

NO. 27.—FOR READERS OF ALL AGES.—1^D.

*Week ending
December 11, 1915.*

NELSON LEE

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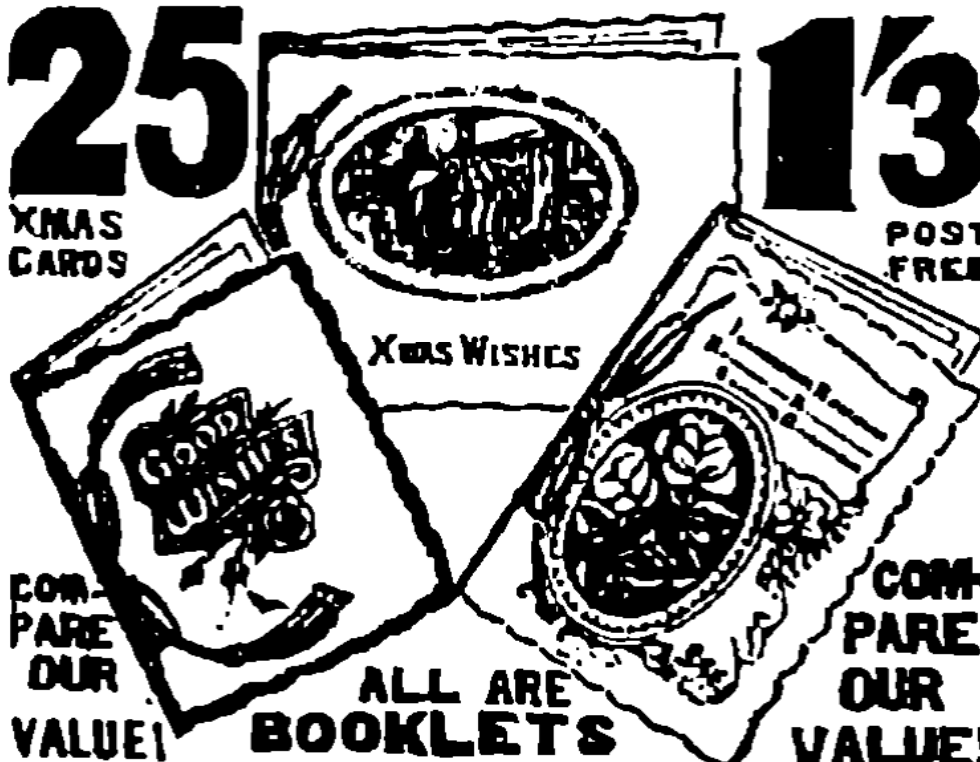
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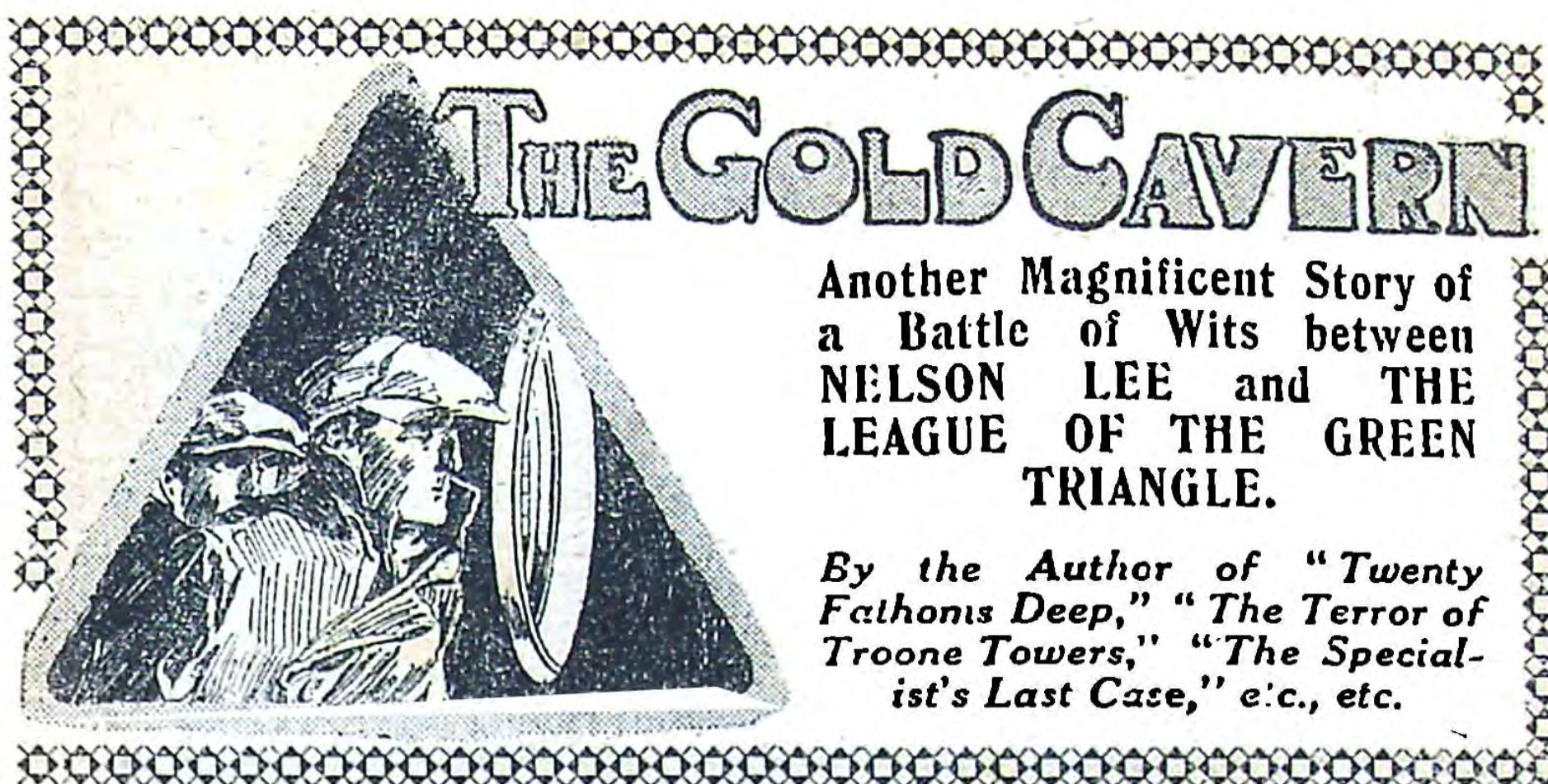
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CHAPTER I.

Nelson Lee's Visitor—The Story of the Gold Cavern.

THREE of the boggars, Nipper," said Nelson Lee calmly—"three at the very least!"

"My hat! That's lively!" remarked Nipper, with a low whistle.

He made as if to join his master at the window of the consulting-room in Gray's Inn Road. But Nelson Lee waved the lad back.

"No, young 'un; you'd better not let yourself be seen," exclaimed the famous criminologist. "I'm concealed behind the curtain myself. I do not wish the men who are watching this house to know that we are aware of their gentle attentions."

"But I wonder why they're spying on us, sir?"

Nelson Lee carefully examined his cigar to see that it was burning evenly.

"The League of the Green Triangle is an organisation which does not do things by halves, my lad," he replied quietly. "And Professor Zingrave, the Chief of the League, is the cleverest criminal I have ever unsheathed my sword against. I take it rather as a compliment that these Green Triangle men are watching my modest establishment so assiduously."

"Why, sir?"

"Because it shows that the league have discovered that it was I who was mainly responsible for the downfall of Dr. Sims Jameson, one of the most important members of the Governing Circle. And it shows that Zingrave is anxious to know whether I have decided to follow up the case of the Nevada Gold Cavern on behalf of Travers Markham and his brother."

"And what are your plans for the immediate future, sir?" queried Nipper eagerly.

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I shall not be able to answer that question, Nipper, until my interview with Travers Markham has taken place," replied the great detective. "The time is now five to three, and Markham promised to be here at three, so you won't have long to wait!"

Nipper looked thoughtfully into the fire, and his mind went back to the exciting incidents of a case which Nelson Lee had only just brought to a successful conclusion. It had been the first decisive blow against the League

of the Green Triangle—a great criminal society which Nelson Lee had undertaken to crush.

Only the previous night the famous Harley Street specialist, Dr. Sims Jameson, had been placed under arrest for the attempted murder of a young man named Charles Markham. Dr. Jameson was severely injured, and it would be many weeks before he would be able to stand his trial.

The case had been a curious one. Charles Markham had arrived from the United States with scarcely a penny to his name, but in his brain he carried the knowledge of a wonderful discovery in a wild region of Nevada. He had found gold there in amazing quantities, and had come to England to enlist the services and co-operation of his only brother, Travers Markham, a journalist.

But Charles had met with an accident which had resulted in a fractured skull. And Dr. Sims Jameson had obtained the wonderful secret from the helpless patient, intending to murder his victim afterwards.

But Nelson Lee had frustrated the villainous plot, and the Harley Street physician was now degraded for all time, and would ultimately be sent to penal servitude. Charles Markham was now under the care of a famous doctor—a personal friend of Nelson Lee's—and was on the road to slow recovery.

The whole vile scheme had originated in the intricate and wonderful brain of Professor Cyrus Zingrave, the celebrated scientist, a man honoured and respected throughout Great Britain. Not a breath of suspicion attached itself to his name; yet he was, in reality, the chief—the actual brains—of the notorious League of the Green Triangle.

Almost every member of the Governing Circle of the league was a famous man. Dr. Sims Jameson had been one; but now he was a vile thing in the eyes of his fellow men. His downfall had been swift and sudden. But nobody knew of his connection with the Green Triangle—not even Travers Markham himself.

Nipper looked up as Nelson Lee walked away from the window.

"Markham has just driven up in a taxi," remarked the detective. "No, you needn't go, Nipper. You had better remain and hear what our visitor has to say."

A few moments later Mrs. Jones, the housekeeper, ushered in Travers Markham, the well-known journalist and writer. He was a small man with an exceptionally keen look. He lost no time in getting to the point.

"I've just come from my brother, Mr. Lee," he said. "Charlie is in a pretty bad state, but he was able to talk to me, and he'll ultimately recover. Now, I'm absolutely sure that his information about this gold cavern in Nevada is literally worth millions. But do you think there is any necessity for particular hurry? That's the main point I have come to see you upon. Is it essential that I should go out to Nevada within the next few weeks——?"

Nelson Lee laughed shortly.

"It is absolutely imperative that you should leave for Nevada by the very first available steamer," he interjected. "The *Titania* leaves Liverpool for New York early to-morrow morning. If you wish to take advantage of your brother's amazing information you must leave England by that boat!"

Travers Markham stared at the detective in astonishment.

"But that is absolutely impossible, Mr. Lee," he said quickly.

"Then your brother's fortune is as good as lost."

"But why—why?" asked Markham blankly. "Please explain, Mr. Lee."

"It is simple enough," replied Nelson Lee. "As you know yourself, Dr. Jameson forced the information from your brother while the latter was in a curious semi-conscious state, and he placed everything down in writing.

Well, that written statement is nowhere to be found. It has, in fact, been taken possession of by an accomplice of the doctor's."

The detective did not explain that the League of the Green Triangle was closely concerned in the affair—that the league now had those valuable directions in its possession.

"And is this accomplice dangerous?" asked Markham.

"He will, at least, start for Nevada at the earliest possible moment—probably by the *Titania*," replied the detective grimly. "The first man to reach this gold cavern will obtain possession of the vast wealth it contains."

Markham looked startled.

"By Jove, you're right!" he said. "Charlie did a very foolish thing—or, rather, he failed to do a sensible one. He made this wonderful discovery, and then came straight over to England without registering his claim. He thought that the news of the gold-find might spread, and that his claim might be 'jumped'—or whatever it's called—during his absence."

"So I understand," agreed Nelson Lee. "Under those circumstances, you will realise that delay will mean failure. If Sims Jameson had kept the stolen information to himself all would have been well; but even while we are talking, the precise directions as to how to reach the gold cavern are in villainous hands. Your enemies will do their very utmost to rob you of what is rightfully yours and your brother's."

Travers Markham looked serious.

"Then it will be a race?" he asked. "The first to reach Nevada wins."

"Exactly. And a very adventurous race, too, I should imagine."

"How deucedly awkward!" muttered Markham perplexedly. "I simply can't let the thing drop—there's a chance of both Charlie and I being millionaires within a year. And yet it is impossible for me to leave England at such short notice. I should have to start for Liverpool to-night, by gad!"

"Of course!"

Markham rose to his feet, and paced the consulting-room with jerky strides. He was greatly worried.

"I'm in a difficulty, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed, halting before the detective. "I simply can't leave England this week. I am under contract with a large firm to contribute a long, topical article every Friday——"

"Cannot you break the contract?" asked Nelson Lee. "Surely the unusual circumstances would warrant you taking such a step? A vast fortune is at stake, you know."

"I have never broken a contract yet," said Markham doggedly.

Nelson Lee smiled quietly.

"Pray be perfectly frank with me, Mr. Markham," he said, throwing his cigar-end into the fire. "I can see that you are uneasy, and I think I know the cause. You do not exactly relish rushing off to Nevada, do you?"

"No, I'm hanged if I do!" said Travers Markham flatly. "Yes, I'll be straightforward, Mr. Lee. I want you to undertake this commission for me—I want you and Nipper to go. I'm a journalist—a scribbler. I should be absolutely out of my element in an undertaking of this sort. Probably, too, there will be dangers to face."

"Undoubtedly."

"I'm not a coward, I don't funk the business," went on the visitor, "but I should be like a fish out of water. In short, this unknown enemy of mine—the accomplice of Dr. Jameson's—would outwit me without difficulty. You and Nipper, on the other hand, are thoroughly accustomed to dealing with rogues, and you are astute and clever enough to hold your own. Will you go to Nevada for me?"

Nelson Lee nodded calmly

"Nipper and I will start to-night," he replied, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"By Jove! I'm glad—I'm glad!" cried Markham.

Nipper's eyes sparkled.

"Not so glad as I am, sir!" he exclaimed excitedly. "A trip to Nevada—eh? By gum, it'll be a ripping holiday."

"Not so much of a holiday as you seem to think, young 'un," Nelson Lee said with quiet conviction. "There will be many unknown dangers—many unsuspected perils. I will undertake the case, Mr. Markham, and I will do my best to win through in the end, and rightfully establish the gold cavern as the absolute property of Charles Markham and yourself."

Travers was highly delighted. He knew that the affair was in extremely capable hands. If the whole project came to nothing he would pay Nelson Lee and Nipper for their services, and no great expense would be entailed.

Without delay he produced a notebook which contained precise directions regarding the cavern in Nevada. With that in Nelson Lee's pocket he would be able to find his way to the wild spot without the slightest difficulty.

"I am more glad than I can say, Mr. Lee, that you have decided to help me," exclaimed Markham. "With my brother still gravely injured I do not feel like rushing out of the country. If there is truth in Charlie's story, then you will see that he and I benefit by it."

Shortly afterwards the journalist took his departure, relieved and happy in mind. And as soon as he had gone Nelson Lee clapped Nipper on the back.

"Nothing could have suited me better, my lad," he said briskly. "If Travers had not suggested my taking up the case, I should have broached the subject myself."

"I wondered why you agreed so readily, sir," said Nipper. "What's the idea?"

"Think, lad—think," the detective replied. "We have made a compact with Douglas Clifford to fight the league tooth and nail. Already we have accounted for Dr. Sims Jameson; and Mr. Page T. Dayton, of the Governing Circle, is unquestionably the man whom we now have to fight against. Our journey to Nevada will be for two reasons. Firstly, to attend to Markham's business; and secondly—and by far the most important reason—to deal with Mr. Page T. Dayton. If it is within our power, he will be the second member of the league to feel our teeth."

Nelson Lee's tone was very grim. And even as he finished speaking another visitor entered the consulting-room. This time it was Douglas Clifford, a young man who had been held a prisoner for five years by the League of the Green Triangle. He ultimately escaped, and he and Nelson Lee had sworn a compact to bring the league to ruin. He was generally supposed to be dead—murdered by the league—but he was still alive, and lived in London under the name of John Merrick, and had the appearance of a middle-aged wealthy gentleman. In reality he was young, and filled with a fierce resolve to fight the league to the death.

"Well, Mr. Lee, how are things going?" he asked cheerfully.

"Splendidly, upon the whole," replied Nelson Lee. "Yesterday our labours culminated in the downfall of Dr. Sims Jameson; to-night we start work in another direction. Page T. Dayton is to be honoured with our attentions. To-night Nipper and I start for Nevada."

Clifford looked somewhat blank; then his jaw grew firm.

"If that's the case, I go, too," he said resolutely. "I'm up against the league just as much as you are yourself, Mr. Lee. I'm hanged if I'm going to be left out of the fun."

"I give you my word there will not be much fun about it!"

"Nevertheless, I don't feel like remaining in England, inactive, while

you and Nipper do the horsework," said Clifford doggedly. "You're not going to raise any objection, are you?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"On the contrary, your company will be very welcome," he replied. "I shall be extremely glad of your assistance, my dear fellow. But I do not think it will be wise for us to travel to Liverpool together—the league's spies are very active. Be careful when you leave my rooms—although I don't suppose you will be followed. The league have no suspicions as to your identity. Book a saloon passage on the *Titania*, and we will meet some time to-morrow aboard the boat."

Clifford was highly elated at the prospect, and readily agreed to Nelson Lee's suggestions. The remaining hours of that afternoon and evening were very busy ones for all concerned, for rather elaborate preparations had to be made.

But there were other people besides Nelson Lee and Douglas Clifford who were busy that evening—and busy, moreover, upon the same subject. They were the Governing Members of the League of the Green Triangle.

In the mysterious Governing Chamber of the league, hidden away beneath the palatial Orpheum Club in the West End, Professor Zingrave and his fellow members were holding a hastily called meeting. A great many chairs were empty, but those present were a fairly representative throng. Among them were Lord Sylvester, Sir Roger Hogarth, Edmund Gresswell, K.C., Sir Gordon Hyde, Superintendent Valling, Dudley Foxcroft, and Page T. Dayton.

Professor Zingrave stood at the head of the table, his dome-like forehead gleaming white in the electric radiance. His long hair, thick and silky, was brushed back with its usual care.

"It was indeed an unfortunate affair, gentlemen," the professor was saying, in his delightfully musical voice. "Dr. Sims Jameson was a victim of cruel circumstance. He was one of our most valuable members, and we shall all realise his full worth now that he has gone."

"And Nelson Lee, the interfering hound, is responsible for poor Jameson's exposure," said Sir Roger Hogarth fiercely. "That man is a danger to us——"

Zingrave shook his head.

"No; you are mistaken, Sir Roger," he interrupted silkily. "Nelson Lee is a clever man, I freely admit, but I do not think we need fear him. In the affair of Dr. Sims Jameson he proved himself to be exceptionally smart. But one thing is certain—he knows nothing of the doctor's connection with the League of the Green Triangle, and our organisation is as much an intangible myth to him as it is to the dunderheaded police."

Professor Zingrave, for all his wonderful cleverness, had absolutely no conception whatever of the facts which Nelson Lee actually had at his disposal. The professor would have been thunderstruck could he have known that the famous detective had once been present at a meeting of the Governing Circle, cleverly disguised.

"And what of the information we have received to-night?" asked Page T. Dayton. "I guess it don't sound very healthy. Travers Markham has been to Nelson Lee, and Nelson Lee will probably set sail for America in the *Titania*."

The professor's curious eyes glittered strangely.

"Although Dr. Jameson has fallen into the hands of justice he nevertheless obtained the necessary information regarding Charles Markham's gold discovery," he said smoothly. "That information is now in your possession, Mr. Dayton, and there is no reason why we should not take advantage of

such a splendid opportunity. You will sail in the *Titania* for America to-morrow morning, and I do not think you need fear anything whatever."

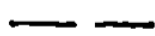
"Lee's a cute beggar," said Dayton uneasily.

"But Nelson Lee will not travel by the *Titania*," exclaimed Zingrave. "I will see to that. You can go ahead with your preparations as though Nelson Lee does not exist. He is absolutely ignorant of the identity of the man who he is fighting against—he probably thinks he is simply a friend of poor Jameson's. It is even possible that Lee has no knowledge or suspicion of anybody being opposed to him. So if you sail in the *Titania*, Mr. Dayton, and he is left behind, your work will be simple and straightforward."

"But suppose Nelson Lee ain't left behind?"

"We will suppose nothing so absurd," said Zingrave sharply. "As you seem to be rather uneasy, I will soon put your mind at rest."

And when, five minutes later, Professor Zingrave's gentle voice ceased speaking, the emissary of the league, who was to journey to far Nevada, was perfectly satisfied that under no circumstances whatever could Nelson Lee and Nipper sail for America in the trans-Atlantic liner, *Titania*.



CHAPTER II.

Off for Nevada—Shadowed—Trapped in the Express—Dawn.

THE boat-train for Liverpool left Euston at midnight exactly; and at twenty past eleven two figures came silently and swiftly from a house three or four doors away from Nelson Lee's rooms in Gray's Inn Road. The road was fairly deserted, and it could be seen, as soon as the pair passed swiftly beneath a lamp, that they were Nelson Lee and Nipper themselves.

"Not a soul about, Nipper. I do not think we shall be followed to-night."

"No fear, guv'nor," agreed the lad confidently. "That wheeze of leaving the house four or five doors away was jolly smart. If any spies are watching they won't suspect anything."

"Nevertheless, we will keep a sharp look-out, my boy."

By the time they reached Holborn a taxi was sighted, and they chartered it immediately. By now they were fairly satisfied that no "shadows" were on their track.

But Nelson Lee and Nipper were mistaken.

For almost as soon as they stepped into the taxi two dim figures approached one another from opposite sides of the road and immediately boarded one of the several other motor-cabs which were proceeding down Holborn.

So, when Nelson Lee and Nipper stepped out of their taxi at the great terminus, their movements were kept under constant observation. The league's spies were clever men, and did their work so perfectly that the pair who were off for Liverpool saw absolutely nothing suspicious.

"I think we've given the beggars the slip," said Nelson Lee easily.

"Well, I haven't seen anybody following or watching us, sir," remarked Nipper. "Strikes me we're not being troubled."

The boat-express was not well patronised by any means, and the detective and his assistant had no difficulty in obtaining a first-class compartment to themselves. Nelson Lee removed his heavy overcoat, and then settled himself down to a cigar and a read. Nipper was more in favour of a nap, once the train started.

A couple of doors banged, and a whistle sounded.

"Hallo, we're off!" said Nipper.

There was a sudden commotion outside on the platform.

"Here you are, gentlemen!" cried a voice. "Hurry up! The train's moving already. This compartment, sir? Right you are!"

The carriage door was wrenched open even as the express started moving out of the station. Nelson Lee laid his paper down with a frown, and saw that four well-dressed men were piling into the compartment.

"Confound it!" muttered the detective irritably.

Nipper threw his master a swift, meaning look—and Nelson Lee understood. Could it be possible that this had been arranged? Were these four men spies?

If so, things would look a little ugly. They were four big men, and if they chose to pile upon their two companions there would be little doubt as to the result. For some reason Nelson Lee did not appear to have his usual air of coolness; Nipper, too, was decidedly uneasy.

Of course, these four men may be merely ordinary travellers; but, on the other hand, their abrupt and sudden entry into the compartment had been decidedly suspicious. The express was a fast one, the first stop being Rugby. There would be ample time for much scoundrelly work, if any such thing were contemplated.

"What sort of boat is the Titania, sir?" asked Nipper, once the train was fairly away on its long journey. "Do you think we shall get to New York in good time?"

Nelson Lee gave the lad a grim look.

"Talk of something else, young 'un," he said curtly.

But apparently one of the four men had heard Nipper's remark, for he gave his companions a quick glance. The quartette had produced a pack of playing cards, and were now engaged in a friendly game of solo-whist, a rug spread across their knees doing duty as a table.

Certainly there was nothing in their demeanour or actions to cause the slightest uneasiness to the other two occupants of the compartment. They were apparently four jovial gentlemen with no evil thoughts in their minds.

Nevertheless, Nelson Lee noticed that after a time one of the men kept looking at his watch rather frequently. At last he put it away with an air of finality. At the same moment one of his fellow travellers picked up the cards in order to shuffle them. They were all laughing and joking.

Nelson Lee was reading his paper carelessly, feeling a trifle dozey.

Then an astonishing thing happened.

Without the slightest warning, without giving the least indication of what was afoot, two of the strangers suddenly whipped up the travelling-rug, and it descended over Nelson Lee's head in muffling folds.

"Crikey!" gasped Nipper.

He had not much time to say more, for the other two men flung themselves at him, and in less than twenty seconds his ankles were strapped tightly together, and his hands equally tightly strapped behind his back.

The scoundrels had come well prepared.

So perfectly was the attack arranged that their victims had not the slightest chance of putting up a decent resistance. Nipper could do absolutely nothing against two strong men; and Nelson Lee was completely handicapped by the rug which enveloped him to the waist.

In less than five minutes Nelson Lee and Nipper were sitting side by side, their legs and arms secured, and their mouths effectually silenced by thick gags. Their four attackers were somewhat breathless, but they were all smiling.

"So you thought you'd get to Liverpool in safety, Mr. Nelson Lee?"

sneered one of the men. "Our orders are to prevent you leaving England by the *Titania*—and those orders are going to be carried out."

He paused and lit a cigarette.

"I expect you wonder how we're going to manage things?" he went on. "Well, I may as well tell you that when the express reaches Rugby this compartment will be entirely empty."

And no more was said. But it was evident that the league had made very elaborate plans to attain their object. Nelson Lee and Nipper were, under no circumstances, to travel in the *Titania*. And the steps which were being taken by these league men made it absolutely impossible for their victims to catch the boat.

"Getting near the time, Harry!" said one of the men abruptly.

One of the others nodded, and put his head out of the window. Nelson Lee and Nipper, helpless and furious, sat looking on with gleaming eyes.

The brakes of the train were suddenly applied, and the express slackened in speed, until it was travelling at a mere crawl. And yet, as the detective well knew, they were still far from Rugby. The train was, in fact, travelling through bare, deserted country.

The real reason for the stoppage was simple. A working member of the league had received certain instructions, and he was now, at this very moment, at the top of a lonely signal-post just ahead. The signal was down, and showing a green light. But in front of the green light a lantern was held—and the lantern's light was red.

Obediently—but reluctantly—the engine-driver had applied the brakes, and the express at last came to a stop, hissing and creaking. The league's plans were well thought out, and this method of getting Nelson Lee and Nipper out of the train was a really smart dodge.

The very instant the train stopped the door of the first-class compartment was flung open and two of the men sprang out on to the permanent-way. Then, quickly and silently, the two bound and helpless forms were passed out into the darkness.

The door was silently closed, and for a second a light flashed from a tiny electric torch. The red light was at once twisted round, and the green light blinked out proclaiming the line clear. The line had been clear all the time, but the engine-driver was in ignorance of that.

The stoppage had been so short that nobody had troubled to get up and look out of the windows. And as the rear lights of the express disappeared into the darkness there were many chuckles.

"Worked like a charm!" one of the league men exclaimed. "Everything's simple now. Lend a hand with these two duffers!"

Nelson Lee and Nipper were grasped and carried slowly away, the man who had attended to the signal joining the others and taking charge of the unfortunate pair's handbags. For some time the party walked slowly on, and then a low building loomed up ahead.

It proved to be an old, ramshackle barn, and was apparently the only building in the neighbourhood. Within five minutes Nelson Lee and Nipper were lying on a pile of dry hay, and their captors were squatting close by, smoking and chatting amiably. There was absolutely no escape for the pair. Besides being closely guarded—and by five big men—they were bound so securely that no amount of struggling would have freed them.

And help from an outside quarter was impossible. Nobody had seen the daring attack in the train; nobody had seen Nelson Lee and Nipper removed. And Clifford, by this time, was in Liverpool, for he had travelled north by an earlier train.

So the league men had good cause to be amiable.

Their plot had worked as on oiled wheels.

"And they say Mr. Nelson Lee is a smart 'tec!" chuckled one of the men. "I don't take off my hat to you, Mr. Lee—I don't even lift the brim!"

Did you think that by leaving a house four or five doors away from your own you would hookwink us? Why, we spotted you at once!"

Nelson Lee maintained a stony silence—he couldn't very well reply with a thick gag covering his mouth.

"Maybe, you're getting scared?" went on the man. "Well, there's no need to. We're not going to harm you, or the kid either. We're simply going to prevent you leaving England by the *Titania*. She sails at seven o'clock in the morning—and you're both going to be kept prisoners here until eight!"

"Then you'll be released," added one of the others, evidently taking keen enjoyment in sneering at the helpless pair. "You'll be ungagged, and your feet will be freed. By the time you get your hands at liberty we shall all have disappeared in a motor-car which will call at eight o'clock precisely."

Nelson Lee and Nipper moved uneasily, and the men chuckled afresh. The prisoners lay there with mingled feelings—helpless, and unable to move a finger to get themselves out of the predicament which seemed likely to ruin everything.

Page T. Dayton would leave by the *Titania*—and they would be left behind!

It was impossible for Nelson Lee to cable to New York to have Dayton detained on arrival, for there was absolutely nothing against the American member of the Governing Circle. Once on board the *Titania* he would have a clear four days start—for there was no other liner leaving for the United States until the end of that period.

Clifford would be on the *Titania*, of course—but what could he do alone?

At the very start of the case things seemed to have gone terribly wrong.

The hours passed slowly, and two or three of the men dropped off to sleep in the soft, comfortable hay. But the two prisoners did not feel like sleep; they knew, positively, that they would not travel by the *Titania*.

At last the dim light of dawn filtered into the barn, and it rapidly grew stronger. And when the sun rose and daylight flooded the countryside, the five league men roused themselves, and one of them glanced at his watch.

"By George, it's later than I thought!" he exclaimed. "It's a quarter to-eight, and the car will be here in a few minutes to take us away."

The others stretched themselves, and the barn-door was swung open. Outside, the morning was cold and grey. Not a house was within sight, and the only sign of life were the birds, and a few cows grazing in a meadow far distant. A narrow lane led past the barn and joined the main road a mile away.

The interior of the barn was flooded with light, and Nelson Lee and Nipper gazed at one another with strange looks.

"When we leave you, Mr. Nelson Lee, I should advise you to crawl away and hide your heads somewhere!" sneered one of the men jeeringly. "The *Titania* left Liverpool over three-quarters-of-an-hour ago!"

The gags were removed from the helpless prisoners.

"Yes, you prevented us reaching Liverpool," the detective exclaimed fiercely. "But I should not advise you to crow too soon!"

"What do you mean?"

"One day, perhaps, you will understand!"

And Nipper burst into a suppressed chuckle.

"Strikes me some other people will have to hide their heads when the truth of this affair becomes known!" he grinned delightedly. "I say, guv'nor, we're not looking so glum as we ought to!"

Nelson Lee, in fact, was smiling broadly.

The league men gazed at their captives with a certain amount of uneasiness. They had hardly expected Nelson Lee and Nipper to adopt this attitude. What could it mean? The pair had certainly lost their boat—yet both were perfectly cheerful.

"Oh, you can make a show of bravado if you like!" growled one man. "But we've spoilt your little game——"

"What did the crowd say?" murmured Nipper. "Oh, guv'nor, ain't it awful? We've lost the *Titania*, and we sha'n't go to America after all! Ain't it terrible!"

There was a mocking note in Nipper's voice, and as Nelson Lee chuckled, one of the league men rapped out an order and the two prisoners were brought to the door in the full daylight, standing side by side.

"What's the meaning of this tomfoolery?" snarled the fellow who seemed to be doing all the talking. "What are you chuckling about?"

"Something that is really rather humorous," replied Nelson Lee coolly.

The man lost his temper. He gripped the detective by the shoulders and shook him violently. And as he did so an amazing thing happened. Nelson Lee's hair—dark, chestnut hair—seemed to work loose, and the man uttered a startled oath. He jerked his hand out, and a wig came off in his grasp, revealing a close-cropped head of fair hair which, under no circumstances, could possibly be mistaken for Nelson Lee's!

A chorus of furious exclamations broke out. Then the league men simply fell upon their two victims, and a close examination revealed the presence of clever make-up on both of the prisoners.

Nelson Lee and Nipper, in fact, were not Nelson Lee and Nipper at all!

It was simply stupefying.

The five men could only stand round and gasp. The amazing discovery almost took their breath away. Certainly, the pair had been Nelson Lee and Nipper to the very life so far, but now it could be seen—their make-ups removed—that they were two total strangers!

In plain truth, the famous detective had proved himself to be extremely astute. While he and Nipper travelled to Liverpool in deep disguise, he had arranged to have two trusted helpers start off by the boat express for the especial purpose of hoodwinking the league's spies. Nelson Lee and Nipper had purposely left their rooms several times during the previous evening, both wearing distinctive coloured overcoats and hats. These articles of clothing had been worn by the two doubles when they left Gray's Inn Road. The league men had been led astray without the slightest difficulty—and, strictly speaking, they were not to blame, for Nelson Lee's ruse was extremely clever.

"I think the laugh is against you, my friends!" said the detective's double coolly. "Mr. Lee arranged this little affair last evening, and we expected to be kidnapped and held prisoners. Perhaps you will understand, now, why everything went so smoothly with your cause. We intended you to capture us!"

"And the real Mr. Nelson Lee and the real Nipper are now safe on board the *Titania*!" grinned the lad who had impersonated Nipper. "My word, you're looking pretty sick! It requires smarter chaps than you to get the better of our boss!"

"By thunder!" gasped one of the discomfited rogues. "It's we who've been hoodwinked! Well, I reckon I take off my hat to Mr. Nelson Lee after all! He's tricked us fair and square—and it's too late to start swearing now!"

The five men were, indeed, almost too staggered to be angry. All their trouble had been for nothing—all the Governing Circle's elaborate plans

had been wrecked. Solely owing to Nelson Lee's keen forethought, the league men had expended their energies in a wrong direction.

And, meanwhile, the *Titania* had sailed, carrying aboard the two very individuals whom the league had schemed so strenuously to detain!

Without a doubt Nelson Lee had scored the first point in the game.

CHAPTER III.

Westward Bound—Page T. Dayton is Furious—A Near Shave—Rescued.

NELSON LEE and Nipper—the real, genuine pair—leaned over the rail on the saloon deck of the Atlantic liner, *Titania*, and drank in deep draughts of rich, ozone-charged air. The rich, blue sea lay on every side, with a line of creamy foam in the great vessel's wake. Overhead was the blue sky, slightly flecked with white clouds, of a calm winter's day.

"By Jove, young 'un, it's good to be on a sea-voyage again," Nelson Lee remarked cheerfully. "I have an idea this trip will be slightly strenuous, but the change will do us both a world of good."

Nipper chuckled.

"I wasn't thinking of the voyage, sir," he said. "I'm wondering what happened to our giddy doubles on the boat-train last night! My hat, the league's been properly dished this time!"

"At all events, we are safely away from England, in spite of Zingrave's elaborate plans," agreed Nelson Lee. "Ah, hallo! Yes, I thought so—it's Cliff— Hang it all, I'm forgetting myself! Our friend Merrick is in sight."

John Merrick—otherwise Douglas Clifford—appeared upon the deck, smoking a cigar and obviously in a good temper. The time was just after ten o'clock, and the *Titania* was well started on her long journey.

Clifford came across the deck and shook hands warmly with Nelson Lee and Nipper. Now that they were all on board, there was no necessity for concealing their friendship.

"I saw you at the breakfast-table, Mr. Lee," said the young man. "But I didn't think it wise to make any sign in such a public place. Mr. Page T. Dayton was not far from me, and as he was looking extremely pleased with himself I gather that he hasn't spotted you yet."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"No. I think Mr. Dayton is in ignorance of my presence aboard so far," he replied. "This is a big ship, and it is possible to be days out at sea before meeting a well-known friend face to face. Dayton probably thinks that I and Nipper fell victims to the league's careful scheme."

"You weren't even followed, were you?" chuckled Clifford.

"Not by a soul. The league's spies gave all their attention to our doubles," replied the detective genially. "You know all about my plans."

"Yes, you told me last night. Did they succeed?"

"Obviously. We travelled to Liverpool in the greatest comfort."

"And your excellent doubles?"

"They, of course, had rather a strenuous time of it," laughed Nelson Lee. "But they are in no danger—the league merely wished to detain us. Well, they've detained the wrong fellows, as they've probably found out by now. That tip of Caine's was simply invaluable."

Nelson Lee was referring to a word of warning which had reached him the previous evening from Martin Caine, a controlling agent of the league.

Some time back Nelson Lee had saved Caine from death, and the man had sworn eternal faithfulness. He had proved his worth on more than one occasion. The previous evening he had received the Governing Circle's orders, and had handed them down to the working members—Caine being one of the league's intermediaries. The working members never, under any circumstances, had dealings with the Governing Circle. No ordinary member, in fact, had the slightest idea of the identity of the league's chiefs.

Caine had informed Nelson Lee of what was afoot—and the detective had accordingly taken astute precautions, with results already recorded.

"It was really a simple scheme," Nelson Lee exclaimed, lighting a cigar. "My two faithful lieutenants—a man and a youth who often work for me—were disguised as cleverly as I could manage. But, of course, an intimate friend of mine, such as yourself, would have detected the fraud instantly. Although outwardly our doubles, the pair are not superb actors, and could not have kept up the deception a minute under difficult circumstances. But the league's common workers have never seen us actually face to face, and they fell into the trap beautifully."

Clifford chuckled, and then grew serious.

"But things are by no means easy yet," he said gravely.

"Far from it," agreed Nelson Lee. "Page T. Dayton will do his very utmost to thwart us as soon as he discovers that the league's plans have failed. The first man to reach the gold cavern in Nevada wins the game—and Dayton will move heaven and earth to be the victor."

Even as the great detective was speaking, the American member of the Governing Circle had become aware of his enemies' presence aboard the liner. Dayton had just left his cabin, a fat cigar between his teeth, feeling "real good," as he would himself have expressed it. Zingrave had absolutely satisfied him that Nelson Lee and Nipper could not possibly leave England by the *Titania*. Therefore, as the *Titania* had sailed, there was nothing particularly to worry about.

Page Towuley Dayton was a tall man, decidedly lean, with a clean-shaven, sharp-featured face. He had a tremendous confidence in himself and his own powers. In his own opinion there was no "cuter" man on earth than P. T. D. His appearance was gentlemanly, and he could converse coolly and intelligently with the most learned and exalted of men.

In point of fact, he was "some" person, and was best known as the president of the Long Creek Consolidated Silver Mine Company. It was because of his intimate knowledge of all things connected with mining that he had been chosen for this particular case. To give him his due, Page T. Dayton was a clever man, and a formidable opponent. But his heart was as hard as steel, and he was callous and brutal to the core.

Then, all in a flash, his sense of security vanished into thin air. A furious oath rose in his throat, and the fat cigar dropped from his lips on to the white deck.

"By thunder!" he muttered savagely. "Nelson Lee and Nipper! Guess I must be dreaming, or else my eyes ain't seeing right!"

From a convenient spot he carefully watched Nelson Lee and Nipper talking to Douglas Clifford. And from this closer vantage point Dayton was completely convinced that the detective and his assistant were actually on board the *Titania*.

"Gee! But that's darnation strange!" exclaimed Dayton under his breath. "How in the name of all that's infernal did those two hounds get on board? Bah! I guess Zingrave ain't so almighty clever as he fancies himself to be. This is sure going to make a whole heap of difference to me!"

Dayton was quite positive on the last point. The trip which he had expected to be a perfect holiday was, after all, to be very much the opposite.

It was extremely galling to Dayton to see Nelson Lee and Nipper chatting there as coolly and composedly as though no steps whatever had been taken to detain them in England.

Dayton didn't trouble himself by wondering how his enemies had slipped through the league's clutches. Nelson Lee and Nipper were there—on the same boat as himself. That was quite sufficient.

"Guess I shall have to set my wits to work now," growled Dayton irritably. "I fancied this was going to be a soft job. Waal, Lee don't know anything about me—I'm no more to him than any of the other passengers. That's where I can put one over on him!"

But that was just where Mr. Page T. Dayton was very sadly mistaken. He was under the impression that Nelson Lee knew nothing about the league—that he had been merely engaged by Travers Markham to journey to Nevada. Dayton would have been considerably startled could he have known that Nelson Lee knew exactly who his enemy was, and that the detective was constantly on the alert for possible danger.

The rest of the morning the American was morose and worried. He made no effort to keep out of Nelson Lee's way. The two were absolute strangers, and Dayton was a splendid actor. He gave no sign whatever that he was actually greatly interested in Nelson Lee's movements.

In the late afternoon Dayton was in apparently careless conversation with three well-dressed men in a rather deserted portion of the deck. Nelson Lee saw the American, but even the keen detective had no idea that Dayton's three companions were trusted members of the League of the Green Triangle—placed on board in the unlikely event of their services being required.

As it turned out, their services were required very much indeed.

They had no knowledge of the fact that Page T. Dayton was a member of the Governing Circle. They simply knew that he was working on behalf of the league, and that they were under his orders.

"I don't know how the beggars got on board," Dayton was saying, "but the pair of them ain't very healthy customers to be knocking around. I guess I give them their due. They're darned cute—mebbe too cute. Anyways, you fellers have got to get busy as soon as daylight's gone."

"We're game enough, boss," said one of the men readily. "But it'll be rather a risky game monkeying with a pair of saloon passengers——"

"Say, cut that out, Grogan!" snapped Page T. Dayton curtly. "I've been thinking all the afternoon, and making a whole heap of inquiries. I guess I've hit on a scheme that'll ultimately cause Nelson Lee and the kid to take a long spell of retirement!"

"By George! You mean——"

"Oh, you make me tired!" interjected Dayton roughly. "Just keep your tongues between your teeth and listen. I'm doing the planning, and you're going to do the business. So just pay attention."

It was some considerable time later when Nelson Lee and Nipper were strolling on the upper deck. Two bells had just sounded—seven o'clock—and dinner would be served very shortly. The detective was having a cigar before descending to the saloon.

"Not many people about, sir," remarked Nipper.

The upper deck, indeed, was deserted. Being near the dinner hour the bulk of the saloon passengers were either dressing or chatting in the smoking-room or lounges. Many of them, too, favoured the promenade deck or the main deck. Nelson Lee and Nipper almost had this particular portion of the upper deck to themselves. The evening was rather chilly, for a cold wind was blowing off the Atlantic. The great ship ploughed her way smoothly through the comparatively calm waters, her brilliant thousand and one lights gleaming warmly.

Nelson Lee and Nipper were both well wrapped, and were enjoying their exercise. The detective was thinking deeply, and wondering if Dayton would soon begin to show his hand. Certainly, Nelson Lee had no idea that Dayton's confederates were even then, at that very moment, scheming to trap him. Indeed, Nelson Lee was not aware that Dayton was supported by other league men. That slight lack of knowledge was to land Nelson Lee and Nipper into a pretty tight predicament.

A man suddenly hurried behind one of the deck-houses, and came face to face with somebody who was leaning there, calmly smoking.

"Our opportunity has come before we expected, Grogan," whispered the newcomer hurriedly. "Dayton reckoned on us doing the business after dinner; but Lee and Nipper are pacing the deck at about the most favourable position we could wish for. Nothing like striking while the iron's hot!"

"Good man! You've kept your eyes open to good advantage, Slaney," said the other briskly. "We'll see what Dayton's wheeze is worth right away."

An officer was passing, so Grogan and Slaney behaved themselves as two saloon passengers should. But as soon as they were unobserved they slunk along the upper deck on the starboard side of the ship. Nelson Lee and Nipper were pacing the port promenade. They saw nothing of the two dim forms which quietly slipped into one of the small deck-houses, for they were walking the other way, watching the lights of a big ship a mile or so astern.

"Well, I suppose we must be getting below, young 'un," exclaimed the great detective, tossing his cigar-end into the sea. "Everybody seems to have disappeared—from this quarter of the boat, at least. By Jove, what wonderful floating hotels these big Atlantic liners are! Over a thousand souls aboard, and yet it is possible for us to pace the deck here practically alone."

"Yes, they are marvellous things, these liners, sir," agreed Nipper, as they walked back on their tracks. "Why, there are apartments and holds and things below that we never even suspect. Right down in the bowels of the ship, below the water-line, they've got swimming-baths even!"

"We shall have to explore——"

Nelson Lee ceased speaking suddenly. They were just opposite the port-hole of the little deck-house, and the detective's keen ears had caught a few words, spoken rather loudly, as though with impatience. The little window was open, but all was dark within.

"What's up, guv'nor?" asked Nipper, in a soft voice.

"I don't know!" whispered Nelson Lee. "I thought I heard—— Ah, listen!"

A low but perfectly clear voice sounded quite close, emanating from the port-hole.

"Bosh! I tell you Nelson Lee doesn't count!" snapped the strange voice. "There's no need to fear him at all, Jim. We're as safe as the Bank of England!"

Nipper formed his lips into a whistling position, but made no sound.

"They're talking about you, sir," he breathed excitedly.

"Precisely!" murmured the detective. "Keep quiet, lad!"

The voice made itself heard again.

"What's the good of being nervy?" it said irritably. "Just because you've discovered that Nelson Lee is aboard you get an attack of the jumps. Lee is going to America on his own business—or somebody else's! He knows nothing whatever about us!"

"Are you sure?"

"Sure! Great Cæsar, haven't I been telling you for hours?" snapped the other. "Our game is as safe as clockwork, Jim. You can shove Nelson

Lee out of your thoughts. He's a smart man, I'll allow, but he can't freeze on to an affair of which he knows less than nothing. Pull yourself together, and attend to me!"

"I'm game for anything," said "Jim" readily; "but I'm hanged if I'll go through with the business if Nelson Lee——"

"Nelson Lee—Nelson Lee!" rapped out the other furiously. "Confound Nelson Lee! You seem to have got the man on your brain! See here, Jim, if you don't be sensible I'll quit your company altogether, and do the thing on my own. Man, the game's worth thousands. I've been making judicious inquiries, and I know exactly where the stuff is—I can lay my hands on it in two minutes. It's the softest job we've ever tackled!"

Nelson Lee and Nipper could hear every word, and they were fairly quivering with the unexpectedness of this dramatic discovery.

"Do you know where the masterpieces are then?" asked the other man.

"Of course I do—although their presence on board this ship is supposed to be a secret. They're some of the most famous paintings of the old masters being sold to an American millionaire. There is nothing like getting the thing over in good time. We'll do it to-night at half-past ten exactly—five bells, shipboard time."

"I'm game. Where is the stuff?"

"In No. 27 hold, right down in the bowels of the ship, far for'ard."

"But we'll be spotted——"

"Rubbish! I've already explored that part of the ship. Hardly a soul goes there once in the day. It's far beyond the ordinary inhabited quarters of the ship. We'll meet at No. 27 hold—it's really only a small compartment, and the way into it is by a big iron door—at half-past ten——"

The man broke off with a furious oath.

"You careless fool!" he snarled. "Look at that porthole! Why in thunder's name didn't you close it?"

"There's nobody about——"

The little window clanged to, and the conversation was abruptly cut short. Nelson Lee and Nipper, crouching beneath the porthole, slipped away, and then stood facing one another close against the port rail.

"Well, sir, what does it mean?" asked Nipper breathlessly.

"I don't quite know, my lad," replied the detective. "But it's very evident that some villainy is afoot. By a curious chance we happened to hear the most vital part of a very interesting conversation. But come, we must go below."

"But, guv'nor——"

"My good Nipper, our best policy is to make ourselves scarce," said Nelson Lee coolly. "We have ample time to think over the information we overheard before the time for action arrives."

And they descended to their cabin, removed their overcoats and hats, and then took their places in the brilliant and palatial dining-saloon. Nelson Lee was thoughtful during the sumptuous meal. He had no suspicion whatever that the conversation he had overheard was merely a clever trick to lure Nipper and himself into a deserted part of the boat. The detective did not even connect Page T. Dayton with the affair, but—quite naturally—supposed it to be just an ordinary robbery.

Nelson Lee was hardly to blame for what followed, for he did not know that Dayton had confederates aboard.

After dinner the detective and Nipper held a discussion in their own cabin. If a daring robbery was to take place that night, prompt action would have to be taken. It must be stopped. The detective thought of informing the purser—the purser being responsible for practically everything below decks. A great many people think that the sole responsibility

of a great ship rests on the captain's shoulders—but that is quite wrong. The purser has really more worries than any skipper.

But, on second thoughts, Nelson Lee decided to investigate the affair alone—or, rather, with only Nipper's aid. So it was only by a mere fluke that Page T. Dayton's scheme succeeded.

For it did succeed.

At a quarter-past ten Nelson Lee and Nipper made their way quietly down into the depths of the great vessel. They passed many stewards and other officials, but they were not questioned or stopped.

As they stepped on the floor of a narrow passage, having just descended a steel ladder, they found themselves in a part of the ship which was very rarely frequented. Occasional electric lights were dotted about, but as the pair neared the vicinity of No. 27 hold, everything was pitchy black. It was dark always, day and night alike, for there were no portholes far down here. There were electric lights, of course, but they were all switched off in this section of the boat.

"Well, we've got here, Nipper," murmured Nelson Lee. "We can't be stopped now, can we?"

The detective had his electric torch in his hand, and very soon the white light was flashing upon a dull painted door, bearing the number 27. It was not a hold at all, in reality, but simply a kind of storage room. The *Titania* was one of the most modern boats, and Nelson Lee was rather surprised at some points of her construction. In many ways she was quite different from many other liners which Nelson Lee had been over.

"Here we are, young 'un, and we're five minutes before time," murmured Nelson Lee. "The best thing we can do is to switch the light off and wait in shadow. If nothing happens before eleven o'clock we'll run off to bed."

They had not long to wait, however.

In less than five minutes whispering voices were heard, and then the bolts which secured the massive iron door were quietly thrust back. No light was shown, but Nelson Lee and Nipper could tell by a faint creak, followed by complete silence, that the men had opened the door and had entered.

"Splendid, Nipper!" murmured Nelson Lee. "We will satisfy ourselves that the scoundrels are actually committing a robbery, and then close and bolt the door upon them. They will be caught red-handed!"

They crept quietly to the iron door, and peered into the storage room. A dim light showed in the darkness, and then Nelson Lee could see that the men had entered a small apartment farther in—for the light was coming through a half-closed doorway.

Without hesitation Nelson Lee and Nipper crept in, and cautiously picked their way through a number of large packing-cases. But before they reached the inner door a bright light suddenly flashed out fully upon them from a dark corner of the room.

"Hands up, the pair of you!" rasped a voice sharply. "If you utter a sound I'll drop you both as you stand—this pistol's a silent one, and the report won't carry a yard! Up with your hands!"

Nelson Lee snapped his teeth, and bit back an exclamation of rage. In a flash he knew that he and Nipper had been trapped just when they had been congratulating themselves that they were trapping some would-be burglars! Nelson Lee was simply furious with himself. Fool that he was, not to have seen through the trap before he fell headlong into it.

"I know when I'm beaten!" he said quietly. "We'd better put our hands up, Nipper. There's no sense in letting this scoundrel drill lead into us!"

Nipper was gasping, but he obeyed his master. He, too, knew that it

would be the very height of folly to make a dash to the doorway. They could not even see the man was threatening them; while they, themselves, were in the brilliant light of a powerful electric lamp. The whole situation was dead against them.

"Out you come—slick!" went on the man with the light.

And immediately two men appeared from the inner compartment. It was impossible for the captured pair to recognise them, for they wore heavy masks. The whole affair had not occupied ten seconds, so far. It was evidently planned carefully; for the very instant the masked men appeared, Nelson Lee and Nipper were pushed forcibly into the inner compartment. They made an attempted resistance, but the whole thing was done so quickly that they had no chance. The heavy iron door clanged upon them and the bolts were shot. Then, after a few more seconds had passed, came the faint sound of the other door—the outer one—being closed also.

Nelson Lee and Nipper were in utter darkness.

"I've never felt so downright ashamed of myself in all my life, Nipper!" exclaimed Nelson Lee bitterly. "By heavens, what is happening to my brains? They must be muddled and choked up! I've actually allowed the pair of us——"

"Oh, rats, sir!" interjected Nipper promptly. "I don't see that you were to blame at all. Page T. Dayton is at the bottom of the business, as sure as boots! Well, I must admit that he's smarter than we gave him credit for being!"

"No, Nipper, we did not underestimate Dayton's accomplishments," said Nelson Lee quietly. "But we made the mistake of supposing him to be alone. Obviously, several other members of the League of the Green Triangle are aboard the *Titania*!"

"And a pair of them deliberately got up a fake yarn especially for our benefit to overhear through that open porthole," exclaimed Nipper. "By gum, guv'nor, it was a smart wheeze, whatever you say."

Both the prisoners were perfectly cool. Yet they instinctively knew that they were in a truly terrible predicament. This steel-sided apartment was completely shut off from the inhabited parts of the ship. It was a storage-room which was never entered the whole of the voyage. In addition it was separated from the passage-way by another and larger room. No amount of shouting would reach the ears of anyone on board, and hammering on the door would be equally ineffectual.

Nelson Lee's thoughts were very bitter. But he was not a vain man; he knew well enough that he was far from perfect. Even the cleverest will make mistakes at times. And, calming down a little, the detective realised that the trap had been so carefully set that he was not so very much to blame for falling into it.

And there was no sense in being infuriated at the turn of events. The best and most sensible thing to do would be to seek a way of escape.

"Well, young 'un, we've blundered badly, so we'd better make the best of it," said Nelson Lee evenly. "Fish out your electric torch and we'll find out where we are, to begin with."

They were both provided with those exceedingly useful pocket lamps, and the two beams of light flashed out together. It was really remarkable to see how coolly and collectedly the pair faced the situation.

There was not much to be seen. The apartment was steel lined, and the floor and ceiling were also of metal. It was perfectly square, and the only door was the one by which they had entered. The room was half filled with packing-cases, but there was plenty of space in which to move about.

"H'm! Not a very cheerful outlook," remarked Nelson Lee. "Dayton has certainly displayed remarkable intelligence in the choice of his prison

for us. We'd better face the matter calmly, Nipper—we're in a very tight hole."

"But what is this place, sir?"

"Well, it appears to be eminently suitable for the purpose to which Dayton has turned it," replied the detective. "A steel-sided apartment with a steel door and no ventilation! If we don't escape within twelve hours, my lad, we shall be suffocated!"

"Well, that's lively, anyhow!" said Nipper with forced calmness.

"One might almost think that we were in the magazine of a battleship," went on Nelson Lee. "Explosives could certainly be stored here without much danger. Ah, an idea. Let us ascertain what these cases contain."

Five minutes later one of the big boxes was opened, and a whole collection of highly expensive fireworks was exposed to view. They were not ships' rockets, but simply harmless fireworks, such as are used on the fifth of November. Possibly a big spectacle had been held on board the *Titania* recently, and these were the surplus. And they were stored in this room for safety's sake.

"This gives an explanation of the fire-proof qualities of our prison," remarked the detective grimly. "I don't see that our position is in any way improved, however. If we have a pretty little bust-up with these fiery toys we shall merely hasten the end by choking ourselves!"

"What are these funny-looking things, sir?"

"Smoke-bombs—perfectly harmless, but decidedly pungent," replied the detective calmly. "Let us sit down on one of the cases, young 'un, and keep quiet for a short space. If we hear voices, however faintly, it stands to reason that those same voices will be able to hear us if we yell lustily enough."

Accordingly they remained silent. But, except for a dull, insistent throbbing—caused by the ship's powerful turbines—everything was utter silence. Of course, the absence of the two saloon passengers would be noticed in the morning, and a search would ultimately be instituted. But by the time the storage-room was reached, both the prisoners would probably be suffocated.

The outlook was hopelessly blank.

But Nelson Lee forced down a desire to hammer his head against the wall, and remained quite calm. Nipper naturally followed the example of his master, and affected a careless ease which caused the detective to smile a little sadly. Nipper was a brave youngster, with simply piles of grit.

"Well, this won't do!" exclaimed Nelson Lee briskly. "Help won't come to us, my lad, and we sha'n't help ourselves by twiddling our thumbs. I never give up hope until every expedient has been tried and found useless. We'll shift these cases in the hope of finding a trap-door!"

The detective spoke jocularly. But he knew, of course, that no such thing as a trap-door existed in the storage-room. However, the exercise would serve to warm them, for the apartment was icy-cold.

Propping their electric-lamps upon one of the cases, they set about shifting the others. It was a half-hearted task, but one which was to mean salvation for them. Their captors had failed to move the cases, and had therefore overlooked a most important point.

"Phew! This is warming work, in spite of the chilly atmosphere," said Nelson Lee, after three of the cases had been shifted from the steel wall. "Perhaps we had better give it up and commence a systematic hammering--- Hallo, hallo! What is this we see, Nipper?"

Nipper bent forward eagerly, and gazed at a spot near the flooring.

"By Jove! It's a ventilator, sir!" he gasped.

"We're getting on, lad—we're getting on!" said Nelson Lee coolly. "A

ventilator—eh? That suggests possibilities. We're not dead yet, by a long way!"

A grating had been revealed. It was small, but it was certainly a ventilator. The detective bent down and examined it. He placed his ear to it, and there was a faint draught. They would not suffocate, anyway—although they probably would have done had they not shifted the case which had been blocking it.

Inwardly, both Nelson Lee and Nipper were somewhat excited. Before this discovery they had both felt twinges of hopelessness. Now their spirits were thoroughly revived.

The detective raised his voice and bellowed into the ventilator with all the strength of his lungs. But his voice echoed back thunderously. Ten minutes passed—twenty minutes—and finally an hour. And every few minutes both Nelson Lee and Nipper had yelled up into the ventilator. But there was no result—there was no sign of approaching deliverance.

"Our discovery appears to be of no service to us," said the detective, a little hoarsely, for he had been shouting hard. "Our voices fail to carry—although the ventilator certainly has an exit, or there would be no air-current. What do you suggest, Nipper? Haven't you any ideas?"

The lad grunted.

"Fat lot of good ideas are, sir," he growled, flashing his light about the room—they had been doing their bellowing in the darkness, in order to save the "juice" in the electric batteries. "What about firing your revolver up the shaft? If the report isn't heard the smoke might carry——"

Nelson Lee gave a great shout.

"By James!" he roared. "What a dolt I am! Why didn't I think of it before?"

Nipper was rather startled.

"Goodness! You gave me a start, sir!" he gasped. "Think of what?"

"The smoke-bombs, my cheery youth!" said the detective crisply. "They were probably intended to give an artistic finish to an outdoor spectacle; but we'll put one of them to a different use."

"My hat! What a stunning wheeze!" panted Nipper excitedly.

One of the smoke-bombs was soon procured, and Nelson Lee placed a match to it and ignited it. Almost at once a dense roll of thick smoke commenced to burst forth. Nelson Lee hastily thrust the thing close against the ventilator. At first it seemed as though none of the smoke was going up the ventilator. But a test—by holding it slightly away from the wall—proved that a certain proportion of the pungent vapour was escaping from the storage-room.

"Rescue is now a mere matter of time, Nipper," said the detective confidently. "This smoke is bound to be observed somewhere above, and a hasty examination will soon be made. The excellent officers will get a fine fright when they spot it."

"Oh, crikey! What a rotten whiff!" Nipper gasped chokingly.

"Dayton's scheme was exceedingly smart," went on Nelson Lee, "but our enterprising enemy over-reached himself, young 'un. He trapped us in a storage-room far from the inhabited quarters of the ship—a storage-room with steel sides and almost sound-proof. But the very reasons for this apartment being steel-sided is the reason for our being rescued—as I am confident we shall be. This place is fire-proof, and therefore contains rather dangerous cargo. Mr. Page T. Dayton had not the slightest idea that we should make an excellent use of that cargo."

"He was too clever, sir—he overdid the thing," exclaimed Nipper.

And then the lad went off into a fit of violent coughing. The atmosphere, in fact, was becoming almost too thick to breathe. In a few minutes it was

impossible to see across the apartment, and the beam of electric-light reflected on the smoke reminded the prisoners of a regular old-fashioned London "pea-soup" fog.

The pungence of the smoke was terrible. Nelson Lee and Nipper felt themselves choking. Their lungs became dry and harsh, and they breathed with awful difficulty. Fifteen minutes in that atmosphere and they would perish. Their wonderful scheme for bringing aid would recoil on their own heads.

"Put your face close to the floor, lad, and breathe through your handkerchief," croaked Nelson Lee hoarsely. "The smoke rises—the air is clearer below!"

But even near the floor the dreadful smoke was almost overpowering. The pair felt their heads swimming. Their breath came and went in great sobbing gasps. Consciousness was leaving them rapidly. The minutes passed agonisedly at first, and then everything seemed uninteresting. Their brains became clogged and—

Clang! Clang!

The heavy steel door burst open, brilliant lights loomed through the awful smoke, and as consciousness was on the point of leaving them, Nelson Lee and Nipper knew that their desperate expedient had been successful.

Rescue had come in the nick of time!



CHAPTER IV.

Clifford Gets a Pleasant Surprise—Into the Icy Sea.

"O F course, it's your business, Mr. Lee," said the first-officer bluntly. "The rest of the passengers need know nothing whatever of the affair. I admit the notoriety wouldn't be exactly pleasant. But I'm hanged if I'd like your job! You can't even cross the Atlantic without your enemies trying to finish you off!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"My life is a trifle strenuous, certainly," he admitted huskily. "In this particular instance my enemies nearly succeeded in their devilish designs. I don't know who they were, as I have already told you, for they were masked."

"Well, I should advise you to be careful in future," said the first-officer. "The old man knows all about the business, and he's a bit worried. He doesn't want a couple of his saloon passengers to peg out in mid-Atlantic."

"I do not think I shall give our unknown friends another opportunity," said Nelson Lee grimly. "This has been quite narrow enough a squeak for Nipper and I—hardened as we are to a life of constant peril."

"Narrow squeak!" echoed the officer. "Well, I should think it was—narrower than you realise, perhaps. I give you my word, if that smoke hadn't been observed you would have remained in that storage-room until you suffocated—and you weren't far off suffocation when we lugged you out. In any case, even supposing you survived, you would have remained prisoners for a deuce of a time; probably until you starved. That room hasn't been entered for three voyages—although the key is easy to get at. It hangs in the purser's cabin—and wouldn't have been now but for the smoke!"

The first-officer was in the detective's state-room. Both Nelson Lee and Nipper were in bed, and the ship's doctor had just left. Over two hours had passed since the rescue, and the nearly suffocated pair were now themselves again, except for dry throats, husky voices, and throbbing heads.

The doctor had ordered a good sleep, and had frowned somewhat at the first-officer as he entered. In a few minutes, however, the latter took his departure, and Nelson Lee and Nipper immediately dropped off into healthy sleep.

When they entered the saloon for breakfast the next morning they were a trifle pale, but otherwise cheerful. Their heads still ached, but a promenade on the deck after the meal would soon blow the cobwebs away from their brains.

Without appearing to do so, Nelson Lee watched Mr. Page T. Dayton closely, and he observed the scowl of fury which convulsed the American's face when he saw his enemies present in the saloon as calm and cool as though nothing had happened. Dayton had been hugging himself in the assurance that Nelson Lee and Nipper were finally settled with. And here they were, as large as life! Dayton swore that his underlings would have a pretty warm taste of his virulent tongue after breakfast.

Indeed, while he was engaged in that pleasant occupation, Nelson Lee and Nipper, in a sheltered part of the deck, related their thrilling experience to Douglas Clifford, who was decidedly concerned.

"And I stuck in my own cabin, indecently buried in a novel, all the time!" the young man protested—for Clifford was young. His grey hair and beard were certainly his own, but Nelson Lee was responsible for their greyness. "Dayton's shown his hand early in the game, Mr. Lee!"

"On the contrary, my dear fellow, Dayton has not shown anything," said the detective calmly. "He took care not to appear in the business at all. He left his confederates to do the work—and they succeeded confoundingly well! I shall never forgive myself for blundering into the trap so unsuspectingly."

Nelson Lee accepted a cigar from Clifford, and then became conscious that his head was rather thick still. So he reserved smoking the excellent weed until later. Clifford strolled off presently, leaving the "invalids" to recuperate their strength.

The day was beautiful, the sun shining down from a clear sky with almost spring-like warmth. The promenade-deck was well populated, and Clifford drank in deep draughts of delightful sea air with keen pleasure.

Carelessly he watched the people as they strolled about. They were all well-dressed, all gay and cheerful. Old and young, the influence of the delightful weather was affecting them all. His gaze travelled from Nelson Lee and Nipper, over on the starboard side, to a graceful girl who had just appeared from one of the companionways. The sun caught her hair, and played fully upon her fresh, delicately-moulded face.

"By Jove, it's— No, it can't be, surely?" gasped Clifford, his heart suddenly beating a wild tattoo against his ribs. "It is, though, begad! Vera Zingrave aboard the *Titania*! Am I dreaming?"

In an instant his expression of careless interest vanished, and it was replaced by a look of keen, eager pleasure. His face was flushed, and his eyes sparkled. Then impulsively he sprang forward, his hat in his hand.

"This is an amazing surprise, Miss Zingrave!" he exclaimed, in a low voice. "I'm delighted——"

The girl gazed at him, startled for a moment. Then her eyes widened a little, and she flushed delightfully. She extended her hand with winning frankness.

"Oh, it's Mr. Clifford!" she said, in a little gasp with a tone of decided pleasure in it. "Fancy meeting you here—of all places! Oh, I'm so pleased."

Douglas Clifford fingered his hat nervously.

He knew Vera Zingrave well, and her friendship was of great value to him. Yet she was the daughter of Professor Cyrus Zingrave, Chief of the

Green Triangle! Just that fact alone attracted Clifford to the girl more than anything.

He had suffered five years of imprisonment—five years of torture—at the league's hands. And Professor Zingrave had been mainly responsible; it was his mighty brain that had schemed to imprison the young man. Clifford had met Vera before those long years of incarceration—had met her afterwards, on two occasions. And he knew that she was in entire and utter ignorance of her father's terrible wrong-doing. She thought him to be the honourable and highly-respected scientist he purported to be.

Was she to suffer for her father's sins? Because she was Zingrave's daughter, was she to be regarded as a criminal, too? Clifford, knowing all he did, was greatly attracted towards Vera simply because she was the professor's daughter. A wild desire was within him—had been within him ever since he learned the truth—to rescue this sweet girl from her present surroundings of crime. He wanted to tell her of her father's real character: but somehow he had never been able to bring himself to the point. It was a terrible revelation to make, and Clifford had always funk'd it. He was not ashamed to admit that he funk'd it.

But it was a monstrous shame that such a beautiful girl—such a delightful, sweet creature—should have a father so treacherous, a scoundrel. She knew absolutely nothing; and Clifford had been forced to respect her ignorance on the terrible subject. He had met her immediately after his release from imprisonment—after his escape from the league's hands.

And she had been as delighted to see him as he had been to see her. And then, having been forced to adopt a disguise, he had met her again. He had explained his disguise by telling half-truths; relating a story of being imperilled by a gang of scoundrels into whose clutches he had fallen. He had not explained that the gang was the mythical League of the Green Triangle—mythical because the police could never discover the slightest clue to the league's whereabouts or identity—or that Professor Zingrave was the chief.

Vera had been keenly sympathetic, and had promised to respect his wish to remain unknown. And now, wonder of wonders, he had met her on board the *Titania*! That she was pleased to see him was obvious; and Clifford's heart throbbed with joy.

"I—I had not the slightest idea you were on board," he stammered. "Since we parted in that restaurant, I've thought of you time after time . . ."

"And I had no idea that you were among the passengers," she said, a trifle hurriedly. "I'm awfully pleased to see you, Mr. Clifford. How are you?"

"I'm splendid—and heaps better for seeing you!"

"Oh!" Vera murmured, flushing. "Shall we walk along the deck a little?"

"Thank you! I should love to!"

Clifford took a firm hold on himself, and checked his boyish enthusiasm. But the sight and presence of this girl rather confused him. She was truly delightful. Never had he seen so pretty a girl. She seemed prettier and daintier than ever now, in the clear Atlantic air, with the sun shining on her dark, chestnut hair.

"I wonder why we haven't seen one another before?" he asked.

"Oh, that's easily explained," smiled Vera. "I haven't been quite well . . ."

"But you're better now?" he interrupted anxiously.

She laughed softly.

"I'm splendid—like yourself," she replied. "But when the voyage first

started I kept to my cabin, by the terrible doctor's orders," she added, with a twinkle in her large, brown eyes. "I'm going to New York, Mr. Clifford."

He looked troubled for a moment.

"Not to stay there?" he asked. "You don't mean to remain in America?"

"Good gracious, no!" cried Vera. "I'm only doing the trip for the sake of my health. Father thought it would do me heaps of good. And I'm feeling as fit as anything already. Oh, this air is beautiful!"

"Is—is your father on board?"

"Of course not—he would be with me if he were," she answered. "I'm with Lady Dorothy Calton, a dear old darling of a chaperon. She's Lord Calton's sister, and as she was taking the trip on the *Titania*, dad thought it would be nice for me to go with her. We're both coming back on the return trip."

"Ah, I understand," said Clifford.

They walked up and down a little. Clifford every now and then stealing a look down at his companion's face. She was bewilderingly pretty, and her frank, innocent eyes were perfectly naive and winning. Her cheeks were still a little flushed, and her red little lips were parted slightly in a smile of pleasure.

"So you are doing the voyage just with Lady Calton?" asked Clifford presently. "No party, or anything like that?"

"Oh, no! You'll have to meet Lady Dorothy—she's a darling old thing!"

Clifford hesitated.

"I can understand that your father is too busy to leave London," he said, his words having a significance which Vera did not fathom. "But what of your mother, Miss Zingrave? I do not remember you ever having spoken——"

"My mother is dead, Mr. Clifford," said Vera a little sadly.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" he cried penitantly. "What a brute I am——"

"Rubbish!" laughed Vera. "There was nothing brutal in it. To tell the truth, Mr. Clifford, I hardly remember mother. She died when I was a wee girlie."

They were leaning against the rail now, facing one another, some distance from any other passengers.

"I don't remember father, either," went on Vera. "But it is impossible that I should. Father died six months after I was born."

Douglas Clifford stared.

"I—I don't understand!" he stammered, his heart hammering. "How—how can your father be dead? Isn't Professor Zingrave your father?"

Vera nodded.

"He is, to all intents and purposes," she replied. "But I was born before mother married the professor. He's really my stepfather."

"Thank Heaven!" murmured Clifford fervently.

In one flash, the whole world seemed brighter to him. Zingrave—Zingrave, the scoundrel—was not Vera's real father after all! The discovery sent Clifford's blood coursing through his veins madly, and he could have danced for sheer joy.

"You seem startled, somehow, Mr. Clifford," exclaimed Vera, regarding him curiously.

"Oh! I'm—I'm a bit surprised," stammered Clifford. "But—but please tell me about your father—your actual father, I mean."

"There's not much to tell," said the girl simply. "Soon after I was born my father died from pneumonia. I knew nothing of it, of course, for I was only three months old. Then, two years later, mother got married to Professor Zingrave; and when I was six, mother died."

"Your early life was very sad."

"Yes, but I was too young for any impression to be left upon me," Vera said quietly. "The only father I've ever known is the professor. I've never even troubled to regard him as a stepfather— Oh, but just look at that big ship coming up above the horizon!"

Douglas Clifford mechanically followed the direction of the girl's eyes, but although he looked at the approaching ship, he did not see it. His thoughts were busy in another direction altogether. The news he had just heard was the greatest relief to him he had ever experienced. Vera was not Zingrave's own daughter! She was not tainted with the blood of that crafty, murderous rogue.

He realised that the task of telling the truth to Vera, when the time came for it, would not be so difficult as he had at first imagined. The shock would be great, but not so great as it would have been had she been Zingrave's real daughter.

More fiercely resolved than ever was Clifford to bring about a great change in this girl's life. The knowledge of her stepfather's sins had in no way biased him against her—and now he was a hundredfold more eager to crush the League of the Green Triangle and reveal to Vera the terrible truth.

The pair remained chatting for some considerable time longer, and then Lady Dorothy Calton approached and was introduced to the elderly "Mr. John Merriek." Her surprise would have been great could she have known that the "elderly gentleman" was still well under thirty.

Lady Dorothy was a dear old lady of sixty, and Clifford took an immediate liking to her. The trip to America had suddenly grown tremendously rosy for Clifford. He foresaw that the remaining days of the voyage would be days of joy for him.

Shortly before luncheon Clifford sought out Nelson Lee and Nipper—who were by this time their old cheery selves again. The keen Atlantic air had driven the aches from their heads, and they were both feeling absolutely fit. Clifford told Nelson Lee of Vera Zingrave's presence aboard the *Titania*, and of the fact that the professor was not her real father.

"That's good news, anyhow," remarked the detective. "I didn't like to think of Vera Zingrave being the daughter of such a scoundrel—after what you have told me of her virtues."

"It's the best news I've heard for years, Mr. Lee!" said Clifford enthusiastically.

Nelson Lee's eyes twinkled.

"I do not wish to interfere with your pleasures in any way, my dear fellow," he said dryly, "but don't forget your compact with me. When the league is destroyed, then you can go ahead with your love affair as enthusiastically as you choose."

Clifford went red.

"Love affair!" he echoed. "Oh, I say, Mr. Lee, that's a bit thick! I admit I'm interested in Vera—but, hang it all, I'm not in love with her!"

"Not in the least," said Nelson Lee solemnly.

Nipper chuckled, and Clifford coloured more than ever. Then his jaw set firm, and he looked straight into Nelson Lee's eyes.

"Whether I'm in love, or whether I'm not in love, it makes no difference," he said grimly. "Until the League of the Green Triangle is absolutely defunct, I shall certainly not consider my own pleasures. But if I live, I mean to rescue Vera from her present criminal associations. The idea of that girl having a scoundrel like Zingrave for a guardian is revolting!"



Without the slightest warning, without giving the least indication of what was afoot, two of the strangers suddenly whipped up the travelling rug, and it descended over Nelson Lee's head in muffling folds. [See page 7.]

Shortly afterwards the luncheon gong sounded, and the saloon soon sat down the mid-day meal.

During the afternoon Nelson Lee and Nipper paced the deck discussing plans. Clifford was not with them, but they could guess that he was not whiling away the time in his own solitary company.

Towards dusk Nipper took himself off below deck to the *Titania's* sumptuous little animated picture theatre to enjoy a round of the "movies." Meanwhile, Nelson Lee—a really important personage to have aboard the ship—got into conversation with the captain regarding the exciting affair of the previous night. The captain was a genial man, and the detective was greatly entertained by his company.

After tea Nelson Lee and Nipper remained below until seven o'clock. Then they sallied out on to the upper deck, well wrapped and muffled.

For the night, although fine, was exceedingly chilly. The decks were almost deserted, the bulk of the passengers preferring the cheerful lounges and saloons below.

The pair were unaware of the fact, but their movements were being closely watched. Grogan—one of Dayton's underlings—was greatly interested in their doings.

"I really don't think Dayton will make another attempt on our lives, Nipper," said Nelson Lee, lighting a cigar. "At least we are perfectly safe so long as we fall into no more traps—and I give you my word we shall not do that."

But Page T. Dayton was desperate. He set no more traps, true enough, but he decided to act on the spur of the moment, and to act drastically. Fortunately for his purpose Nelson Lee and Nipper were taking their promenade on a part of the deck which was quite out of view of the bridge and of any steward or seaman.

The great detective and his assistant were, in fact, leaning over the rail, watching the cold sea slip by far beneath them. The place where they stood was absolutely deserted and strangely lonely.

"By the time we reach New York, Nipper, I expect——"

But Nelson Lee got no further. Even as he was in the act of knocking the ash from his cigar, three shadowy forms crept silently and stealthily up to the rail from behind. The whole dramatic incident did not occupy ten seconds. It was swift, silent, and sudden!

Without uttering a sound, two of the forms gripped Nelson Lee in a vice-like clutch. The third dealt similarly with Nipper. And then, before the startled pair could utter a shout, or offer resistance, they were lifted bodily and hurled over the rail into the icy sea.

Down, down they went, almost side by side. There were two great splashes as they struck the water. Then silence—utter silence. Not a cry for help floated up to the *Titania's* decks.

The pair must have sunk like stones, burdened by their massive overcoats. Like shadows the three murderers faded away into the darkness. Their deadly mission had been accomplished with amazing swiftness, and without a sound being uttered.

Nelson Lee and Nipper had been flung to—what?

CHAPTER V.

Nelson Lee's Clever Ruse—Aboard the *La Reine*—A Terrible Disaster.

NIPPER gasped.

"Oh, Christopher!" spluttered the lad. "I've got about half the Atlantic down my giddy throat, guv'nor!"

"Never mind, Nipper; it's all in a good cause."

Nelson Lee spoke lightly. The pair were floating side by side, without making any attempt to swim, on the bosom of the ocean. Seemingly close, but getting farther away every moment, the gigantic Titania continued sedately on her course for New York.

What did it mean?

Nelson Lee and Nipper were not acting at all as two people ought to act who have just been flung overside from an Atlantic liner. And they were floating easily and with no discomfort—and this in spite of their heavy overcoats and other clothes.

"It's a risky business, Nipper, but the conditions are very favourable," exclaimed Nelson Lee calmly. "I think everything will turn out all right. The lights of the La Reine are already well above the horizon."

"Yes, and she's coming straight this way, too."

"If she were travelling in any other direction I'm afraid Mr. Page T. Dayton would have something really tragic to gloat over," replied the detective. "As it is, our excellent American friend is congratulating himself rather prematurely."

"By gum, what a good 'un you are for wheezes, sir!"

Nelson Lee laughed, and lifted his hand from the cold water. The Atlantic was really icy, but neither Nelson Lee nor Nipper suffered any excruciating discomfort. The cold affected them, of course, but not seriously.

In Nelson Lee's hand was a huge electric torch. Its bulb was of large dimensions, and when the detective pressed the switch, a brilliant green light flashed out into the darkness—a light that could be seen for miles on such a clear night as this.

"Well, we don't stand much chance of being overlooked with this little glim with us," remarked Nipper confidently. "I say, guv'nor, suppose Dayton's watching from the Titania's deck? What will he think when he spots this little light? He'll freeze on to the wheeze, won't he?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"Mr. Dayton would probably think things if he saw the light," he replied. "But it is quite impossible for anyone on the Titania to see us, or the green light either. Only those on the La Reine are in a position to see our signal. It is intended for them, and they are on the look-out for it."

Yes, amazing as it seemed, the whole thing was a carefully planned ruse.

Nelson Lee's conversation with the captain of the Titania had not been mere small-talk. The captain had mentioned that the La Reine, a big French liner, and one of the most modern boats, would come up astern during the evening. She was a faster ship than the Titania, and was also bound for New York. But she would arrive in the American port ten hours before the British ship.

That piece of interesting information had set Nelson Lee's brain to work. And he had evolved a scheme, complete to the last detail—a scheme which almost took his own breath away. The very bizarre nature of it appealed to the detective, and it had overwhelming advantages. If he could only get on the La Reine he would arrive in New York ten hours before Page T. Dayton—he would have ten hours start over his enemy!

The whole plan was wonderfully complete.

The very instant the lights of the La Reine had been sighted by the look-out, the Titania had got into communication by wireless with the French boat. Fifteen minutes later Nelson Lee and Nipper betook themselves to the most deserted spot on the Titania's deck that they could find.

The detective was absolutely positive that Dayton would seize the first opportunity to kill his enemies. So Nelson Lee had very kindly obliged by placing himself and Nipper in a position which seemed both foolhardy and thoughtless.

Exactly as Nelson Lee had anticipated, so had Dayton acted. He had taken drastic measures, and had flung Nelson Lee and Nipper overside to their fate.

But that was just where Dayton had made a tremendous mistake.

In reality he was really pushing forward his opponent's scheme! He was assisting them, in fact, to reach New York ten hours before he himself could arrive. And, moreover, Page T. Dayton would be lulled into a sense of false security.

Now that Nelson Lee and Nipper had been flung into the ocean he naturally concluded that they had perished. Instead of which they were calmly floating on the surface waiting to be picked up. And, meanwhile, Douglas Clifford was still on board the *Titania*, well acquainted with the scheme, and on the spot to follow Page T. Dayton wherever he went.

The whole plan was superbly thought out.

Undoubtedly Nelson Lee had scored another point in the game. At first glance it would seem a risky business to plunge into the sea in utter darkness and wait to be picked up by a steamer which was even then just over the horizon.

But, be it remembered, those on board the *La Reine* had been well acquainted with what was afoot, and many pairs of eyes were glued to binoculars sweeping the seas in all directions looking for a green light.

How could Nelson Lee and Nipper possibly be left to their fate?

The green light was very brilliant, the air was transparent, and the sea was calm. Naturally enough, the signal was observed almost as soon as Nelson Lee pressed the switch of the electric torch.

The *La Reine* turned a point to starboard, and bore down straight upon the green light. Nelson Lee and Nipper watched the great liner with interest as she approached. They both realised now that they had never been in the slightest danger. Without that guiding green illumination their position would have been perilous. But the detective had thought out the whole thing with remarkable thoroughness.

One of the points which had rather dismayed Nipper was the prospect of remaining in the cold winter water of the Atlantic for an unknown period. But the detective had soon set the youngster's mind at rest.

When the pair lounged on the *Titania*'s deck they had outwardly no different appearance from the usual. They were perhaps a trifle bulkier, but that would be put down to their thick overcoats.

As a matter of fact, they were both thickly clad with cork, and it was impossible for them to sink, whatever the circumstances. In addition they were both thoroughly and liberally oiled from toe to crown. The sea water, although cold, would not penetrate through that coating of oil. They would be chilled, no doubt; but no after effects would result from their immersion.

They had not so very long to wait, after all. It seemed a very short space of time to them when the huge bulk of the *La Reine* floated placidly a quarter of a mile off, and a boat rapidly skimmed across the water to their rescue. By this time the *Titania* was almost hull-down on the horizon.

Exactly twenty minutes later Nelson Lee and Nipper were in a warm cabin on board the *La Reine*, and the great ship—even larger than the *Titania*—was proceeding on her course. The scheme had worked without the slightest little hitch.

The *La Reine*'s doctor was in attendance, but he was perfectly satisfied with the condition of his patients. The two strangers who had come aboard so dramatically were in a perfect state of health and had not even caught chills.

The oil was rubbed from the bodies of Nelson Lee and Nipper, and they were provided with dry clothes. The detective's private papers he had

carried in a water-tight case safely stowed away. In an hour the pair were sitting in the captain's own cabin, Nelson Lee keenly enjoying a cigar.

The captain, it proved, could speak perfect English—although, for that matter, it was really of no consequence, for Nelson Lee knew French intimately.

"I have heard of you, Mr. Lee, very often," said the French captain. "Mon dieu! But you are a daring man, and your young assistant is also full of courage. I was amazed when the wireless message was brought to me."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"The thing was rather novel, I admit," he said calmly. "But really, monsieur, Nipper and I are prepared to do strange things in order to frustrate our enemies. By your courtesy in stopping your boat to pick us up you have assisted me very materially. You must allow me to thank you heartily."

The French captain shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly.

"But no!" he said quickly. "What have I done? Any little assistance which it has been my privilege to render is as nothing. We could not fail to see your green signal and to pick you up. Ah, it was cleverly planned!"

The Frenchman displayed some little curiosity regarding Nelson Lee's motive for the remarkable expedient. The detective told the captain just sufficient information that common courtesy necessitated.

Shortly afterwards another wireless came from the *Titania*, saying that the news of the adventurous pair's safe rescue had been received, and that not a soul on the *Titania*—excepting the captain and one or two officers—knew of the strange incident. The message also stated that the three men who had committed the apparently black crime of murder had managed to slip away without being captured; although Nelson Lee had left instructions that the scoundrels were to be put in irons if possible.

"Well, it makes scarcely any difference, my lad," Nelson Lee told Nipper. "We shall arrive in New York well ahead of Dayton, and have all the advantages of the game in our own hands."

"Rather, sir," said Nipper delightedly. "Oh, you're a marvel, guv'nor! We shall get to New York first and be well on the road to Nevada before Dayton sets foot ashore. And even then he'll be kidding himself that he can take things easily. My hat, the plan is simply chock-full of advantages to us!"

The rest of the voyage to New York was quiet.

But the two parties, although separated, all enjoyed themselves in their own particular ways. Nelson Lee and Nipper, aboard the *La Reine*, rested comfortably in the knowledge that luck was strongly in their favour. Clifford and Page T. Dayton, aboard the *Titania*, were also contented in mind.

Clifford knew that Nelson Lee's plans were running smoothly, and therefore he gave himself up to a little harmless pleasure. He met Vera Zingrave every day, and grew quite friendly with the dear old Lady Dorothy Calton. His voyage had suddenly become a sheer delight to him, and he made the most of Vera's company while he had the chance.

Dayton was simply bubbling with good-humour. The fact that his enemies were at the bottom of the Atlantic by his orders did not worry him in the least. He was utterly callous. Nelson Lee and Nipper were gone for ever, and that was something to be very jubilant about.

But appearances were deceptive.

Nelson Lee and Nipper, apparently dead, had really stolen a march on the smart American. They stepped ashore, in New York docks, at ten o'clock

one rather cold morning. And at that very moment the *Titania* was still steaming quietly along, en route. She would not enter New York harbour until evening, and would not disembark her passengers until nine or ten.

The great detective and his young companion did not waste a minute. The very moment they reached the great American city they set about entraining for Nevada—Nevada, right away west.

Their stay in New York was extremely short. By noon they were seated in a great corridor coach, rushing west. It was really a tame business now, Nelson Lee told himself. They would arrive at the gold cavern in ample time to frustrate the league's evil designs.

With plenty of time at their disposal Nelson Lee and Nipper carefully studied the notebook which Travers Markham had handed to the detective. Nipper forgot his interest in the swiftly passing country when his master opened the notebook and commenced examining it.

"Our directions are perfectly clear, young 'un," said Nelson Lee. "First of all we have to reach Carson City, Nevada—and that's a long way yet. Once there, we leave the train, and embark on horseback or motor-car—whichever obtainable—for Crooked Gulch."

"That sounds a villainous place, sir!"

"Well, I suppose Crooked Gulch is somewhat rough," agreed the detective. "It is a small mining settlement, situated in terribly rough country. It lies seventy-five miles away from Carson City."

"That's not so very far, sir."

"Provided with a good car, and a good road, the journey would be a mere trifle—merely a couple of hours' ride," replied Nelson Lee. "But Charles Markham's information shows that the only way to reach Crooked Gulch from Carson City is by a rough track—a track which is a foot deep in dust during the summertime, and smothered with snow drifts in the winter. Motor-cars can certainly do the trip, but it is, at least, a full day's journey."

"But once at Crooked Gulch I suppose everything is plain sailing?" asked Nipper, trying to look over his master's shoulder at the note-book. "We're bound to be able to hire a car in Carson City, and when we get to the Gulch, we've won!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Far from it, Nipper," he replied. "This gold cavern is not situated at Crooked Gulch—although the Gulch is the nearest inhabited place. The gold cavern lies about thirty-four miles southward."

"Well, that's only another two or three hours' trip, sir."

"So one would imagine. But Nevada is a terribly rough state, especially in this particular locality," went on Nelson Lee. "There is no road beyond Crooked Gulch, whatever. Once we reach the little mining settlement we are at the last point of civilisation—nothing lies southward but bare, treeless, barren country. There is not even a road—not even a track. Not a soul travels that way once in five years."

"If there's no track, guv'nor, how can we find our way?"

"The directions are simple. From Crooked Gulch two rugged mountains can be seen," said Nelson Lee, referring to the notes. "They are about thirty-five miles away, and we must make for them on foot—or, rather, for the rocky pass between the two summits. Once there we shall find ourselves in a deep canyon, and it is impossible for us to go wrong. For, apparently, a great pillar of rock will confront us, right in the middle of the canyon, sticking up from the ground like a factory chimney. The top of this pillar is larger than the base, and is an unmistakable guide."

"We can't very well go wrong then, sir."

"No, the instructions are commendably lucid," replied the detective, stowing the pocket-book away. "We have merely to turn sharply to the right after passing the rock pillar, and a cleft in the canyon will confront us. That cleft is really a cave, and in the cave we shall find the entrance to the priceless cavern. It is my intention, Nipper, to make certain of the gold, and then take immediate steps to have it registered in the names of Travers and Charles Markham. I have learnt that all the necessary formalities can be concluded in Crooked Gulch. Once we have made the valuable property over to our clients, Page T. Dayton and the League of the Green Triangle will be completely frustrated in their thieving designs. Charles Markham found this gold, and it rightfully belongs to him, by the law of the American Government."

There was really nothing to worry over now. Nelson Lee was well ahead of his scoundrelly opponent, and it seemed that no hitch could possibly occur.

But things were not going to be so easy, after all.

The most exciting, the most strenuous part of the case, was yet to come. Many thrilling adventures were to befall Nelson Lee and Nipper before they set foot within that wonderful cavern of gold.

The following morning, soon after the train had stopped at an important station, a negro attendant bustled into the coach and halted before Nelson Lee.

"Telegram fo' Mistah N. Lee, sah," he exclaimed, grinning broadly.

"Hand it over," said the detective.

And when the attendant had gone away, pocketing a tip, Nelson Lee ripped the envelope open, and glanced through the wire. It was from Douglas Clifford, and had been dispatched from New York early that morning—which, of course, was the morning after the *Titania's* arrival in port.

"Dee leaving for West by first available train," ran the message. "Although complacent he is wasting no time. Am travelling by same train. Will stick on track. MERRICK."

Nelson Lee handed the wire to Nipper.

"So Dayton left New York this morning," said the detective. "Well, we have nothing to fret over. We have got almost a day's start, and our delightful friend has no idea that we are ahead of him. We hold all the trump cards, young 'un!"

At the next stop Nelson Lee dispatched a wire to Clifford—or, rather to a big city, which Clifford's train would run into during the day. The wire would then be handed to him. It merely said that everything was progressing excellently, and that a message would be left at the Carson City post-office for him.

The journey continued, and it seemed an interminable, lazy period to Nelson Lee. He was well accustomed to long railroad journeys in the United States, and he never enjoyed them. Nipper, however, did not share his master's views. He was highly delighted with the trip.

The eastern states were left behind, and the Great West soon began to make itself apparent. The aspect of the country changed gradually, and became more wild, more grand. The magnificent Rocky Mountains were a gorgeous sight, and even Nelson Lee became interested.

Snow lay everywhere, and the frosts were terrible. Winter had the West in its iron grip. But as the journey proceeded—as Nelson Lee and Nipper got nearer and nearer to the Pacific—the cold became less intense. The lovely state of California was not so very far distant now—Nevada adjoins

California—and the effect of that eternal summer country was making its effect felt.

The air became less keen, the skies were bluer, and the snow was now not so apparent everywhere.

Then, at about eleven o'clock one morning, the swiftly-moving train entered the state which was to be Nelson Lee's destination. They were in Nevada. Practically speaking, the journey was ended. That afternoon Carson City would be reached. But, at present, they were still over two hundred and twenty miles from Nevada's capital.

"I would have preferred reaching Carson City early in the day," remarked Nelson Lee. "We could then have reached Crooked Gulch by nightfall. However, it's no good wishing for what can't be, and so we can at least make all arrangements for an early departure at dawn to-morrow. By Jove, I shall be tremendously glad to be walking on solid earth once again—I'm fed up with these trains, travelling day and night."

"Well, I'm a bit tired of it myself, sir," admitted Nipper. "My goodness, there's a pretty stiff wind blowing!"

"It's the last effort of a fierce storm which swept over this region during the night," said Nelson Lee. "Fortunately, we did not feel the effect much—but we are now running into the country where the storm spent its full force. See, my lad, the torrents are swollen considerably."

As Nelson Lee spoke, the long train, travelling swiftly, came within sight of a wide gorge. It was spanned by a trestle bridge which appeared to be much stronger than several others which the train had passed over. It was not high at all, and as the train thundered upon it the rushing waters of the torrent seemed quite close.

The river was much swollen in consequence of the storm which had raged not long before. The trestle bridge was a long one, and the whole structure quivered as the train moved on its way.

"That water looks cold——"

Nipper got no further. Exactly what happened next was sudden, swift, and appalling. There was a terrific jar which sent Nelson Lee and Nipper flying from their seats across the great coach. An awful clanging, shattering noise filled the air; the very train appeared to be dancing in a mad kind of frenzy.

Then, with a deafening crash, the great steel coach which contained Nelson Lee and Nipper tipped up violently and plunged headlong from the trestle bridge into the roaring stream far below.

The whole thing had not occupied fifteen seconds, but the results were terrible. Actually, the trestle bridge was as strong as ever, but the storm had strained it severely, causing the metals to become a trifle uneven. But that trifle meant disaster for the train which was speeding over the steel track. The engine jumped the metals, but escaped almost undamaged. The coaches behind heaved and rocked; and the third one from the engine tore away from its couplings and ran over the edge of the bridge. It stopped for a fraction of a second, and then overbalanced. The rest of the train suffered badly, but it remained on the bridge.

Nelson Lee and Nipper scarcely knew what had happened.

In an appallingly short space of time everything was havoc. Less than a minute before they had been comfortably sitting on the cushions and chatting. But now they were sprawling, bruised and shaken in the wrecked carriage, the windows of which were shattered. Torrents of water rushed in, cold, and deadly.

And the coach, being carried swiftly down the dreadful rapids, was sinking swiftly and surely—its passengers being imprisoned within, practically helpless to save themselves!

CHAPTER VI.

In Carson City—The Telegram—Clifford Gives Up Hope.

THE following day, in the forenoon, Mr. Page T. Dayton walked jauntily away from the railroad depot in Carson City. A big cigar was sticking from his mouth, and the American member of the Green Triangle's Governing Circle was obviously feeling pleased with himself. He imagined that his enemies were dead, and that the game was his. Fate had certainly been kind to the rogue. Although Nelson Lee and Nipper had been privileged with nearly a day's clear start, Page T. Dayton was the first to set foot in Carson City.

Perhaps he would not have been quite so confident had he known that a rather elderly looking individual was watching him closely. Douglas Clifford had arrived at Carson City by the same train and he had seen that Dayton had not come west alone. Two men had parted with him at the railroad depot, two men who had travelled the whole of the way from New York. Clifford guessed that they were league men—and he guessed right. For the pair were Grogan and Slaney, two of the scoundrels who had pitched Nelson Lee and Nipper into the Atlantic.

Clifford was quite cheerful, and chuckled as he noticed Dayton's obvious good humour.

By this time, of course, Nelson Lee was at Crooked Gulch—probably at the gold cavern itself. Page T. Dayton was late for the fair, as he would find out before he was many days older.

Clifford could imagine the American's startled amazement when he found that the great British detective had foiled him after all.

"Lee's got everything fixed, I expect," Clifford told himself, "or, at least, he will have by the time friend Dayton arrives at Crooked Gulch."

Douglas Clifford was easy in mind; he had not the faintest idea that, at the last moment almost, Fate had stepped in and altered the aspect of everything. In plain truth, the odds were now in favour of the enemy.

For Clifford knew nothing of the railroad accident. The train by which he and Dayton had travelled had come by a different route to Carson City. Clifford naturally thought that Nelson Lee had arrived the previous day and was even now at his destination.

"Of course, Lee's left a message for me at the post-office, as he promised in his wire," Clifford murmured as he walked along. "Well, I don't see that I can do anything—and there's really no further need for me to keep an eye on Dayton. The affair's just about over."

He walked to the post-office and inquired carelessly. He was so confident that there was a letter for him that he laughed when he was told that there was no message whatever for anybody named Merrick—that, indeed, no letter had been handed in at all.

At last Clifford was convinced, and he walked out into the street with a decidedly puzzled expression. Nelson Lee had definitely promised to leave him a message, and yet there was no sign of it. What was the meaning of it? Clifford did not even suspect that he and Dayton had arrived at Carson City before the detective.

But he lost his interest in the rough western town in this new worry. The fact that Nelson Lee had left no message caused Clifford considerable anxiety. As he was walking down the main street he suddenly became aware of a motor-car approaching. As it went by he saw that it was a big, powerful one, and that Page T. Dayton was at the wheel. At the back were the American's two confederates, Grogan and Slaney.

"By Jove, Dayton hasn't lost much time," murmured Clifford. "He's

off to Crooked Gulch within the hour, and will probably arrive there to-night!"

Somehow he was strangely uneasy. To arrive in Carson City and to find absolutely no evidence that Nelson Lee and Nipper had been there was decidedly disconcerting. Clifford, in fact, became startled.

What was wrong?

There could be no doubt that Nelson Lee and Nipper had arrived. To think otherwise was absurd. Anyhow, Clifford resolved to go straight to the railroad station and inquire when the previous train, bearing passengers from the east, had arrived.

He happened to meet one of the engineers just outside the station. The man was wiping some grease from his hands by the simple expedient of transferring it to his overalls. He smiled a little at Clifford, for "dude" easterners were not often seen in Carson City.

"I'm rather anxious about a friend of mine," began Clifford. "He travelled from New York about a day ahead of me, and should, I think, have arrived here yesterday. Was there a train from the east——"

"Waal, ther' s-re was a train," interrupted the other slowly; "but I it didn't get around these hyar parts. I guess that same train as you're speakin' of is located up somewhere beyond Elko—over two hundred miles from this hyar city."

"Great Scott! Is the train late, then?"

The engine-driver laughed.

"I 'lows the darned thing couldn't be much later," he said calmly. "I ain't acquainted with the galoot who had charge of that train, but I guess he was a sure washout. Anyways, he won't step aboard a footplate again. I heered his left leg is kinder shortened some. He couldn't have had his eyes properly skinned, or the bust-up wouldn't have come off."

Clifford started.

"Bust-up!" he repeated sharply. "Good heavens! Was there an accident?"

"Waal, you amuse me, stranger—you sure do!" chuckled the engineer exasperatingly. "I 'lows I've heered of wuss accidents—guess I've been in a heap myself. Wunst I was pinned down beneath ten ton of blazin' hot metal——"

"Hang it all, keep to the point!" snapped Clifford. "What happened to the train that ought to have reached this town yesterday?"

"Waal, there was a kinder kink in the line, I figger, and that kink located itself in the dead centre of a trestle bridge," replied the other. "And I calculate trestle bridges ain't ezzackly the most favourable spots for kinks to get around. Howsum, this durned thing caused a hull heap of damage. The train came tearin' along across the trestle bridge, and got sorter tired of running on steel. I guess that engine wanted to try a swim fer a change. Say, it was a pretty little mix-up, stranger! The engine stuck to the bridge, but one of the coaches obliged with a neat little header into the stream! Nigh on fifteen people went the one-way trail that journey!"

Clifford was pale now, and trembling a little.

"And what of the other passengers?" he asked hoarsely. "What of the people who were not in the ill-fated coach which went to its doom?"

"Oh, I reckon they've gone 'Frisco way," replied the man. "Ther' wusn't none of 'em booked for Carson, or they'd have joined my train—which brought you into this city this mornin', I guess. If your friend was bound for Carson—waal, he's taken a road he wusn't precisely prepared for!"

"Then Lee's dead!" panted Clifford huskily. "Good heavens!"

The engineer's smile vanished, and he looked concerned.

"Say, I'm dead sorry if your pard——"

"It's all right—it's all right!" muttered Clifford distractedly.

But he pulled himself together and went straight to the station itself and received official confirmation of the disaster. Then, with haggard face, he wandered down the main street, hardly knowing where he walked or what he was doing.

Nelson Lee and Nipper were dead! Then Page T. Dayton would win the game, after all! What an appalling end to a case which had seemed to breathe success all along the line. At the eleventh hour disaster had come, had taken away two precious lives, and had made the way clear for Dayton's scoundrelly designs.

Clifford was almost stunned.

Nothing mattered now. Tears almost came to Clifford's eyes as he thought of Nelson Lee and Nipper drowning in that fierce mountain torrent, imprisoned in a sinking railway coach! Fate had been terribly unkind.

"Say, mister, guess this'll interest you!"

Clifford turned sharply, and saw that he was near the post-office. The man he had been speaking to previously had emerged, and was now holding an envelope in his hand.

"What is it?" asked Clifford sharply.

"Telegram just come through for Mr. John Merrick," replied the other. "I guess that's your name, ain't it?"

Clifford's heart began to thump.

"Yes—yes!" he exclaimed eagerly. "Give me the wire!"

He simply tore it from the astonished man's hand and ripped it open. Then, as he scanned the words, he heaved a great sigh of relief. For those few words seemed to put new life into Clifford—they brought the colour back to his cheeks, and the sparkle back to his eyes.

"Nipper and I safe," the telegram ran. "Both uninjured. Stuck in wretched little village waiting for coach. No railroad. Do your utmost to frustrate Dee, for I fear Nipper and I are helpless.—LEE."

"By Jove, what a relief!" murmured Clifford fervently. "Lee and Nipper are safe, at all events!"

Then he became brisk and businesslike. He realised that if Dayton was to be frustrated he would have to move heaven and earth to do it. And Clifford knew instinctively that the game was lost; but he immediately dispatched an answering telegram to Nelson Lee, saying that Dayton had started for Crooked Gulch, and that he feared the worst. He would, however, obey Nelson Lee's injunction and do his utmost to foil the scoundrel.

When Clifford left the post-office he immediately inquired for a garage. The next half-hour proved that the only car obtainable at the moment—and delay would be fatal—was a rather small one of indifferent horse-power. Clifford could almost have cried as he looked at it. How on earth could he hope to beat Page T. Dayton under these circumstances? He was furious, too. There were plenty of cars to be had, but when their owners heard that the journey was to be to Crooked Gulch they positively refused to let them on hire. This was not only exasperating, but it told more plainly than words that the track must indeed be a rough one. By a cruel irony of fate Clifford had not enough money on him to buy an automobile outright.

"But I won't give in!" he muttered doggedly. "Lee's out of the running, by cruel circumstance, and I'm infernally hampered. But I promised to do my utmost, and I'll do it! I fear it's a losing game, but I'm hanged if I'll chuck up the sponge until I absolutely know that all hope is dead!"

CHAPTER VII.

Help from the Clouds—A Sporting Chance.

"WE'VE failed, Nipper—there's no doubt about that at all," said Nelson Lee bitterly. "By James, what a ghastly fiasco the affair's turned out to be! Here are we stuck on these plains, miles from civilisation, helpless!"

"It's rotten, sir!" grunted Nipper miserably. "It's simply too utterly awful for words! I think we must have been born unlucky, guv'nor!"

"Well, I'm not sure of that, young 'un," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "We escaped with our lives, at least, from that death-trap. You can hardly call that unlucky."

It was Friday—early in the morning while the sun was still low in the heavens. Three days had elapsed since Douglas Clifford had wired that he was following Dayton to Crooked Gulch. It had been on Tuesday that Clifford had started from Carson City, close on Dayton's track, and not a word had been heard since.

"Of course, it's all over by now," exclaimed Nipper, more miserably than ever. "I expect that gold claim is Dayton's own property now, so far as the law is concerned. And very likely Clifford's been murdered."

Nelson Lee smiled grimly.

"You take rather a black view, Nipper," he said. "I expect Clifford is as much alive as we are; and, by reckoning the time out roughly, I should say neither Dayton nor Clifford have reached Charles Markham's cavern yet."

Nipper stared.

"But to-day's Friday, sir!" he protested. "We've been hanging about this rotten hole for four days, nearly dead with colds, and unable to move. And Clifford wired to us that Dayton had started from Carson on Tuesday."

"Well?"

"Well, sir, Dayton's done the job by now, for certain."

"And why so certain?" asked the detective calmly. "It would be Wednesday mid-day, at the very earliest, that Dayton could reach Crooked Gulch—and that by travelling through the night. True, the distance is only seventy-five miles, but the track is simply wicked. After doing that journey he could not proceed from the gulch without sleep or rest. Therefore, he probably stayed the night at Crooked Gulch."

"And started for the gold cavern yesterday morning?" asked Nipper.

"Precisely," agreed Nelson Lee. "He started on the last lap of the journey yesterday morning—Thursday. The distance is thirty-four miles, roughly, and that is a stiff day's journey on foot, even with a good surface to traverse. Remember, to reach the canyon of the rock pillar, the very hardest country had to be covered. Well, he probably did three-quarters of the distance yesterday, and then camped."

"By gum! So he's not there even yet?"

"So I calculate," said the detective. "The remainder of the journey will be accomplished this morning—Dayton is even now within twelve miles of the canyon. He will reach the gold, I should say, somewhere about mid-day—perhaps a little later."

Nipper sighed.

"Oh, guv'nor, if we only had a magic carpet!" he exclaimed mournfully. "We'd be the winners even at the fifty-ninth second of the fifty-ninth minute of the eleventh hour! Ain't it horribly galling?"

"It is so galling, my lad, that I don't like to think of it!"

Nelson Lee frowned darkly, and his fists were clenched. He gazed

unseeingly over the vast plains in front of him. He and Nipper had sallied out that morning from their "hotel"—a mere shack—just for the sake of exercise. A few rough and ready wooden buildings in the distance comprised the settlement of Grell Creek. On every other hand stretched bare, drab desert-land.

Grell Creek was the most dead-and-alive spot Lee and Nipper had ever run across. It had telegraphic communication with the distant township, but that was about all that could be said in its favour. The place did not boast of a horse, or even a motor-car. The inhabitants were rough miners, and those who catered for them.

Its only link with civilisation was a coach which passed through every Saturday. The Grell Creek inhabitants were intensely proud of the fact that they had a weekly visit from the outside world, and were inclined to boast about it.

Nelson Lee, however, was by no means pleased.

He and Nipper had escaped death by sheer physical strength and determination. When the railroad coach plunged into the river both of them had been imprisoned within it. Just before it sank to its doom, carrying several poor souls with it, the detective had used his last remaining strength in a desperate attempt to free himself from the death-trap.

Solely owing to his own herculean efforts the attempt had succeeded. Just before sinking, the coach had turned on its side, thus bringing one of the windows to the top. Nelson Lee had managed to scramble through, and had given Nipper a hand up—although the lad had done much on his own account.

The whole dreadful tragedy had happened in a minute—for the coach sank with appalling rapidity. But when it did sink it left Nelson Lee and Nipper struggling on the surface of the water, unhurt, but still in a desperate plight.

The water was icy, but they were fighting for their lives. Clutching one another, they were swept down the rushing stream, mile after mile. When upon the point of exhaustion they had managed to hoist themselves upon a great tree-trunk. This, in fact, saved their lives, for the torrent was so fierce that it was impossible to fight against it in an attempt to reach the bank.

Chilled to the marrow, they clung to the tree-trunk, and were swept along for three hours. How they lived through that dreadful voyage they hardly knew. But at last the current grew quieter, and they were observed by the excited inhabitants of Grell Creek, who immediately took steps to rescue them.

More dead than alive, Nelson Lee and Nipper had been dragged from the water, and by rough and ready means the circulation was restored to their numbed bodies. That had been on Monday, and on Tuesday Nelson Lee was just well enough to have the wire dispatched to Clifford. The rest of that day both he and Nipper had been in a kind of fever.

But their constitutions were magnificent, and although Wednesday still saw them very ill, no serious complications set in. The next day, in the afternoon, they were well enough to get up, and a sound night's sleep had worked wonders.

This morning—Friday—they were both a little pale and thin-faced, but were quite themselves. The previous day Nelson Lee had thought of telegraphing to the township for a conveyance to be sent to fetch them. But what would have been the use? They could not possibly reach Carson City until Saturday, at the very best. And by then it would be altogether too late.

So they decided to wait for the coach, and had to admit themselves beaten.

Fate had turned against them just when success seemed certain. It was terribly hard luck. It was utterly impossible, of course, for them to reach the gold cavern before Page T. Dayton now. Clifford might have been able to succeed where they had failed—but it was a very faint hope, and Nelson Lee did not think it at all possible.

The situation was not only exasperating, but bitterly cruel. All the detective's plans were ruined and shattered.

It was scarcely any wonder that he and Nipper walked along silently, and with feelings too deep for expression. They had left Grell Creek behind, and were on the open plain, two miles distant. They were busy with their thoughts, and hardly realised they were so far from the creek.

The day was calm and sunny, the air being quite mild. The silence was utter and complete, except for the slight noises they made themselves as they walked. Then, almost without their noticing it, a faint, far-away hum, musical yet insistent, throbbed gently on the air.

Nipper suddenly stopped.

"Don't you hear something, sir?" he asked sharply.

"Eh? Hear something?" said Nelson Lee. "Ah, yes! Why, it sounds——"

Nipper suddenly jumped a foot into the air, and pointed into the far distance.

"Great jumping crackers!" he yelled, mad with excitement. "An aeroplane, sir! An aeroplane out here in this wild place! Look, sir—look!"

But Nelson Lee was already looking, his face flushed, his whole frame quivering. A mere speck in the distant sky, an aeroplane was certainly approaching. It was as amazing as it was startling. An aeroplane at Grell Creek.

"By James, I remember now!" exclaimed the detective rapidly. "The telegraph operator told me yesterday that an aeroplane had been over this way only a week ago—to the intense excitement of all Grell Creek. It was a military machine, travelling from Salt Lake to San Francisco—a stiff journey. It stopped at Reno, and then continued its journey. Nipper, this machine must be the same one coming home, or another trying to emulate the first's example. A keen rivalry always exists amongst airmen, you know!"

"My—my hat!" gasped Nipper. "Do you think——"

Nelson Lee suddenly gave a shout.

"The thing's coming right over us, young 'un!" he roared. "There's still a chance in ten thousand that we may reach the gold cavern ahead of Dayton. If we can only get on board that aeroplane it will take us to Crooked Gulch dead across country in less than three hours!"

"Oh, guv'nor!" panted Nipper. "Oh, do you think we can signal——"

Nelson Lee threw his hands up despairingly.

"Signal!" he repeated. "How can we signal, Nipper? I am afraid this is merely a trick of Fate—flaunting before our eyes a way of deliverance which we cannot take advantage of. Suppose this airman sees us? Will he stop? Will he take notice of our desperate hand-waves? Not he, young 'un! He'll merely think that we are waving to him, and will fly straight on. Good heavens, what a situation to make a man gnash his teeth with helplessness!"

Nelson Lee looked at the fast-approaching aeroplane with heaving chest. As they could both see—for it was making straight for them, at a height of about a thousand feet—it was one of the most modern American biplanes; very similar to the Thomas tractor machines, one of America's best make. The throb of its engine was now loud and continuous.

"Then—then we can't get it down?" gasped Nipper frantically.

"We can try—that's all, my boy."

"Look here, sir, I've got a wheeze—a mad idea perhaps, but it might work!" said Nipper quickly and excitedly. "You say signalling won't be any good. Well, suppose you try to murder me?"

"What!"

"Only make-believe, sir. We'll have a struggle, and then——"

"By the powers, it might work!" shouted Nelson Lee. "Nipper, you're a wonder!"

The approaching biplane was now only half a mile distant, seemingly almost over them, a little to the left. Without hesitating a second, Nelson Lee simply flung himself at his young companion. Then the pair struggled madly, as though fighting for their lives. And all the time they wondered if their desperate and novel scheme would have the desired effect. Would the airman descend when he saw the struggle proceeding?

Suddenly Nipper broke away, and ran for his life, waving frantically to the aeroplane, which was now dead overhead. He could even see the head of the pilot bending over the fuselage of the aircraft.

Nelson Lee was acting his part wonderfully well as such short notice. He ripped out his big clasp-knife, and the blade glittered evilly in the sun. Flourishing the deadly weapon he chased Nipper—and Nipper flung up his hands with despair.

At the same second the roar of the aeroplane's motor was shut off abruptly, and there was merely a swishing sound caused by the revolving tractor-screw. In a sweeping half-circle the aircraft descended, then finished up with a steep, but beautifully judged volplane.

"Success, Nipper!" gasped Nelson Lee. "Oh, how splendid! What amazing luck!"

The aeroplane touched the ground, ran along a few yards, and then came to a standstill. A second later a woollen-coated man leapt out, and rushed towards Nelson Lee. The detective dropped the knife and raised his hands.

"Now, then, I guess you'd better——"

"It's all right!" panted Nipper, rushing up to the aviator. "It was only a wheeze, sir! We wanted to get you down! That fight was only make-belief!"

The airman swore.

"Well, I guess that's real funny!" he said angrily. "Maybe you may think it humour to fetch me down on a fool's game——"

"One moment, sir," interjected Nelson Lee quickly. "We brought you down because I have a matter of the most vital urgency to lay before you. We did not act so drastically for the mere fun of the thing. Believe me, we are quite sane, and almost unable to realise our good fortune."

The airman stared suspiciously.

"Say, what's the idea?" he asked. "You're Britishers, you two. Guess I'd recognise the true mother tongue anywhere. I wasn't aware that there was an asylum for the mentally deficient around these parts!"

Nelson Lee gripped the other's arm.

"I will explain!" he said quietly. "Please listen quite calmly, and with an open mind."

Three thousand feet up, and travelling at ninety miles an hour!

Such was the position of Nelson Lee and Nipper exactly fifteen minutes later. Just when despair had finally settled upon them, this amazing thing had happened. Help had come out of the sky—unexpected and indescribably welcome.

The airman, who proved to be Captain Hyne, of the United States Army, had also proved himself to be a thorough sportsman and a gentleman. Nelson Lee's story had been so lucid, so convincing, so sincere, that Hyne had believed it without hesitation. The detective spoke no half-truths—he kept nothing back regarding the gold cavern. He had told the captain that he was working on behalf of a client in England, and that a scoundrel was attempting to frustrate him.

Hyne was a true sportsman, and the idea of foiling Dayton at the last moment appealed to him. By travelling towards Crooked Gulch he would go out of his way a little, but nothing to matter. He was bound for Reno, Nevada, and then on to 'Frisco. His machine was "some goer," and thoroughly reliable.

He was a bit doubtful about dropping his passengers at the desired spot, but he would do his best. If no landing-place could be found they would have to travel on until a suitable spot hove in sight. He would put them on Mother Earth again, but he himself would immediately restart on his journey. He couldn't possibly afford to delay longer.

Nelson Lee was almost too grateful to express his thanks; but, as Captain Hyne didn't want any thanks, it mattered little. Hyne was a curt, sharp-tongued man, but undoubtedly "white" right through. He was going to a considerable amount of trouble for a perfect stranger, and Nelson Lee made a resolve that he would one day repay the generous airman for his splendid and timely assistance.

Hyne had heard of the detective—for he had spent a couple of years in England—and although Nelson Lee's story was an amazing one, he wasted no time in argument. He was a man of brisk action, and the net result was intensely satisfactory.

The biplane was indeed a splendid machine, and it soared across the rugged country at a terrific speed. Small scout aeroplanes will do over a hundred miles an hour with ease, but this was a big touring passenger machine, and ninety was wonderful.

Hyne made straight for Carson City, although it was a little out of the way. It was better to do so, however, for Carson was a landmark which made the ultimate destination sure of being reached. It would never have done to go wandering about on the off-chance of striking Crooked Gulch. By travelling via Carson City no error could be made.

Roaring musically, the biplane ate up the miles.

On, on, swiftly and surely!

The journey, so impossible by any other vehicle, was being accomplished as though by magic. The unbelievable had come to pass. Nelson Lee stood a good sporting chance of being the ultimate winner of the great game even yet.

But it was a matter of minutes now. The finish of the race would be terribly close. The very air, rushing past the detective's ears, seemed to be singing a song of stupendous triumph.

The game was not yet lost! There was still hope! Who would win in the end?

CHAPTER VIII.

The Cavern at Last—The Hand of Justice—Conclusion.

GOLD—gold—gold!

Gold by the pound—gold by the hundredweight! Nelson Lee's torch flashed upon the most amazing spectacle he had ever beheld in all his life. Both he and Nipper were within the cavern of gold which

Charles Markham had spoken of—which he had told to Dr. Sims Jameson while in a semi-trance.

And Charles Markham's story had been true in every detail. The gold within that pitchy black cavern was simply staggering. Probably the seam was not deep, and would not yield much more than could be seen—but, even so, both the Markhams were multi-millionaires.

"It's astounding, Nipper," said Nelson Lee, almost awed. "By Jove! Think by what a narrow margin the Markhams have come into this fortune. But for that splendid man, Captain Hyne, the League of the Green Triangle would have benefitted."

"Oh, sir," gasped Nipper, "it's too much for little me! I seem to be in a giddy dream! I shall wake up soon, and find myself in the shack at Grell Creek. Is it possible that all these things have happened to-day?"

"My dear Nipper, there is nothing so extraordinary in our adventures, after all," said Nelson Lee calmly. "The fact that we arrived here by aeroplane is certainly novel; but aeroplanes are fairly common now, even in Western America."

Yet, in spite of the detective's disclaimer, the events of the day had undoubtedly been extraordinary. In due course Captain Hyne had descended to the ground within four miles of the canyon—it being impossible to find a suitable landing ground an inch nearer. The spot had been sighted easily, for the great pillar of rock, in the dead centre of the canyon, was a certain landmark.

Even as it was, the aeroplane had had a pretty rough time in landing. But, lightened of the weight of Nelson Lee and Nipper, it had risen fairly easily, and had disappeared into the clear sky like a phantom thing.

The whole business reminded Nelson Lee irresistibly of a fable from the Arabian Nights. They had arrived at their destination from the clouds: had been dumped down; and their steed had flown off without delay. After five minutes it had vanished, and they were utterly alone, in the midst of a wilderness of rugged grandeur.

Not a sign of Page 'I. Dayton was to be seen. It was probable that, even now, Nelson Lee was too late. So he had lost no time in traversing the distance—now seeming absurdly short—which still separated him from his objective.

But, although short, Nelson Lee and his young companion had found it difficult going. After two hours hard work they had at last arrived at the base of the great rock pillar. There, before them, was the cleft in the rocks. Entering, they found themselves in a cave; and a small hole, six feet from the ground, and practically unnoticeable, led along a narrow tunnel straight to the wonderful cavern.

The fact that they had won through triumphantly, after all, seemed indeed like a strange dream. But it served to illustrate the astonishing and incalculable advantage of a modern aeroplane over all other methods of transit. That which had taken Dayton three days to accomplish, the aeroplane had accomplished in a few hours! The roughness and ruggedness of the country mattered nothing—the air was the same over all. The whole case was an illustration of the triumph of modern science over nature.

"Well, my lad, I've got a plan in my head, and I mean to carry it out as soon as I possibly can, if it is within my power," said Nelson Lee briskly. "We have seen enough here to satisfy ourselves that we have not travelled half across the world for nothing. It now remains to safeguard this wonderful treasure from Dayton's evil hands."

"What are you going to do, sir?"

"I'm not sure, young 'un, but I want to disguise the entrance to the cleft, if possible, so that it will be safe for us to go away," replied the

detective. "Our troubles are by no means over—we have a formidable time before us. Don't forget, we are over thirty miles from civilisation, and we haven't got a mite of food or water. Well, we mustn't grumble. The fact that we are the victors in the race is sufficient reason for us to feel contented, in itself."

"Rather, sir," said Nipper promptly. "Oh, we'll muddle through, somehow!"

Nelson Lee smiled. He was pleased with the lad's fearless utterance. For, strictly speaking, their position was not exactly a pleasant one to contemplate. But, as contemplation would do no good, they busied themselves with the task which was immediately necessary.

Nelson Lee in advance, they crawled along the narrow tunnel, and emerged into the outer cave. The sunlight of the afternoon streamed in at the entrance, and they walked out, the detective trying to think of a scheme to assist the plan he had in mind.

Then, with startling suddenness, there was a rush of feet. The very instant the detective and Nipper emerged into the sunlight they saw three forms rushing at them. Before they could defend themselves they were bowled over and pinned down—two upon Nelson Lee and one upon Nipper.

"By gosh!" gasped a furious, amazed voice. "I guess I'm beat over this! Nelson Lee here before me—and he and the brat were thrown over the Titania's rail in mid-Atlantic! Gee, and I thought I was safe!"

Nelson Lee struggled madly.

"You scoundrel!" he cried. "Yes, we got here first, in spite of your murderous plans! You'd better let us alone—there are four others within the cave——"

"Say, that don't cut no ice with me!" snarled Page T. Dayton harshly. "I ain't the man to be bluffed! The rope, Grogan—make the hounds secure!"

At the end of five minutes Nelson Lee and Nipper were bound—not very securely, but in such a manner that they were helpless. The detective was calm, but his face was pale and his teeth set.

The irony of it all!

Again, and this time at the very moment of triumph, ill-luck had dogged his footsteps. He had certainly not expected Dayton to arrive yet—— No, that was wrong. On second thoughts he realised that he ought to have been more careful. The excitement of the discovery had made him rather careless. If anything, this startling crisis was of his own making. Had he been cautious he could easily have gained the upper hand over his foes.

Page T. Dayton's face was contorted with fury.

"I guess you'd better say your prayers, the pair of you!" he grated. "I'll make short work of you, right here and right now! You won't work any tricks on me this time—as I reckon you did before!"

"My own carelessness is responsible——"

"Say, what's coming over you, Mr. Nelson Lee?" cried Dayton. "When it comes to you admitting you ain't perfect—waal, I guess it's time for the stars to fall!"

"What's the programme, boss?" asked Grogan bluntly.

"Waal, it's a programme that's not of the kind usually sold in theatres!" replied Page T. Dayton harshly. "There'll be nothing theatrical in this business! I admit I'm fairly bowled over. I thought I was here absolutely first; but I guess it doesn't matter any, as it's turned out."

"Don't be too sure," Nelson Lee said quietly. "Scoundrelism doesn't usually triumph over honesty——"

"Honesty!" echoed Dayton mockingly. "That doesn't swallow with me, sir! You're a darned 'tec, and tecs aren't models of righteousness. I reckon you meant to collar this little lay-out for yourself, and let Markham go to the deuce. Well, you're both going to the deuce—only you and Nipper will hit the trail right away."

"You murderous brute!" cried Nipper, almost crying with helpless rage. Dayton bent down and lashed the lad across the face cruelly.

"Any more talk, and you'll——"

"Oh, I'll talk!" exclaimed Nipper fearlessly. "You'll take further advantage of my helplessness, I suppose? That's about all such a skunk as you is fit for! You're a mighty brave man when you've got nothing to fear!"

The American swore loudly.

He was simply furious—but there was a glimmer of mad triumph in his evil eyes. It pleased him to think that, although Nelson Lee had arrived first, the detective was now wholly in his power. No help from outside could possibly come, and it was Dayton's privilege to take what revenge he chose.

A smile appeared upon his face as he gazed at a little cave, a hundred yards away, on the opposite side of the canyon. The cave was deep and low, with a still lower entrance; the latter, in fact, being only a foot in measurement. But it was quite large enough to admit the bodies of Nelson Lee and the youngster.

It was quite close to this cave that the great pillar of rock lifted its bulb-like top to the sky. The base was narrow, and the whole structure seemed in imminent danger of toppling down. But it was obviously safe, or it would not still be standing.

"Shift the pair into that cave!" ordered Dayton sharply. "I guess you'll say my scheme's rather neat when you freeze on to it!"

Grogan and Slaney dragged their victims to the cave, and pushed them through the narrow opening into the dark interior. Both Nelson Lee and Nipper kept their mouths tightly shut; not a word would they utter to cause Dayton a second's pleasure. For it would have been pleasure for the scoundrel to hear his victims uttering words of prayer.

But, once inside the cave, Nipper uttered a little sob.

"What's the idea, sir?" he asked brokenly.

"Ah, Nipper, I can't tell you," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "The villain evidently means to wreak some devilish work."

"Just when we were success—— Oh, it's awful, guv'nor!"

"I blame myself entirely, lad," said the detective bitterly. "What a blind fool I was to leave the cave without even looking or listening to see that the coast was clear. I knew that Dayton might be coming, and yet I neglected to take even commonplace precaution! Sometimes, Nipper, I begin to think——"

Boom!

Crash—crash!

There was a sudden deafening explosion, and the rock fell in front of the two bound forms, leaving a gaping hole—through which they could see the exterior. And as they looked, a startling thing happened.

The great rock pillar, shaken by the explosion, toppled over, and fell swiftly and surely. And with the terrible crash of its fall, came a dreadful shriek—a shriek of mortal terror and agony.

That was all. Just that one, single scream—and then silence.

For a tragedy had taken place.

Page Townley Dayton had died by his own hand! Not by design, for he valued his life too much to deliberately take it. No, the thing had been

brought about as though by the hand of Providence. Justice had seen that the right man had suffered; the man who deserved swift and terrible punishment.

Dayton had meant to exact a fiendish revenge. Immediately after Nelson Lee and Nipper had been thrust into the little cave Dayton had fired the fuse of a dynamite cartridge directly in front of the entrance.

But the result of the explosion was unexpected.

Dayton's cold-blooded plan had been to block up the entrance to the cave, and so imprison his victims in a living tomb—to starve and die by slow degrees. Quite another thing had actually happened.

The cave entrance had merely been made larger; and the pillar of rock, already unsteady, was unable to withstand the shock. It thundered down, as though directed by a higher power, full upon the spot where Dayton was standing. There was no escape for him, although he saw the doom which was to be his.

One scream he uttered, and then he disappeared beneath the mass of shattered rock. His confederates, witnessing the tragedy, became terrorised, and fled—fled they knew not whither.

And thus another member of the League of the Green Triangle was accounted for. Slowly but surely, the campaign of Nelson Lee and Douglas Clifford was progressing. And this was only the beginning. Before they sheathed their swords the whole villainous organisation would be shattered and wrecked.

After Dayton's death Nelson Lee and Nipper soon freed themselves, and met Clifford quite a short distance away. True to his promise, Clifford had done his utmost to frustrate Dayton, and had intended adopting a plan of his own to scare the scoundrel away from the spot. That plan, however, was not necessary.

When Nelson Lee and his two companions returned to Old England, both Travers and Charles Markham greeted them enthusiastically. Charles was now almost recovered, and intensely grateful to the famous detective for saving his life, and for saving his rightful fortune.

And, a few days after, his gratitude took a more concrete form: for a cheque arrived at Gray's Inn Road which fairly took Nipper's breath away when he saw it. Even Nelson Lee was forced to open his eyes a little wider.

But he banked the cheque in a separate account from his own private one. The money, he told Nipper grimly, was to be kept in reserve for use, whenever required, against Professor Zingrave, and the Green Triangle. The great campaign against the dreadful league was only just starting.

Already two famous members of the Governing Circle had met their fate. Who would be the next to go?

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.

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.

A short time afterwards, while the two chums are out together, Hugh thinks he sees some mountains and pastureland far out to sea. Val Ruxton, however, tells him that what he sees is only a mirage. (Now read on.)

A Terrible Fight.

"H'M! We've not time to do that now," returned Val, somewhat testily. "We'll have to make up our minds to appropriate one of 'em. Ha! Look over there, at that orifice in the side of yonder cliff! How will that suit your high-and-mightiness? Looks new, and—er—to speak, as if it had been done up—I mean, done down."

He pointed to a precipitous rock, evidently a spur of one of the great mountains. It had an appearance as though a portion of the cliff had fallen outwards, disclosing a hole, which probably had been previously closed up.

"Now you can see that the front door is quite new," Val went on, "and it's very likely we shall find the interior new also, so far, at any rate, as previous inhabitants are concerned. We may even find that some enterprising house-agent has had it specially re-decorated in anticipation of our arrival. Hallo, Mike! What have you got there?"

The two sailors had come running up, each carrying something in his hand. While their leaders had been searching for a likely cave, they had been foraging around on the off-chance of coming across some kind of game. With this idea, they had entered some of the thickets and woods, and now they had evidently made a discovery.

"Why—I declare—eh? Yes—no—yes, I declare they've got some hares! Good biz, you chaps! How did ye manage t' catch the craytures, Mike, darlint?"

But Mike did not respond to the banter. Nor did Cable. Instead of seeming pleased and proud at their hunting skill, they were looking, as Hugh expressed it, as sober as judges, and twice as scared.

"It's meself as don't unnerstan' it," cried Mike. "An' I don't loike it at all, at all! It's witches—or warlocks—theer be about. My grand'ther used to tell me as witches caught hares an' sarved 'em loike this."

"Theer be some queer varmints about, an' that's a fact, sir," Cable joined in, very seriously. "We found these things—we ain't killed 'em—look 'ow they've been killed!"

Impressed by their manner, the two friends took the hares—there were three of them—and examined them. The first noticeable thing was that they were not white, as Arctic hares usually are. The other, and more important thing, was the way they had been killed. Their necks had been wrung as one might wring a chicken's, but evidently with great strength and ferocity, so much so, that two of them had been torn almost off. On one, there were, in addition, wounds as though some wolf-like creature had savagely bitten pieces out. There was something particularly gruesome and revolting about the manner in which they had been killed. It suggested intense ferocity and savage, ungovernable fury.

Ruxton whistled.

"I see what you mean," he muttered gravely. "Evidently, there are here not only hares, but larger creatures which live on them."

"Yes, but what sort of creatures?" Hugh asked.

"That be jist it, sir," cried Bob. "It ain't no sort o' cat, like, or anythin' o' that kind, d'ye see? It must be somethin' as 'ad hands, an' precious strong hands, too!"

"It's certainly very curious," Ruxton agreed. "At the same time, I don't see that you need look so straight down your nose, Bob! Providence has sent us something good to eat; the best thing to do is to accept it thankfully, and proceed to cook it. We'll be along there presently—by the time you've got it ready—to sample your cooking."

The men went off, looking anything but comfortable or satisfied, while Hugh and Ruxton went on to the hole in the rock.

This hole was some six or seven feet above the level of the ground outside, but there were two or three rocky ledges which enabled them to get up to it without much difficulty.

"Steps up to the front door, too!" said Ruxton. "What more would you have? Now let's see what the inside looks like. You don't insist on wall paper, I suppose? I'm afraid it will be rather dark, but perhaps we can get the gas laid on after we've moved in."

They passed through the hole, which was not unlike a window without frame or sash, and stepped down a foot or two on the other side. Then, to their surprise, they found themselves on the floor of a roomy, lofty cavern.

Their surprise increased when they discovered that it was but the first of several similar chambers communicating with each other by small openings, in size, very much the same as the one by which they had entered.

"Ha! I said the rocks here seemed to be honeycombed!" cried Val. "I wonder how far you can walk from one to another in this way?"

"But what a queer thing!" exclaimed Hugh. "It's not dark in here! Do you notice what a strange sort of light there is? What does it mean?"

Whatever it might mean, or whatever might be the cause, it was certain that there was a curious, almost uncanny, soft twilight, even in the farthest

cave they had reached. It certainly did not travel from the entrance they had come in by, for that was quite out of sight."

"The very walls themselves seem to me to be slightly luminous," Hugh went on. Then he remembered what they had seen the night before. "We thought the whole country seemed to be in a magnetic glow," he reminded Ruxton. "It must be the case here."

"Magnetic light laid on," laughed Val. "What more could you wish for? Say, shall we take the place on a—h'm—weekly tenancy, and have our handsome suites of furniture brought in?"

"I think it ought to suit us literally down to the ground," assented Hugh, laughing back. "But I'm jolly hungry. Let's go and see if they've caught any fish, and whether they've got those hares cooked. They looked to me all right, and I don't see why—Hullo! Something's up! Come on, Val!"

They had, while talking, walked back to the outer cavern, and were nearing the entrance, when a loud outcry caused them first to stop to listen, then make a rush to the "window." Hugh sprang on to it and leaped out. Ruxton came almost tumbling on top of him.

They looked round, and forthwith, started to run as hard as they could go.

For there, a few hundred yards away, they saw the two sailors fighting for their lives against some of the strangest-looking monsters they had ever seen or dreamed of.

Whether they were ape-like men, or some new and unknown species of men-like apes, it was impossible at a first glance to say. All that could be made out, while running towards them, was that they were horribly ugly, ogre-like beings, covered with long, shaggy, yellow hair, and that they were uttering screams, snarls, and hoarse roars, such as made the blood run cold to listen to.

In a few seconds the two chums were amongst them, and then began one of the fiercest fights they had ever engaged in.



A Wild Fight with Weird Loss—A Night Attack in Force.

WHATEVER the precise place in nature the strange creatures might be supposed to occupy, there could be no question as to either their ferocious hostility or their formidable strength.

At first there had been two of them, and as Hugh and Val ran up, they left the men they had attacked and turned on the new-comers. But ere the sailors had time to take breath, wild howls and screams were heard from a thicket near, and two more rushed out and joined in the fight.

And terrible fighters they were. Though not nearly so tall as the men they had attacked, their length of arm and width of shoulders were extraordinary. Heavy, mis-shapen monsters though they appeared, their quickness and agility were something marvellous. They had long, talon-like nails, both on hands and feet, and immense tusks for teeth, all of which they made free use as weapons.

Perhaps, however, the most noticeable parts about them were their faces—so, at least, Hugh afterwards declared, and the others agreed with him. There was something positively fascinating in their unutterable ugliness, something almost maddening in the diabolical glare of their eyes—eyes that in colour matched the horrible, tangled, yellow hair which covered them from head to foot. There was some leering peculiarity in that horrible glare, which seemed to inspire those they attacked with a sort of reflection of their own fiendish rage.

Against these beings the four men fought as best they could, each following his own tactics. Hugh found that his sledge-hammer blows answered best for a while. They kept his antagonist at arm's length, though they seemed to have little permanent effect upon its anatomy. This puzzled him not a little.

Ruxton, meantime, was rolling on the ground, engaged in what he afterwards described as the most deadly, hideous, wrestling bout he had ever had in his life. Vainly he strove to crush his foe, vainly he gripped its throat and thumped its head on the ground. Each time it wriggled itself free, and sprang up and flew at him again, livelier and more savage than ever.

In the midst of the contest the sun, which had for some time been behind the clouds, came out, and its rays poured down, hot and dazzling, upon the wrestling, writhing, struggling combatants. At once, a change was noticeable. The uncouth monsters evidently disliked the bright sunbeams, and tried to avoid them. Hugh noticed this. The one he was struggling with blinked, for the first time, its baleful eyes, and turned its head away, and the young fellow was quick to take advantage of it. As they fought, he forced the creature round, again and again, in such a manner as to get the sun in its eyes, and each time it shrank back as if in pain. Finally, it gave a wild scream, as of mingled rage and pain, broke away, and bolted for the wood.

Seeing this, the others followed suit, and the four men were left to themselves, panting and breathless, and wondering not a little at the sudden cessation of the struggle.

"What brutes!" exclaimed Val.

"Sure, an' phwat did I say, Mither Ruxton? It's warlocks, they are—may the divil fly away with 'em!"

Everyone of the four had scratched and bleeding faces and torn clothes. As Cable said, it seemed a mercy they had escaped having their eyes scratched out.

"Did ever mortal man see such divils!" cried Mike, disgustedly. "It's like a wild cat, an' ape, an' a wolf, they are, rolled into wan, disperate body!"

"Well, I confess I'm not sorry they've hooked it, though what was the precise reason for their going I'm blessed if I understand," said Ruxton. "Somehow, I can't flatter myself that we'd beaten 'em yet. It wanted more than we had time to give 'em to really beat 'em, and somehow I don't think they were frightened. They don't seem to know what fear is!"

Hugh explained:

"They don't like the sunlight," he said. "It was cloudy and gloomy when they first rushed out of yonder dark wood, and when, afterwards, the sun came out and got in their eyes, they didn't seem to like it; in fact, they evidently couldn't stand it."

Val nodded his head.

"I dare say you're right," he said. "I reckon they're used to living in semi-darkness. They prefer the long winter, with its night lasting for months, and the summer sun upsets them."

"Just so. It's a good thing it happens that way--only——"

"Only—what?"

"Why," said Hugh thoughtfully. "I was wondering how we should have fared if it had been night, and if, say, there had been more of 'em? Somehow, I fancy we haven't done with 'em yet. I shouldn't be surprised if they attacked us again in the night, and brought more of their kind to help 'em."

Ruxton looked disturbed.

"Jupiter! A deuced unpleasant supposition of yours, Hugh, but I'm not prepared to say it's wide of the mark. If so, it's the more reason why we should move into our habitation to pass the night. And by way of making sure, we'll barricade it against the brutes. We don't want any more of this sort of fighting, and we can't afford to waste any cartridges on the beasts."

"This sort of exercise makes one hungrier than ever," observed Hugh. "Now, where did you find those hares, you chaps?"

"In the wood, sir. They were lying just outside a dark cave," Cable answered.

Hugh looked at Ruxton.

"Do you see?" he queried. "That confirms my idea. The brutes live in a dark cave, in the midst of a dark pine wood. You chaps stole some of their food which they had left outside. They came out to look for it, missed it, tracked you, saw you carrying off their property, and were so enraged that—the day being comparatively dark at the time—they rushed out to try to recover it."

"Yes, sorr, an' they've got it, too," cried Mike ruefully. "I niver thought about the hares at all at all, an' sure it's gone they are!"

So they had, and there was a general laugh at the discovery. Even in their hurry to get away out of the sun's rays, which dazzled and half-blinded them, the creatures had been astute enough to seize upon the hares which, in the struggle, the sailors had dropped, and had borne them off in triumph.

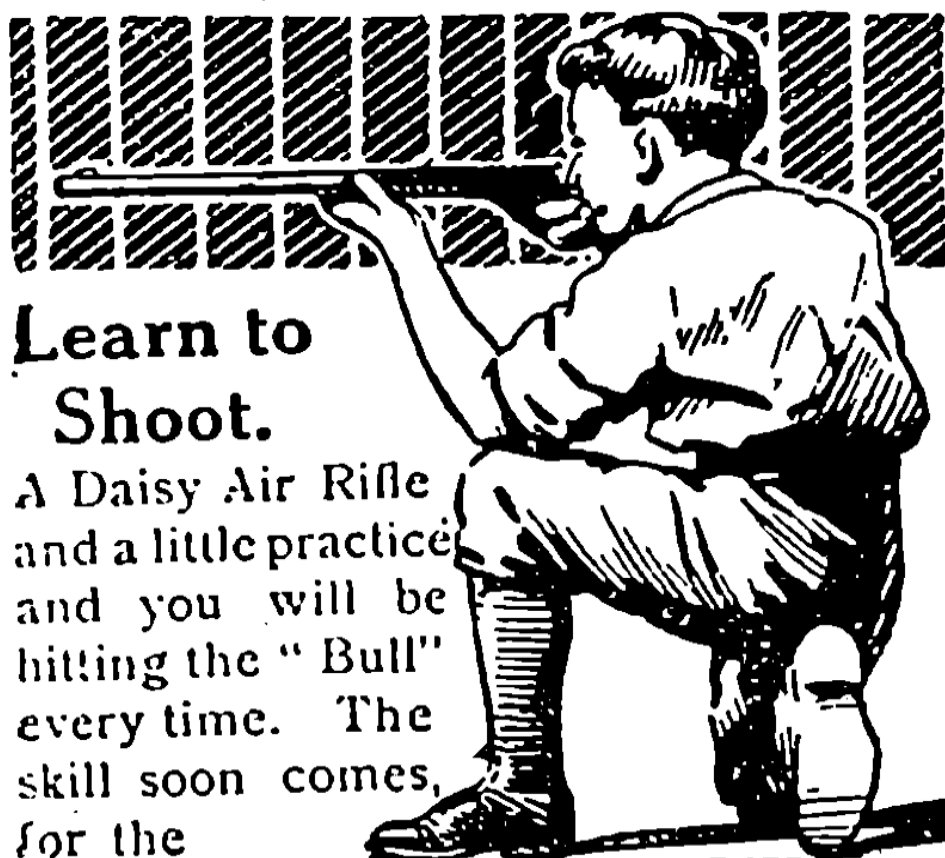
"Well, let's go and see how the fishing is progressing," suggested Ruxton. "That seems to be our only chance of a meal at present."

To their great satisfaction, they found that the natives had been very successful. They had landed quite a quantity of fish, and some of it was already being cooked at a fire they had made of wood cut from trees at hand.

So they all sat down to it and were filled.

Then the Eskimos, who knew nothing of what had occurred, led their leaders down to a shallow place in the river, and showed them a number of strange footmarks in the soft, wet sand at the edge. These marks were repeated on the farther side, and there could not be much doubt as to what they were.

(To be continued.)



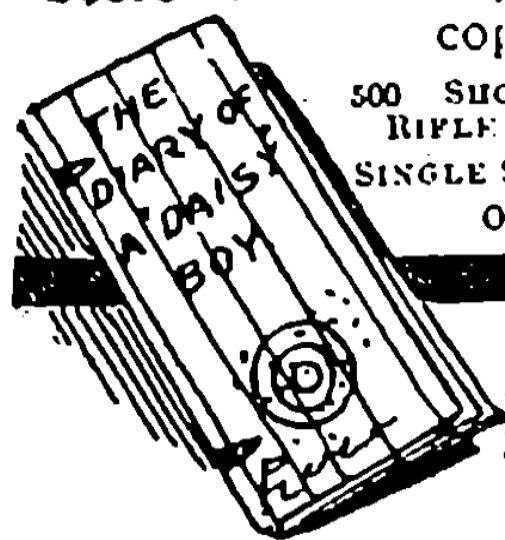
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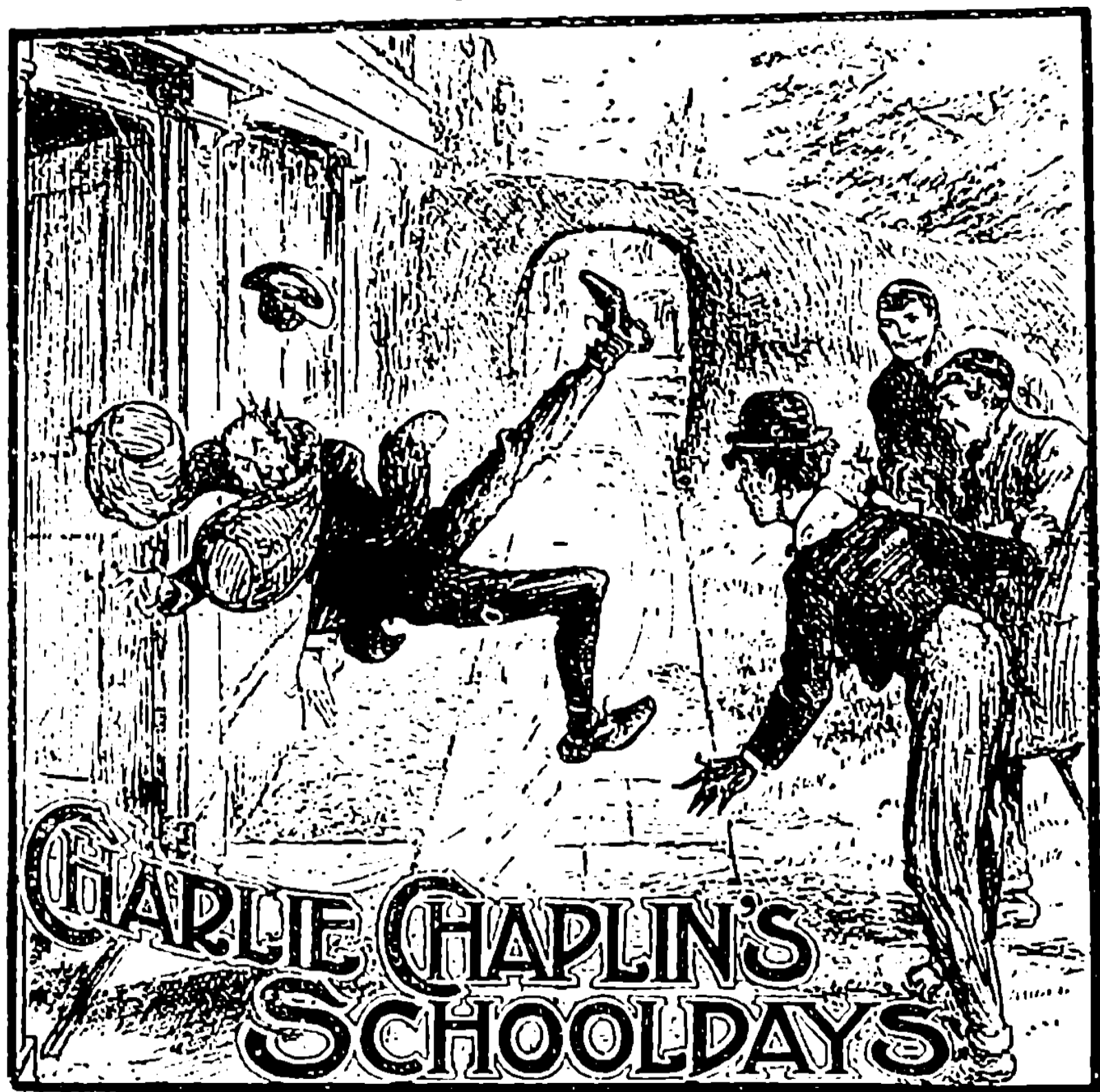


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