

NO. 28.—FOR READERS OF ALL AGES.—1^D.

*Week ending
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THE

FORGED FINGER PRINTS.

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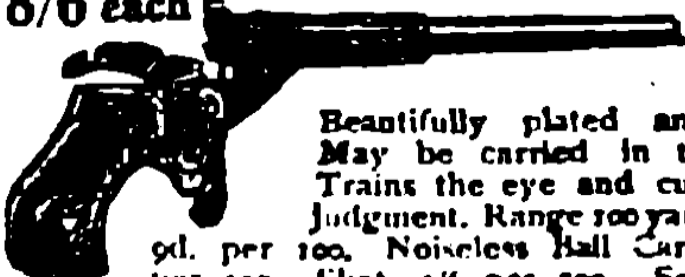
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THE FORGED FINGERPRINT



Another Dramatic Story of NELSON LEE and
THE LEAGUE OF THE GREEN TRIANGLE.

*By the Author of "Twenty Fathoms Deep," "The
Terror of Troone Towers," "The Gold Cavern," &c.*

(Illustrated by Arthur Jones.)

CHAPTER I.

The Diamonds of Destiny—Attacked in the Fog—Nelson Lee is Astounded.

PROFESSOR CYRUS ZINGRAVE gave a soft, musical little laugh.

"I give the necklace into your charge, Sir Roger, without the slightest fear as to its safety," he said genially. "As you are visiting your jewellers to-morrow, you may as well undertake this little commission for me. The necklace belongs to my daughter, Vera, so you must be careful with it."

Sir Roger Hogarth removed the cigar from his mouth.

"What's wrong with the necklace?" he asked, smiling.

"Oh, nothing much—merely requires a slight repair to the fastener," replied the professor, taking a dazzling diamond necklace from his pocket and watching it glint in the electric-light.

The pair were standing in the palatial and magnificent lounge-entrance to the Orpheum Club, in the West End. Both were overcoated and ready to venture out into the cold, damp, foggy atmosphere of the winter's night.

They had just been on the point of going their different ways when Professor Zingrave had remembered the necklace. They stood there, under the great electrolier, admiring the pretty string of precious stones for a moment or two, watching them scintillate and glitter.

Professor Zingrave was an imposing man, with a wonderful voice and a magnetic personality which made him liked and respected wherever he went. The great scientist's dome-like forehead stood out boldly, and his eyes were full of twinkling geniality. One glance at him was enough to be made instantly aware that he possessed a marvellous brain, and that he could lead men to obey his will, even against their own inclinations.

Yet his fame as a man of science would have dwindled to nothing compared to the position he held in another—and totally different—field. For Professor Cyrus Zingrave was the greatest, the cleverest criminal in Great Britain. He was the chief—the actual scheming brain—of the infamous League of the Green Triangle!

And Sir Roger Hogarth, Bart., shipowner, was one of the most influential members of the league's Governing Circle. The pair had just been passing an idle hour at the club, together with many other well-known gentlemen and noblemen.

Yet, could the amazing fact have become general knowledge, the exclusive and highly respectable Orpheum Club was really nothing more nor less than the headquarters of the league. Every member of the club was also

a member of the Governing Circle. The tremendous criminal organisation planned its infamous business right under the gleaming limelight of the West End. Hidden away below the cellars of the magnificent building was the league's Governing Chamber. And not a breath of suspicion attached itself to the great men who were responsible for the thousand and one crimes which were yearly committed by the league's emissaries.

The ordinary working members of the huge society were legion—and not one of them knew who ruled them, or from where they were ruled. They knew that there was a mysterious Governing Circle, but there their knowledge ended. That Professor Zingrave was the chief, and that the Orpheum Club was the league's headquarters, was never suspected or dreamed of. The working members of the criminal brotherhood received their orders from specially appointed controlling agents.

The lounge-entrance of the club was brilliant and open, and the street outside was quiet, and the air filled with gathering fog. By mere chance an ordinary member of the league was passing the club at the minute Professor Zingrave and Sir Roger Hogarth were admiring the diamond necklace.

He was a well-dressed man, this ordinary member. There was nothing of the criminal in his outward appearance. For Mr. William Garratt was a valet in ordinary life—a seemingly respectable and staid gentleman's gentleman.

William Garratt had been a member of the league for some time, and he was flourishing on it. A month or so before he had rendered invaluable service by transmitting a wireless message from a steam yacht to one of the league's receiving stations at an exceedingly opportune moment. And Garratt, in consequence, was doing well.

He was valet to Mr. Vernon Greenwood, chief cashier of the London and Home Counties Bank, Ltd., and although he received a good salary, this was greatly added to by regular and handsome payments from the league. At present he was idle so far as the league was concerned; but he had been placed in his present position for a definite purpose. At some future time it might be necessary to bring off a big robbery at the London and Home Counties Bank—and Garratt's position as valet to the chief cashier would certainly prove to be of incalculable value. But the time was by no means ripe for the coup, and so he was resting on his oars.

Garratt's knowledge of the league was somewhat limited, for, in common with the other working members, he was in utter ignorance as to the personæ of the Governing Circle, and although he was passing the Orpheum Club on this particular foggy night, he merely thought the place was an ultra-respectable gentlemen's establishment. Garratt's knowledge of the league really ended in the back parlour of a small inn somewhere at the back of Shaftesbury Avenue. It was owned by Mr. Frederic Bayley—and Bayley was the controlling agent of the league from whom Garratt received his orders.

The valet was thickly overcoated, and a muffler was tightly bound round his throat. As he glanced into the brilliant lounge-entrance of the Orpheum Club the very first thing he saw was the diamond necklace in Professor Zingrave's delicately shaped fingers. It was sparkling like fire, and Garratt knew instantly that it was a real stone necklace of considerable value.

He paused irresolutely, his eyes gleaming with sudden greed. In one second all Garratt's criminal instincts arose to the surface. Ordinarily he was rather calm and inclined to take things easily, allowing the events of life to come and go as they would. But the one weak spot in his armour was diamonds. The very sight of diamonds always aroused his cupidity and

THE FORGED FINGER-PRINTS

8

avarice to their highest pitch. An inordinate desire to rob always took possession of him at the sight of precious stones.

"Genuine sparklers!" he muttered. "By Cæsar, what a haul!"

He looked round cautiously, and saw that the street was fairly deserted. And even the few pedestrians who were hurrying along were almost hidden in the fog. Garratt fumbled in his coat pocket, and produced a cigarette-case. While extracting a cigarette and lighting it he kept his eyes upon the two men within the club entrance.

"It's a wonderful necklace," he heard Sir Roger say. "Worth at least two thousand, Zingrave."

The professor chuckled with a kind of silky ripple in his voice.

"My dear Sir Roger, I thought you were a good judge of diamonds." He smiled. "This string of stones would fetch five thousand any day—probably more."

"H'm! Five thousand," said Sir Roger. "Shouldn't have thought it. Well, hand it over to me. I'll attend to the little matter for you."

The necklace changed hands, Sir Roger dropping it carelessly into the inner pocket of his thick overcoat. Garratt clicked his teeth as he watched, and moved away from the club entrance. But he did not leave the neighbourhood; he stood waiting, watching the entrance through the thickening fog.

"Five thousand pounds!" he muttered fiercely. "What a chance! In this fog the thing would be absolutely safe. I know exactly the pocket it's in—and Bayley would dispose of it for me, without even the league knowing."

Garratt positively trembled with eagerness.

"Besides, the league could know," his thoughts ran on. "They'd take the necklace, and I should get a cool two thousand, at least, as my share. And there'd be not the slightest suspicion of risk. Once I handed the necklace over, the Governing Circle would do the actual business—and I should be handed my bit in ready cash."

The temptation was almost overpowering. Garratt had never attempted actual robbery before, but this was a chance which seldom came to any man. He knew the diamonds to be extremely valuable, he had seen exactly where Sir Roger had stowed them—and the night was dark and foggy, with almost deserted streets.

"It's worth the risk!" muttered Garratt. "I'll try my luck—by Jupiter, I will!"

Even as he came to a decision, Sir Roger Hogarth strode out of the club, and walked briskly away down the quiet street. Had the night been clear the baronet would have chartered a taxi; but he had a horror of motor-riding in a fog, and much preferred to walk.

This was fortunate for Mr. William Garratt, but there was nothing surprising in it. Taxis are really more trouble than they are worth on a foggy night, for they can never travel faster than a walking-pace, and are subject to innumerable exasperating stops.

Sir Roger's house was just off Portland Place, and he knew every inch of the way, fog or no fog. He strode on, puffing enjoyably at his fragrant cigar. The idea of being molested was as far from his mind as the poles are apart. Presently he turned down a narrow roadway—a quiet street which cut off a considerable corner. The fog was thick, and the road was utterly deserted.

This was Garratt's opportunity.

It had come almost before he was ready for it. But his mind was made up—he could obtain the necklace with the greatest ease, and he meant to take the slight risk without delaying. Garratt would never have dreamed of

attacking a well-dressed man just for the sake of robbing him; but this was different altogether. He knew, for a certainty, that the necklace was on Sir Roger, and he knew that it was worth over five thousand pounds. The temptation was irresistible.

It was a perfectly safe job.

"I'd be a fool to let a chance like this slip through my fingers," murmured Garratt softly. "It'll be all over in two minutes!"

Sir Roger was walking along ahead of him, completely unconscious of the man creeping so quietly behind. The fog deadens sounds considerably, and Sir Roger knew nothing until he heard a slight footfall immediately behind him.

Then he looked round quickly, rather startled. A dim figure loomed in the fog, and the stranger's arm was raised, whirling a heavy stick aloft. Sir Roger's cigar dropped to the pavement, sending out a little shower of red sparks, and the baronet uttered a short gasp.

"You ruffian!" he ejaculated. "Begad, what——"

But he got no further. He half-raised his hand to ward off the blow, but he had no time to act. The heavy stick descended upon his head with a thud, the soft cloth cap he was wearing—mainly on account of the fog—providing little or no protection. Sir Roger sank to the pavement, partially unconscious.

He was not seriously hurt, but his head was badly bruised, and gashed open—skin-deep—by the heavy blow. He lay upon the cold flagstones, dazed and too dizzy to even open his eyes.

Garratt, breathing heavily, tore open his victim's coat, and dived his hand into the inner pocket. His hand closed on the necklace greedily, and withdrew it. As he placed it in his own pocket he felt a card which reposed therein, and a grim smile twisted the corners of his mouth.

"Might as well leave a trademark for the police to puzzle over!" he muttered.

He stuck the card into Sir Roger's waistcoat, between two of the buttons, and then rose. A swift glance in either direction told him that the dramatic incident had not been witnessed by a soul, and he slipped away silently, and was swallowed up in the fog. His enterprise had been entirely successful—the whole affair had not occupied thirty seconds.

But he had seized his opportunity only just in time. For at the expiration of another thirty seconds footsteps sounded through the fog, and voices made themselves apparent to Sir Roger Hogarth's slowly returning senses."

"My dear Lee, I nabbed my man with the utmost ease," exclaimed one voice, although the words were a mere blur to the semi-conscious man. "It was down Shadwell way, close to the river—— Why, goodness gracious, what——"

"It's a man across the pavement, Lennard!" cut in another voice sharply. "Drunk, probably. We'll soon see."

Nelson Lee—for, by a curious chance one of the new-comers was the celebrated detective—bent down, and knelt by Sir Roger's side. Almost the first thing he saw was the slip of cardboard sticking out of Sir Roger's waistcoat. He glanced at it keenly, and then uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"By James! What's this? A green triangle, by all that's infernal!" he ejaculated quickly. "A green triangle, Lennard!"

Detective-inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard, swore fluently.

"That confounded gang again!" he growled. "There's no telling what the hounds will be up to! Is this fellow hurt?"

Nelson Lee did not reply; he was making a short examination. The great criminologist knew a tremendous lot more about the League of the Green

Triangle than Detective-inspector Lennard dreamed of. To Scotland Yard, and the police generally, the League was more or less a myth, for a member of the powerful organisation had never been convicted. But Nelson Lee knew everything concerning the Green Triangle, and he had sworn a deadly campaign against the infamous league.

He naturally supposed that the affair was one of the society's lesser crimes, and was certainly not prepared for the surprise to come almost immediately.

"Nothing serious," he announced. "Just a whack on the head; he'll get over it in a day or two. Why, what— Great Scotland!"

Nelson Lee's tone was one of amazement, and he stared at the injured man's face with widely-dilated eyelids. For he saw now that the stranger was Sir Roger Hogarth—and Nelson Lee knew perfectly well that Sir Roger was a member of the Governing Circle.

And yet the baronet—one of the biggest men of the league—was lying here, injured and probably robbed, a victim of the league! The irony of the situation was extremely forcible, and Nelson Lee could not help expressing astonishment.

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Lennard quickly.

"Nothing—nothing at all," replied the detective. "But I've just recognised the injured man, and I was rather startled. This is Sir Roger Hogarth lying here!"

"Sir Roger Hogarth—eh?" said Lennard. "I'd better scout round for a taxi!"

The name conveyed nothing to the police-detective's mind. He regarded Sir Roger as the rest of the world regarded him; he thought Sir Roger to be merely an extremely rich shipowner and an honourable gentleman. Lennard would have roared with laughter had he been told that the baronet was a Governing Member of the Green Triangle.

While the Scotland Yard man was obtaining a taxi, Nelson Lee bound the baronet's own handkerchief round his head, for the blood was coming slightly from the gash which Garratt's blow had inflicted.

Sir Roger was mumbling to himself, but he was not fully conscious.

"This is the work of some enterprising and over-zealous ordinary member of the league, who, of course, was in ignorance of Sir Roger's identity," thought Nelson Lee. "By Jove, what a curious trick of Fate. I pity the poor beggar if Sir Roger ever gets to know his identity. When a man of this sort is a victim of his own underlings he doesn't usually appreciate the peculiar humour of the situation. On the contrary, the gentleman who performed this assault has a grim and ugly time ahead of him!"

But the "gentleman" in question appeared to have no forebodings of evil as he made his way into the back-parlour of the Boar Inn—the establishment owned by Mr. Frederick Bayley, one of the league's controlling agents.

Garratt entered the parlour at about the same time as Sir Roger Hogarth was being driven to his home, and Garratt was smiling broadly, and trembling with excitement. Bayley, guessing something was afoot, soon joined the visitor, and over a glass of whisky Garratt boasted of his crime.

He handed over the necklace to the controlling agent's care; and although Bayley thought nothing much of the affair at the time, it was to have vast and far-reaching after-consequences. For, very soon after the valet had left, Bayley learned that Garratt's victim had been Sir Roger Hogarth!

Then, with a vengeance, the fat was in the fire.

Bayley immediately made a secret report, and long before morning Professor Zingrave was in full possession of the facts. He knew that his daughter's necklace—now safely back in his own hands—had been robbed from Sir Roger Hogarth by William Garratt, league member No. 985.

CHAPTER II.

Sir Roger's Fury—Swift Punishment—A Strange Trick of Fate!

"HE shall, Zingrave! I say he shall!"

"But, my dear Sir Roger——"

"I am amazed, professor, that you should take up this attitude!" snapped Sir Roger Hogarth fiercely. "The man committed a fatal blunder. Swift death is the only punishment for him—it is the league's customary punishment for those who blunder!"

Professor Zingrave held up his hand and pursed his lips. He was standing at Sir Roger's bedside at the baronet's house in the West End. They were alone in the room together, and there was no fear of their conversation being overheard.

Sir Roger was sitting up in bed, his head bandaged. No serious result had occurred in consequence of Garratt's blow. But Hogarth was simply mad with fury—unreasoning, vindictive hatred.

He had been savage when he learned of the green triangle which had been found on him. But this morning Zingrave had informed him that the culprit was William Garratt, an ordinary working member of the league.

"After all, you are not badly hurt," said Zingrave, in his soft voice. "And your position is even safer than ever. Who would ever suspect that you belong to the league after you have been made a victim of the Green Triangle? I assure you, Hogarth, this affair has its humorous side!"

Sir Roger rapped out an oath.

"The man might have killed me!" he exclaimed harshly. "What guarantee have we got that this Garratt won't continue his assaults? He does not know who I really am, and he cannot be told. The only thing—the only way to insure my future safety—is to deal with Garratt summarily!"

Zingrave regarded his companion with his strange, brilliant eyes.

"I agree with you, Sir Roger, that Garratt has made a bad mistake," he said evenly. "But death is surely a hard punishment? The fellow acted in ignorance——"

"Bah! That is no argument whatever," snarled Hogarth. "And it is rather a novel thing for you, professor, to hesitate over a human life."

"When it is necessary, I act swiftly," said Zingrave, with gentle softness. "But is it necessary in Garratt's case?"

"Absolutely necessary."

"And why?"

"Because Garratt disobeyed one of the most strict rules of the league," said Hogarth grimly. "No man must commit haphazard crimes on his own initiative. You know as well as I do that our whole organisation would tumble about our ears if we allowed the men to do exactly as they liked. It is only by careful planning that the league is the great power it is. The men are merely so many machines—so many cogs running smoothly together. If one cog works loose the whole vast engine is in danger of destruction. Garratt is that loose cog, and he must be removed before he does further mischief."

Zingrave smiled.

"Very well put, my dear Sir Roger," he exclaimed musically. "Perhaps, after all, Garratt is more of a hindrance than a help. In the past, too, he has made one or two serious mistakes. It appears to be a fatal failing of his."

"Ah, you agree with me now!" said Hogarth fiercely. "I am amazed, Zingrave, that you ever hesitated. To be frank, it is not like you to be

merciful. Suppose we allowed Garratt to live? We have no assurance that he would not commit other crimes on his own hook—and the league would be endangered. The secret of the league's wonderful success is that its members simply carry out the orders and instructions of the Governing Circle. Directly a man commences to launch out independently he becomes a peril, and he must be dealt with swiftly and surely."

The professor stroked his silky hair.

"Pardon my candour, but your wits appear to have been wonderfully sharpened by this blow, Sir Roger!" he exclaimed amusedly. "Upon my soul, you are even teaching me a few home truths. Yes, Garratt must certainly be expelled from the league—and there is only one way for that to be accomplished. It is a pity. He is an excellent fellow in many ways. This blunder of his is nothing much in itself—I still adhere to that view—but, as you point out, it may lead to bigger blunders."

"Garratt will be removed, then?"

Zingrave carelessly picked a piece of cotton from his coat.

"To-night, Hogarth," he replied. "There is really no reason for delay."

And the conversation drifted into other channels. William Garratt's fate was decided as though he were no more than the cog Sir Roger had compared him to. So hardened, so utterly callous had these men become, that human life was no more than a mere snap of the fingers to them.

Yet the victim—William Garratt, the blunderer—was about the most self-satisfied man in London that evening. The theft of the necklace had been about the easiest thing imaginable, and, in due course, he would receive a fat bundle of banknotes as his share of the spoils.

Garratt, in fact, thought he was going to be settled with immediately.

He was—but not in the way he fondly supposed.

He thought that the cash transaction was to be settled. Instead, he himself was to be swiftly and quietly made away with. His employer, Mr. Vernon Greenwood, lived at Putney, and Garratt had received a note from Frederick Bayley—which Garratt had immediately destroyed—telling him to walk slowly over Putney Bridge, and to meet Bayley on the Fulham side of the river.

Garratt was highly elated. He concluded that the controlling agent had brought the money which was to be his share. It was just after seven as he walked along Putney High Street towards the bridge. The night was foggier than the previous night, if anything. But perhaps the close proximity of the Thames caused the fog to hang lower and thicker.

On the bridge itself, Garratt could scarcely see his hand before him. But he did not care at all; the fog was all the better, for he and Bayley could do their business privately.

"Best bit of work I've done for months!" murmured Garratt, as he lighted a cigarette. "'Pon my word, I can't realise I really did bowl that old fellow over—it was done so easily. So he was Sir Roger Hogarth—eh? Well, he's none the worse for a little bump on his bald head!"

He was in the centre of the bridge now. There were not many people about, and those who did pass were practically unseen. Now and again a motor-bus or some other vehicle would pass slowly and cautiously across the bridge; but there were times when no human being and no vehicle could be seen or even heard.

Garratt was puffing contentedly away at his newly-lighted cigarette, and had not the faintest suspicion or foreboding of danger. At this particular moment he seemed to be absolutely alone. The fog hemmed him in on all sides.

With an abruptness which startled Garratt he heard soft footfalls immediately behind him, and he started round with sudden alarm. As he

did so he was irresistibly reminded of the previous night's adventure; Sir Roger Hogarth had twisted round in precisely the same manner as he was now doing himself. But before Garratt could speak a bright light dazzled full into his eyes.

"Yes, this is our man," growled a muffled voice behind the light. "William Garratt, the vengeance of the league has overtaken you!"

A hand seemed to be clutching at Garratt's throat.

"The league!" he panted. "What——"

But he got no further. The light suddenly snapped out, and then unseen hands gripped him by arms and legs and he was lifted bodily into the air. He had absolutely no time to cry out or to offer the least resistance.

The whole thing was like a ghastly nightmare. A gurgling kind of cry aroso in his throat as he felt himself pitched over the parapet of the bridge. Down he went, through the grey fog, and then struck the icy waters of the Thames with a dull, muffled splash. The unfortunate man rose to the surface, and one agonising cry for help left his white lips.

But the sound hardly carried ten yards in that fog, and it so happened that a noisy motor-'bus crossed the bridge slowly on its whirring low gear at the moment. The two men who had flung Garratt to his doom just heard the faint cry—for they were leaning over the parapet listening for it. But no other cry came up.

"He's finished!" growled one of the men. "Pretty dirty work, mate, but orders is orders. There's no chance of Garratt coming out of this alive. He can't swim a stroke, and in this icy water, with all his clothes on, he must have sunk in less than a minute."

"How do you know he couldn't swim?" asked the other, as the pair moved off.

"He told Bayley so himself not a month ago."

But, although Garratt had certainly told Bayley that he couldn't swim, that statement was entirely false—and it thus gave the unfortunate man a chance of life which otherwise would not have been allowed to present itself.

Some little time before there had been a rather unsavoury job to do in the vicinity of Hammersmith—a job connected with the river. Bayley had broached the subject to Garratt. And the valet, being extremely disinclined to a cold bath at night in mid-winter, had stated emphatically that he could not swim a stroke. So another man had been obtained for the task.

Garratt, as a matter of fact, could swim very well, and, at the time, he had thought it decidedly "thick" on the controlling agent's part to approach him on such a business. As he came to the surface and struck out blindly into the fog he realised, in a flash, that the league had attempted to murder him. And he knew, at the same time, that they had chosen this means because Bayley was under the impression that he could not swim. But what did it mean? Why was he being treated in this way. Instinctively he knew that it was connected with the affair of the stolen necklace.

But Garratt had not much time for thought—except in one direction. How was he to escape? He had no idea in which direction the river banks lay, and so he struck out haphazard and swam with all the energy he was capable of.

By a piece of good fortune he arrived at the bank just as he was on the point of giving up hope. He seemed to have been swimming for hours when the riverside quay loomed up out of the fog. He pulled himself out of the water, and lay upon the bank for a minute or two, numbed with cold, and almost exhausted.

As his wits slowly became sharpened again, as his brain grasped the full significance of this attempt upon his life, he shuddered violently. But it was not a shudder of coldness; it was fear—terrifying, ghastly fear.

The league had marked him down.

To anyone else it would appear as though Garratt's escape was a merciful stroke of Providence. But Garratt himself almost wished that he had breathed his last in the icy water he had just emerged from. But he was a member of the league, and he knew what it was to be marked down.

Many cases he had heard of; many times he had felt pity in his heart for some poor wretch who had fallen foul of the Governing Circle. Once a man was marked out for destruction, he was destroyed. There was no escape in the end. He might survive three or four attempts upon his life, but at the finish he would go under.

The league would soon know that Garratt had not been killed. And then? Well, then his life would be one long, terrible strain. Terrified and almost driven out of his mind, he would at last be hounded down and done to death.

But what had he done?

Garratt's mind worked feverishly.

"It was that affair of the necklace!" he croaked, through chattering teeth. "I did the thing without orders, I know, but what of that? By Heaven! I wonder if Sir Roger Hogarth is connected with the league?"

Garratt was very near the mark, and as he dragged himself to his feet his eyes gleamed feverishly. The idea took possession of him, and he hugged it closely.

"Perhaps Sir Roger's a member of the Governing Circle," he went on fiercely. "If so, I can understand why I've been marked down. What can I do? How can I escape from the fiends who are on my track?"

Garratt shuddered again, and he knew that if he did not remove his wet clothes very shortly he would collapse from sheer numbness and exhaustion.

With faltering footsteps he left the vicinity of the river-bank, walking blindly in the fog which surrounded him. After a time he found himself upon the roadway, and knew that he had landed on the south side of the river—that is, the Putney side.

Garratt was rather glad of the fog, for had the air been clear he would have attracted much unwelcome attention. As it was he walked on without his condition being noticed by a soul. A panic seemed to seize him. He fancied there were spies of the league on every hand, following him, tracking him. The fog seemed to intensify his fear.

He imagined that unseen hands were close behind him, ready to grasp him or stab him to the heart. And so his terror increased. His terrible experience in the river had much to do with his present pitiable condition. He was utterly panic-stricken; his nerves seemed to be in shreds. Death was dogging his footsteps! The awful power of the league had impressed itself much upon his mind in the past; but now he felt a cold hand, so it seemed, clutching his heart.

In plain truth, William Garratt was in the most abject state of funk it was possible for a man to be in. Chilled to the bone, he walked on drunkenly. The exercise certainly caused the blood to course a little more warmly through his veins, but his feet and hands were causing him the most acute agony.

At last he found himself walking up the garden path of Vernon Greenwood's house. Quite mechanically Garratt had made his way homewards, and now he staggered up to the front door and pulled the bell violently.

He wanted to get out of the fog; he wanted to see lights and feel warmth. Once he gained the sanctuary of his master's house he felt that he would be safe. As he heard the bell peel out within the building he sank on to the step and lay there, shivering perceptibly.

The door was suddenly flung open, and a gleam of light cut through the foggy atmosphere. The door had been opened by Vernon Greenwood himself—a tall, grizzled man of just over middle age, with a kindly face and expressive eyes. The latter gazed into the fog for a moment, and then fell upon the form on the doorstep.

"Great Heaven!" gasped Mr. Greenwood, aghast.

"It's I, sir—Garratt!" gasped the valet weakly. "For pity's sake take me indoors, sir! They're after me! They're on my track!"

Mr. Greenwood was a man of prompt action. He bent down and lifted Garratt to his feet—the latter having just strength enough to stagger into the house. The bank cashier took Garratt straight into the front dining-room, and placed him upon a chair. Then the master of the house closed the front door, and entered the dining-room again, closing that door, too.

"Good gracious, you're soaked to the skin, Garratt!" he exclaimed sternly. "What's the meaning of it—eh? What have you been doing with yourself? If you have been drinking——"

Garratt's eyes rolled in an insane fashion.

"Drinking!" he panted hoarsely. "I wish to Heaven it were nothing worse! They're after me—and they'll have me before morning! Curse the league—curse the day I ever joined the infernal society!"

"Pull yourself together, Garratt," said Mr. Greenwood sharply. "What's the meaning of this wild talk? Who are after you? And what league is this you refer to?"

"There is only one league," grated Garratt. "The League of the Green Triangle! I don't wonder that you're amazed, Mr. Greenwood! But I've been a member of the league for years, and at last they've turned on me."

"By Jove!"

"They tried to murder me to-night by throwing me in the river; but I escaped. And now they're shadowing me! They're on my track! I must have protection—protection! I want to confess everything to the police!"

Mr. Greenwood was exceedingly startled, but he kept calm.

"You say you were thrown in the river?" he asked keenly.

"Yes; I was attacked in the fog."

"But why? For what reason?"

"I don't know," exclaimed Garratt weakly. "But I have displeased the Governing Circle in some way. I robbed Sir Roger Hogarth last night, and I believe he's one of the chief members of the league——"

Vernon Greenwood laughed shortly.

"Do not be absurd!" he exclaimed. "You are talking insanely, Garratt. Pull yourself together, man, and go upstairs and get into dry things. I suppose I'd better come with you and give you a hand."

Garratt looked round him fearfully.

"They're after me!" he whispered in a hoarse voice. "For pity's sake take me to Scotland Yard! I shall be safe there! They'll put me in a cell—I shall be safe! I want to confess everything!"

Greenwood considered for a moment. He knew that something exceedingly dramatic had occurred to his valet, but that Garratt was a member of the League of the Green Triangle was a startling revelation. One thing was certain. After the valet's confession it was quite impossible to allow him to remain in the house.

For one thing, the police were certainly the right people to be informed, and Mr. Greenwood had no wish to have Garratt remain under his roof after having made such a statement as he had done.

"You wish to confess everything, you say?" he asked sharply.

"It's the only way," gasped Garratt. "I dare not move an inch out of the house by myself, or I'd go straight to the police now, just as I am. If I confess, they'll put me in prison, and then I shall be safe."

Greenwood tugged at the valet's sleeve.

"Get upstairs and take these wet things off," he ordered. "This excitement of yours has saved you from catching a serious chill. You're more frightened than hurt, Garratt. While you are changing I will telephone for a taxi."

"What are you going to do, sir?" demanded Garratt eagerly.

"Well, to be perfectly frank, I don't quite relish having you in my house any longer," replied Mr. Greenwood grimly. "Since you wish it, I'm going to take you to Scotland Yard without delay. I think they will deal with you far more efficaciously than I can. I have an idea that you are suffering from an hallucination, Garratt—but that will be for the police to determine."

The terrified man uttered a cry of thankfulness, and made his way up to his own room unassisted. Strangely enough, his whole views of life were altered. Two hours ago he had respected the league, and had feared the police. Now his greatest wish was to go to Scotland Yard and confess everything he knew. And his fear of the Green Triangle was something appalling. He was utterly terrorised—and he had good cause to be! He had been in the league long enough to know the fate of those marked down by the Governing Circle. Grasping fully the nature of his awful danger, a prison cell seemed a veritable haven of refuge.

When he came downstairs again he was attired in dry things. A brisk towelling had warmed him up considerably, and now a stiff dose of brandy caused a little colour to enter his cheeks. Mr. Greenwood had an idea that the valet would change his views now that he was more on his feet; but Garratt was more fiercely determined than ever.

"Take me to Scotland Yard, sir!" he exclaimed huskily. "I'm a criminal, and I know it! But the police will treat me decently—they'll protect me from the all-powerful hand of the league."

Mr. Greenwood gave his companion a sharp, searching look.

"H'm! This is a queer business," he said curtly. "Come, my man!"

And they passed outside and boarded the taxi which was waiting. Mr. Greenwood had left instructions with one of his servants to tell his wife that he would be back rather late—Mrs. Greenwood being out.

It was a slow journey up to Charing Cross through the fog, and Garratt was uneasy the whole way, fidgeting and glancing out of the windows practically continuously.

Curiously enough, the fog was clearer in the West End than at Putney, and once Knightsbridge had been passed the going was much faster. At last the taxi turned into Scotland Yard, and the two men got out.

Mr. Greenwood gave Garratt a keen look.

"Are you still determined?" he asked curiously.

"Let's get in, sir!" faltered Garratt, with a frightened look around him.

So, without delay, the pair entered the building. Mr. Greenwood spoke for a few moments to a police-sergeant, and the latter looked rather grave.

"Seems to be pretty serious, sir," he exclaimed briskly. "Superintendent Valling is on duty at present, and I should advise you to lay the affair before him at once."

Mr. Greenwood nodded.

"Excellent!" he replied. "I would much prefer to have a high-placed official hear this man's story. Superintendent Valling is an important member of the Yard, and I shall be extremely pleased if you will show us into his office."

And so Mr. Greenwood and William Garratt were taken straight away to the private sanctum of Superintendent Valling. Neither of the two men realised the full and extraordinary significance of the strange trick Fate was playing—for they were both ignorant of a singularly remarkable fact.

Superintendent Valling, an officer respected by all, was, in reality, one of the leading members of the Governing Circle of the League of the Green Triangle!

Chance was indeed working in strange paths.

CHAPTER III.

The Traitor—Nelson Lee Receives a Telephone Call—The League's Vengeance.

SUPERINTENDENT VALLING was one of the Yard's most trusted men. There had never been the slightest suspicion of anything "fishy" about him. He was a man of medium height, with a clean-shaven face, and eyes that seemed to bore right through one when they chose. He usually kept perfectly calm under the most exciting circumstances, and was noted for his shrewdness.

He was alone in his private sanctum when Mr. Vernon Greenwood was announced. He was, in fact, deep in thought—planning, actually, how to throw a herring across the trail of a gang of forgers who were really members of the league. The Yard had somehow got on the scent of the league men, and Valling was naturally anxious to throw dust in the eyes of his unsuspecting colleagues.

For Superintendent Valling was one of the Green Triangle's most valued members. Situated as he was, right in the headquarters of London's police, he was in a unique position, and his help was frequently of the utmost value.

A scoundrel to his finger-tips, he nevertheless posed as a man of the very highest integrity—and not a soul who had ever had association with him suspected that he was really a snake in the grass.

And it was to this man that William Garratt was to make his confession.

Unknowingly, Garratt was to betray himself utterly and irretrievably. He would brand himself as a traitor to the league, and his position of danger would be fifty times intensified.

Scotland Yard itself—the real, honest police—would never know of the affair. Garratt, the working member, was to tell his secret to Valling, the Governing Member! The situation was dramatic in the extreme. And it was all the more dramatic because Garratt himself had not the slightest idea that Valling was an important personage in the controlling of the league. He had come to Scotland Yard for protection, and instead he would simply sign his own death-warrant!

Mr. Greenwood entered the superintendent's private office alone, leaving Garratt outside, in temporary charge of the sergeant. Valling was glancing at the visitor's card as the latter entered.

"Good-evening, Mr. Greenwood," said Valling genially. "You are connected with the London and Home Counties Bank, I see—"

"I have called upon quite a different matter," interjected Greenwood. "My business concerns my valet, William Garratt. To be brief, he came to my house to-night, after having been out for a while, in a pitiable state of terror, and soaked to the skin. He begged me to bring him to Scotland Yard, as he wishes to confess."

"Indeed. Confess what? Do you know the nature of his crime?"

"Not exactly. He was thrown into the Thames, it appears, from Putney Bridge, and he claims that it was the work of the League of the Green Triangle."

Valling's eyelids flickered, but he showed no other sign of emotion. Yet inwardly he was instantly uneasy.

"The Green Triangle?" he asked smoothly. "Rather a tall story, don't you think, Mr. Greenwood? This league is rather a mythical concern——"

"It has been up till now," said Greenwood. "But Garratt claims to be a member of the league. He told me that—— Well, I hardly know what he did tell me. It was a tissue of disjointed, amazing statements. The main point, however, appears to be this—Garratt has earned the displeasure of the league, and his life was attempted in consequence. He has come here in order to confess, merely for the sake of getting himself locked up, and so beyond reach of his enemies."

The superintendent stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"I had better see Garratt at once, Mr. Greenwood," he said. "I do not think there is any necessity for you to remain. You have brought the man here, and I will now question him and test the value of his revelations. You may, of course, wait in an ante-room if you wish to."

Mr. Greenwood rose.

"I would prefer to go," he replied. "There is really nothing for me to do—to-night, at least. Whether Garratt is a scoundrel or not I leave you to determine. But I think I acted wisely in bringing him straight along."

"You were extremely shrewd," said Valling promptly.

A moment later Vernon Greenwood took his departure, and as he passed out into the corridor Valling's lips set in a thin line and his eyes glittered dangerously.

"A traitor!" murmured the superintendent fiercely. "By thunder, what an amazing stroke of luck the fellow has been brought to me. I will hear his story, and then send him off. In less than an hour his treacherous tongue will be silenced for ever. The rest of the Yard will never know a thing!"

When Garratt was brought in to Valling, the latter motioned curtly to a chair, and then closed the door securely. This interview, he felt, was going to be a disturbing one, so he lighted a cigarette, and puffed at it in silence. When inwardly upset, Valling always resorted to a cigarette to keep his nerves steady.

"Your name?" he demanded suddenly.

Garratt started.

"William Garratt, sir," he said huskily. "Thank Heaven I've got here alive! The hounds are after me—they nearly did for me, but I slipped through their fingers. I want to stop here now. I want you to arrest me!"

"On what charge?"

"On any charge!" said Garratt eagerly. "I'll confess all I know. I'm a working member of the League of the Green Triangle. I've been a member for a long time past, and the league has always been generous to me. Last night, though, I made a blunder. I assaulted Sir Roger Hogarth and robbed him, and the league tried to kill me for it! Curse the lot of them! Curse the Governing Circle!"

"Come, come! Be calm!" exclaimed Valling sharply. "Pull yourself together!"

Garratt, in fact, was feverish. His terror had gripped him so thoroughly that he scarcely knew what he was saying or doing. The relief he experienced now—now that he was safely within the walls of Scotland Yard—was so great that the reaction seemed likely to result in a collapse.

"I'm safe now," he muttered. "The hell-hounds can't get at me now!"

"You cannot remain here unless you convince me——"

"I'll tell anything!" cried Garratt wildly. "Haven't I confessed that I assaulted Sir Roger Hogarth? I robbed him of a diamond necklace—and it was because of that the Governing Circle ordered my death. I've been marked down——"

"By whom? Who belong to this Governing Circle?"

"I don't know!" wailed Garratt. "The ordinary league members know nothing!"

Valling breathed a little freely.

"I am afraid your story is merely a phantom of your disordered brain," he said curtly. "You had better go home——"

Garratt leapt to his feet.

"Go home," he cried shrilly—"go home! I should be murdered on the way. You can't send me home; I've confessed to a crime! You've got to lock me up—safe and sound from the league's murderers. I can give you a lot of information yet. Frederick Bayley, the landlord of the Boar Inn, off Wardour Street, is a controlling agent of the league. If you raid his premises you will find heaps of incriminating evidence. This league is a terrible organisation; the Governing Circle is composed of well-known men. And I believe I know who one of them is. If you act on my information you will probably make a terrific capture!"

The superintendent fixed Garratt with his keen eyes.

"Who is this man?" he asked sharply. "State your suspicions."

"I think Sir Roger Hogarth is a member of the league!" declared Garratt deliberately. "Do you hear? Sir Roger Hogarth!"

Valling's cigarette dropped from his lips.

Garratt's words had utterly startled him. This common member—this traitorous wretch—knew that Sir Roger Hogarth was a member of the Governing Circle; or, at least, Sir Roger's connection with the league was suspected. Inwardly Valling was intensely startled. His pulse beat quickly with alarm.

"Now will you arrest me?" demanded Garratt fiercely. "I'm a criminal, and I want to be committed for trial. If you send me away I shall be killed like a fly! You can't send me away—you daren't! I demand protection! I demand——"

Valling frowned darkly.

"Silence!" he rapped out. "You are talking utter nonsense, man! Did you tell any of this to Mr. Greenwood? Did you state your suspicions to him?"

The terrified valet passed a hand across his perspiring brow.

"I don't know," he muttered dully. "I don't remember. I told him a lot—oh, a tremendous lot! He knows as much as you do—more, perhaps!"

"By thunder!" hissed Valling, beneath his breath.

Garratt was obviously too upset in mind to remember exactly what had passed his lips. Greenwood might know a lot, and he might know nothing. Anyhow, Garratt had told his former master quite sufficient to make him—Greenwood—dangerous to the league. The bank cashier could prove nothing, of course, but a hundred things might happen in the future. The whole affair was decidedly disturbing and startling.

"Be calm," snapped Valling. "What did you tell Greenwood?"

"I don't remember telling him anything," said Garratt weakly. "I might have done—I might have told him more than I have told you. No, I didn't. I didn't say a word to Greenwood. He merely brought me here."

The superintendent looked at his companion with gleaming eyes. Apparently Garratt was so upset that he didn't actually know what he was talking about. He had contradicted himself several times. It was obvious,

however, that Greenwood was in possession of facts and suspicions to an unknown extent. Valling knew that further questioning of Garratt would produce no satisfaction. So he quickly decided what to do.

He suddenly laughed, and patted Garratt upon the back.

"I'm afraid you are suffering from a slight attack of nerves, my friend," he said genially. "It really does you no good to imagine those absurd things——"

"Imagine!" panted Garratt, suddenly alarmed. "I tell you——"

"Now, don't get excited!" said Valling smoothly. "Go straight home to bed, and have a good, long sleep. Sleep is what you want more than anything. I am afraid I cannot detain you here, for your story is too utterly unconvincing for me to act upon."

William Garratt stared at Valling with bulging eyes.

"You—you send me away?" he gasped faintly. "Oh, you fool—you fool! I shall be murdered——"

"Nonsense! You made a big mistake in coming to Scotland Yard," went on Valling. "You should have gone to a doctor; he is the man who can help you. I don't know how you fell into the river; but the effect of your ducking has made you feverish and highly imaginative. Dismiss all this Green Triangle absurdity from your mind. No such league exists, and you are in no danger!"

Valling made as if to ring the bell, but Garratt leapt forward with a hoarse cry.

"I won't go!" he panted frantically. "You daren't make me go! I demand the protection of the police. My life is in danger——"

"The sooner you get that hallucination out of your head the better," interjected Valling curtly. "I really cannot waste more time upon you, my man! The sergeant will now show you off the premises, and you had better get some sleep before your mind becomes totally unbalanced!"

The superintendent's tone was final, and he rang the bell sharply. William Garratt was breathing hard. He had been absolutely sure of police protection, and Valling's present attitude had taken him completely by surprise. His eyes glittered with a queer, insane light.

"What is the good of Scotland Yard?" he exclaimed bitterly. "Even you, a superintendent, can see no further than your nose! You and your officials are too blockheaded to take advantage of valuable information when it is proffered to you. By Heaven, I'll get protection somehow!"

"The only protection you need is a doctor's prescription!"

"Fool!" snarled Garratt. "We are both fools! I should have had more sense than to waste my time in coming here—to be laughed at and jeered at!"

The door opened and a constable appeared.

"Show this fellow off the premises," ordered Valling in a sharp voice. "Take absolutely no notice of what he says, for I have an idea that he is not exactly responsible for his words. You have dealt with his sort before."

"I understand, sir," said the constable. "This way, mister!"

Garratt choked back a curse.

"This means death to me!" he panted hoarsely. "By Cæsar, I've a mind to fling myself at your throat! Then perhaps you would lock me up!"

And Garratt made a step forward towards Valling. But the constable strode in the way, and the next moment Garratt was being escorted—or, rather, forced—off the premises. The distraught man found himself in Whitehall almost before he knew what had happened, and he noticed that the fog had cleared a little.

All his terror returned again intensified a hundredfold. He was absolutely alone! Unseen assailants would pounce upon him and do him to death

before he could have a chance to cry for help. Curse Scotland Yard! Garratt was not to know that Fate had been dead against him. Had he told his story to any other official he would assuredly have received protection he needed, and he would have been detained in a cell on his own confession.

But the only man who had heard his utterances was Superintendent Valling—and Valling had very good cause to keep the information to himself, and to take immediate steps to encompass Garratt's destruction.

The ways of the league were strange and terrible. Before Garratt reached Trafalgar Square a shadower was on his track—and now indeed the valet had good cause to be almost prostrated with nervous fright.

As Garratt walked his panic increased. The man was really ill with the suffering he had lately experienced—mental and physical suffering. What would be the end of it?

"How can I get protection?" he asked himself again and again. "The police will take no notice of me—they're too dunderheaded! They think I am mad, and perhaps they are right. I shall, at least, be mad unless I reach a safe refuge. But the police and detectives——"

Garratt's thoughts darted off at a tangent.

"Detectives!" he muttered fiercely. "Official detectives are useless, as I have discovered to my cost. Perhaps I may receive the help I need from an unofficial source. There's Nelson Lee! He'll help me, if any man will! I've always feared Nelson Lee, but I believe he's the one man in London who could help me to-night!"

Garratt was excited now. He knew Nelson Lee to be a terribly hard man upon all evil-doers, but he was a just man and had a kind heart. When he had heard Garratt's story he would almost certainly provide him with the protection he so urgently needed. But where did Nelson Lee live? Garratt caught his breath in sharply.

"I don't know where he lives!" he muttered. "I believe it is off Holborn—Gray's Inn Road. But I'm not sure, and I certainly don't know his number. Who will tell me? How can I get to know?"

A solution soon presented itself to his distracted brain.

"Dolt! Why didn't I think of it before?" he asked himself feverishly. "Any telephone directory will give me the information I need; and, at the same time, I can ring up Nelson Lee's house and ascertain if the detective is in. If he is, I'll take a taxi there straight away. By Heaven, he will treat me better than that hound Valling did!"

Garratt walked on briskly, glancing uneasily around him as he went. But he saw nothing suspicious. He was in the Strand now, and he felt a little more easy in mind. There were plenty of people about here. Surely he was safe from the league in the Strand?

He turned into Charing Cross Station, and in the great booking-hall espied a telephone-box. Without delay he stepped into it, sought out Nelson Lee's 'phone number, and then called up the exchange. He got through easily, and after he had inserted his three pennies into the coin-box, he heard a voice at the other end of the wire.

"Is that Nelson Lee?" he shouted anxiously.

And a man who had been loitering outside the telephone-box moved away with an expression of alarm upon his face. Garratt saw nothing of it, for his back was turned.

A voice came clearly across the wire.

"Yes, I am Nelson Lee," it said briefly. "Who is that speaking?"

The great detective, in fact, was seated in his consulting-room talking to Nipper. He was rather surprised to note the tone of fearful anxiety in the far-away speaker's voice, and Nelson Lee set his lips firmly. Probably this

was a fresh case for him; but it was impossible to take it up, for he was busily engaged upon the work of destroying the League of the Green Triangle. He had, in fact, been discussing a plan of campaign with Nipper when the telephone bell had rung.

"Who is that?" he repeated.

"My name is William Garratt," came the reply clearly. "I am a member of the League of the Green Triangle——"

"What!" shouted Nelson Lee in astonishment.

"I need your protection, Mr. Lee—— Ah-h-h!"

Garratt's voice rose in a choking scream for a moment, and then died away into a sob. At the same second Nelson Lee heard a sharp crash; then utter silence.

"Hallo!" he shouted urgently. "Are you there? Hallo—hallo!"

But there was no reply. Nelson Lee waited anxiously, and Nipper, feeling that something unusual was taking place, came near to his master with an expression of curiosity on his face.

"What's up, guv'nor?" he asked softly.

"I don't know, Nipper, but I believe something serious has happened," replied Nelson Lee curtly. "I heard a scream and—— Ah, quiet, lad!"

Another voice came across the wires, and it was a voice which simply vibrated with excitement and alarm.

"Hallo! Are you there?"

"Yes, yes! Who is that?" said Nelson Lee sharply.

"I am an official police-officer of the South Eastern and Chatham Railway—speaking from Charing Cross Station," came the voice. "A man was ringing you up a moment ago——"

"Exactly! What has become of him?"

"He was shot dead just now by an unseen assailant!" said the railway policeman, in startled tones. "We don't know who committed the murder, for no report was heard, and no suspicious person was seen. There was simply a shattering of glass and a scream. I hope the man was no relation of yours?"

"Oh, no; he was a perfect stranger!"

The tragedy was absolutely startling. But William Garratt had paid the full penalty for his base treachery. After all, he was a member of the league, and had sworn allegiance to the league. The fate of traitors was death—death swift and sudden. And Garratt's punishment had overtaken him with dramatic swiftness and unexpectedness.

The avenging hand of the league had fallen!

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CHAPTER IV.

Nelson Lee Takes Up the Scent—The Next Victim.

NELSON LEE hung the telephone receiver on its hook and then looked at Nipper.

"The man who was talking to me, my lad, was shot a couple of minutes ago," he said quietly. "He was a member of the Green Triangle, and had evidently rung me up for some reason of his own—probably to turn traitor."

"By gum! He was soon punished for his treachery, sir!"

"The power of the league is something to marvel at, young 'un," said Nelson Lee grimly. "Come, we will hurry round to Charing Cross Station at once, and see who the man was. I only hope that this will provide a

starting-point for a fresh case against the league. It is some time since we dealt with Mr. Page T. Dayton, out in Nevada. I must follow this affair up thoroughly if there is any likelihood of its developing satisfactorily."

A few minutes later Nelson Lee and Nipper were seated in a taxi, en route for Charing Cross. When they arrived, there was much excitement at the great station, and the man who had been shot was in one of the waiting-rooms.

Nelson Lee and Nipper soon gained admission, and they found a doctor present and two police-officers.

"Ah, Mr. Nelson Lee!" exclaimed the doctor quietly. "So this poor fellow was ringing you up at the moment he was shot?"

"Yes. He was shot stone dead, I understand?"

The doctor shook his head.

"Oh, no!" he replied. "The wound is fatal, but the man is still breathing—he is, in fact, just conscious. I'm afraid he will die before he can reach the hospital."

Nelson Lee was rather surprised.

"Not dead—eh?" he exclaimed keenly. "May I have a word with the man, doctor?"

"I'm afraid it is quite impossible——"

"Not impossible!" exclaimed a faint, husky voice. "If that is Mr. Nelson Lee, I want to speak to him. I know I've only got a few moments to live!"

Nelson Lee and the doctor twisted round to the leather settee on which Garratt was lying. The man's eyes were brilliant and inclined to be a little glassy, but the terror had left him now. The knowledge that he was actually dying had calmed him completely. He had nothing to fear now, for the worst had occurred.

"I want to speak—to Mr. Lee—alone," breathed Garratt weakly.

"Oh, certainly!" said the doctor.

Nelson Lee knelt by the dying man's side while the doctor moved away, talking to Nipper.

"The league did this, Mr. Lee," said Garratt, in a mere whisper. "The League of the Green Triangle murdered me."

"But why? What had you done?"

"I am a member of the league—and I turned traitor!" exclaimed Garratt. "Oh, yes, I know I deserved death—I realise that now. But I didn't deserve death before I went to Scotland Yard and blabbed. May Heaven perish the league to ashes!"

"So you turned traitor?" asked Nelson Lee. "I know more of the league, Garratt, than you think I do. Why did you let your tongue run away with you? Why did you go to Scotland Yard?"

"Because I wanted protection," muttered Garratt bitterly. "See—I'm fatally shot! That is the protection I got from Scotland Yard!"

"Who did you see at the Yard?"

"One of the biggest men there—Superintendent Valling. Bah! He's an utter fool!"

Nelson Lee bit his lip in order to keep back an exclamation. He knew that Superintendent Valling was a member of the Governing Circle, and instantly he gained a fuller grasp of this case. So Garratt had confessed his connection with the league to Valling! It was little wonder that death had soon overtaken him. But Nelson Lee showed no sign that he was surprised.

"What made you seek protection?" he asked quietly. "Surely the league did not attempt your life before you turned traitor?"

"They did—they did!" faltered Garratt. "They tried to kill me in another way before they drilled lead into me. They threw me over Putney Bridge into the river; but I escaped!"

"But why, man—why were you marked down?"

"Because I made a blunder," said the dying man in a faint whisper. "I'm going, Mr. Lee—I shall only last a minute or two longer. I made a fatal blunder. I knocked Sir Roger Hogarth down and robbed him. That happened last night."

"By James!" ejaculated Nelson Lee to himself. "So this was the man who was responsible for that affair? I begin to see light. When Sir Roger found out that Garratt assaulted him he ordered swift punishment to fall upon the culprit. The whole chain of events are now clearly connected."

He touched Garratt lightly on the arm.

"Well?" he said. "Is that all, Garratt?"

"I—I'm going!" croaked the man. "Mr. Lee, I want you to devote your attentions to this accursed league! I can't offer you money, but you are a man who loves justice. I believe that Sir Roger Hogarth—is a member—of the Governing—Circle."

"By Jove! So you know that?"

"I—don't know it," breathed Garratt. "I suspect it. I told—Valling so, but he—scoffed at me. The fool—the petty, official dunderhead——"

Garratt's voice trailed away, and his glassy eyes closed.

"Doctor!" called Nelson Lee, turning his head.

The medico came quickly; but William Garratt was unconscious, and dying rapidly. Indeed, the doctor stated that the man would succumb within five minutes. Nelson Lee was looking grim.

"We've struck a trail, Nipper!" he murmured to the lad. "Another member of the Governing Circle will soon meet his deserts, if my efforts are successful. I have been chasing this last week or two, but now——"

The doctor approached.

"The fellow's dead, Mr. Lee," he said quietly.

"I thought he was just about finished," exclaimed Nelson Lee. "What a dastardly shame! I understand his murderer got clear away?"

The doctor nodded.

"The police never got a sight of him!" he said. "The wound is a serious one—made with a revolver bullet of fairly large bore. Yet there was no report. Just a smashing of glass and confusion. Terrible affair!"

Nipper suddenly nudged his master.

"Look who's just come in, sir!" he muttered.

But the great detective had already seen. Superintendent Valling was crossing the waiting-room from the door, having just had a few words with the two constables.

"Ah, Mr. Lee, I didn't expect to see you here!" said Valling briskly. "So I've arrived too late—eh? I was 'phoned through that a murder had been committed, and set out with all speed. Unfortunately I was delayed somewhat."

Nelson Lee shook hands with Valling, and assumed a genial manner.

"Rather a knotty mystery for you to puzzle over," he said quietly. "The murderer was not even seen or heard. I am afraid you will have to tax all your resources to bring the guilty man to justice."

"Oh, we'll strike the trail, never fear," said Valling. "Did the victim make any statement before dying?"

"He was in conversation with Mr. Lee for several minutes," said the doctor, who had come up.

The superintendent clicked his teeth softly.

"Ah, so he made a statement to you, Mr. Lee?" he asked.

"I suppose one may call it a statement," replied Nelson Lee guardedly.

"What did he say?"

The detective smiled.

"Am I compelled to divulge?" he queried.

"Decidedly!"

"But what Garratt told me— I understand the man's name was Garratt— was strictly for my own ears."

"Nevertheless, I demand to know the nature of the statement," said Valling tartly. "It will probably be of great importance in tracking the murderer down."

Nelson Lee laughed softly.

"You must pardon me, superintendent," he exclaimed. "I have merely been pulling your official leg—if I may be permitted to make use of a rather vulgar expression. Garratt told me nothing of any importance."

Valling frowned.

"I object to this unseemly joking at such a time as this, Mr. Lee!" he said sourly. "I shall be pleased if you will be perfectly frank with me."

"Certainly!" agreed Nelson Lee genially. "That has been my intention all along. If Garratt had told me anything of real importance I would have handed on the information to you without the slightest delay. But Garratt only spoke wild nonsense."

"Nevertheless, that nonsense may contain a certain proportion of useful facts."

"Not at all," went on the detective. "Garratt was practically unconscious, and he mumbled out that a gang of criminals had turned on him and had 'done him in.' It appears that he belonged to the gang, and had threatened to turn traitor. So his cheerful companions turned upon him!"

"H'm!" grunted Valling. "Did he state the name of the gang?"

"No. His words were wild and disjointed. Indeed, I firmly believe he was raving."

Nipper looked perfectly serious, but inwardly he was delighted. He knew that his master was indulging in some harmless "whoppers." There was absolutely nothing wrong in putting Valling off the scent by a little gentle tact. It was not lying, for Valling himself was as big a scoundrel as any other league member. Nelson Lee had no intention of putting Valling in possession of the facts. On the contrary, he wished Valling to believe that not a word regarding the League of the Green Triangle had been uttered by the dying man.

"Raving—eh?" exclaimed Valling. "Was he terrified?"

"No; perfectly calm and prepared for death."

"Oh, well, I am afraid we can do nothing by discussing wild ravings," said Valling who was inwardly relieved, and thoroughly satisfied that Nelson Lee knew nothing. "The murdered man made no other declaration, I suppose, doctor?"

"He merely conversed with Mr. Lee for a moment," said the doctor. "I was not actually present, but I am convinced that he said nothing of importance. I was watching, and he appeared to be utterly oblivious of his surroundings."

"Ah! Then we will set about other matters," the superintendent ejaculated, now quite certain that everything was all right. "May I inquire, Mr. Lee, why you are present here?"

"For a very excellent reason," replied the detective. "The murdered man was ringing me up at the very moment he was shot!"

"Was he, begad!" exclaimed Valling, startled afresh.

"Yes. And when I was informed that he had been fatally wounded—the railway policeman, in fact, said that the man was dead—I immediately rushed round here."

"Did you know Garratt's object in ringing you up?"

"Not at all. He merely asked if I was Nelson Lee, and then I heard a scream."

"So you are still in ignorance as to his motive in approaching you?"

"Entirely."

"Thank you, Mr. Lee."

And Superintendent Valling walked away, smiling to himself. So everything was well. Garratt had left Scotland Yard and had immediately rung up Nelson Lee. Well, he had been struck down before any harm was done. That was something to be thankful for, at all events. Valling was decidedly elated.

Perhaps he would not have felt so comfortable in mind had he been listening to Nelson Lee and Nipper as the pair made their way out of the station and walked briskly up the Strand through the thick atmosphere.

For some little time Nelson Lee was silent; then he clapped Nipper on the back, and the lad saw that his master's lips were set firmly.

"Well, guv'nor?" asked Nipper curiously.

"We're well on the road again, young 'un," said Nelson Lee grimly. "The Governing Circle of the league has felt our teeth already—and very soon we shall bring off another great success. And this time it will be a heavier blow than any before!"

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

"Ah, that's rather uncertain at present," replied the great criminologist. "But I can safely say this—Superintendent Valling will be the next Governing Member to be struck down in our campaign. The net is already drawing loosely round him, and it remains for us to tighten it and entrap the scoundrel in its meshes!"

"Good biz!" exclaimed Nipper, with tremendous heartiness.

"Valling is one of the league's most influential and most valued members," went on Nelson Lee quietly. "That, of course, is tantamount to saying that he is one of the greatest scoundrels in the kingdom. He is a viper in our midst—posing as a man of the highest integrity and honour. Yet he is, in reality, a base traitor to his countrymen, and a foe of justice!"

CHAPTER V.

The Bank Robbery—Nelson Lee Investigates—The Arrest of Greenwood.

TWO mornings later, as Nelson Lee and Nipper were at breakfast, there was a peal at the bell, and Detective-inspector Lennard was announced. Nelson Lee immediately instructed Mrs. Jones to show the visitor up.

Detective-inspector Lennard was an old friend of the detective's, and was an extremely keen man. He had not one atom of false pride. He knew that Nelson Lee was a cleverer man than himself, and did not hesitate to seek his friend's advice and aid.

"Hallo, Lennard!" exclaimed Nelson Lee, as the Yard man came in. "This is rather an early visit—eh? Anything important?"

"Well, it's rather serious, Mr. Lee," replied Lennard, taking a seat. "I'm awfully sorry to disturb you in the middle of breakfast—"

"Nonsense!" smiled Nelson Lee. "Have a cup of coffee, man! It's freezing outside."

Lennard accepted a cup of coffee, and sipped at it. But a frown was upon his brow, and he looked up after a moment or two.

"I want you to step round to the City with me, Lee," he said bluntly. "There's been a big robbery at the London and Home Counties Bank during

the night, and I'm hanged if I can make anything of it. I want you to have a squint round, if you will."

"The London and Home Counties Bank!" exclaimed the detective. "By Jove, that's rather a curious coincidence. Vernon Greenwood is the chief cashier of that bank."

"Well, what of it?" asked Lennard.

"It struck me as being rather peculiar," replied Nelson Lee, pushing his plate aside. "That unfortunate fellow who was shot in the telephone-box at Charing Cross Station, two days ago, was Greenwood's valet."

"Oh, I don't think there's any connection whatever," said the detective-inspector. "To tell you the truth, Lee, I have a tiny suspicion about Mr. Greenwood. There are certain little uncomfortable points which he will find difficult to explain."

"Surely you don't suspect——"

"I don't actually suspect him," interrupted Lennard. "But the facts are rather grave. The robbery was a serious one, valuable bonds and securities having disappeared to the value of thirty thousand pounds."

"Phew!" whistled Nipper. "That's a decent haul!"

"You say that you're inclined to suspect Mr. Greenwood of being implicated in the affair," said Nelson Lee. "Have you any proof to substantiate your suspicions?"

The inspector raised his eyebrows.

"My dear Lee, we're not magicians at the Yard!" he protested. "I was only put on to the case an hour ago. I merely had a glance round and then came straight to you. I'm not sure whether I've acted in a strictly official manner, but I've got great faith in you, Mr. Lee. If you can spare an hour——"

"Two if you like," smiled Nelson Lee. "Hurry up, Nipper; we don't want to keep our friend waiting all the morning. You've eaten enough breakfast to satisfy you for the rest of the day already."

"Chaps who work for their living," said Nipper calmly, "require a pretty decent dummy-full of grub to start the day with. I notice you haven't eaten much, guv'nor!"

"That's a nice way to talk to your master, young 'un!" said Lennard severely.

But Nelson Lee merely smiled, and Nipper chuckled. Five minutes later the trio were en route for the London and Home Counties Bank, in Bishopsgate. They were admitted straight away into the manager's private office. The latter was considerably worried, and he was delighted to see the famous detective.

"This is a mysterious affair, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed—"an affair which is exceedingly worrying because the stolen securities have been taken from a small safe in Mr. Greenwood's private office. The vaults themselves have not been touched."

"How was the safe opened?" asked Nelson Lee.

"It will be a waste of time for me to explain," replied the manager. "It will be better for you to come and make a personal examination. Mr. Lennard has already done so, but he hasn't made any statement so far."

Nelson Lee nodded thoughtfully, and they all adjourned to the private office of Mr. Vernon Greenwood, the bank's chief cashier. Mr. Greenwood himself was in the apartment wearing an exceedingly worried frown.

"Deneed uncomfortable business, this!" he exclaimed, after he had shaken hands with Nelson Lee. "I'm hanged if I know what to think——"

"Before I commence my investigations," interrupted the detective, "I should like a few words with you, Mr. Greenwood. It is really not connected

with this present affair, but I think it may possibly have some bearing on it."

Greenwood raised his eyebrows.

"Is it anything of importance, Mr. Lee?" he asked curiously.

"That is what I wish to ascertain."

The two men walked over to the window, and Nipper, the manager, and Detective-inspector Lennard stood looking at the safe.

"A man was shot two days ago in a telephone-box at Charing Cross," began Nelson Lee. "I have since learned that he was your valet, Mr. Greenwood—that his name was William Garratt."

"A terrible affair!" said Greenwood, stroking his grizzled hair. "If you wish to question me regarding that tragedy, I believe I can give you a certain amount of information. The police, however, already know the facts."

"The police?"

"Superintendent Valling, at least," added Greenwood. "Garratt told his whole story to the superintendent, after he had told it to me."

"Indeed! Then Garratt confessed to you?" asked Nelson Lee evenly.

"He told me an amazing story," said the other. "But perhaps you already know it?"

"Partly. Garratt, you know, rang me up—was talking to me, in fact, when he was so mysteriously murdered. But what do you know, Mr. Greenwood?"

The cashier looked thoughtful.

"At the time I was rather sceptical," he admitted. "I thought that Garratt was suffering from some kind of hallucination. But when I heard that he had been shot, I realised that there was grim truth in his story. He came to me earlier on that fateful night, in a soaking condition, and said that he had been flung over Putney Bridge—I live at Putney, you know."

"Did he tell you who committed the outrage?"

"He said that it was the work of the League of the Green Triangle!" replied Greenwood—"and I believe he was speaking the absolute truth. Garratt told me that he had been a member of the league for years past, and that he had been marked down for death owing to a blunder he had made the previous night. I don't know exactly what the blunder was, because he was rather vague, and his utterances were certainly wild."

"What did he say, anyhow?" asked Nelson Lee keenly.

"Well, he declared that he had assaulted and robbed Sir Roger Hogarth," replied Mr. Greenwood. "That, in itself, I can easily believe. Indeed, I think it is a known fact that Sir Roger was actually attacked in the fog. But Garratt was in a terrible state of fright, and was not responsible for all he said. He even asserted that Sir Roger himself was a member of the Green Triangle—utterly absurd, of course!"

Nelson Lee laughed heartily.

"Quite!" he agreed. "A preposterous notion!"

The detective had no wish for Greenwood to suspect the actual, startling truth. He was quite certain that Garratt's words had been mere wild ravings, and Nelson Lee was anxious that Greenwood should still think the same as he had originally thought. But, at the same time, the famous crime investigator was startled to no little degree. He was beginning to see clearly through the maze of intricate incidents which had so far occurred in this queer business.

In a flash Nelson Lee knew that the bank robbery was a direct consequence of Garratt's confession to Superintendent Valling. The detective instinctively felt that before the morning was out Greenwood himself would find

himself in an awkward position. Already Detective-inspector Lennard had suspicions regarding the cashier.

The robbery, in fact, had been engineered by the League of the Green Triangle.

And Nelson Lee knew why. Valling had been greatly startled by Garratt's story—told to him in his capacity of a police-superintendent. The valet had undoubtedly informed Valling that he had already told much to Vernon Greenwood. Valling, accordingly, realised that the bank cashier knew a lot more than was healthy for the Governing Circle. Consequently the league had immediately taken steps which would ultimately lead to Greenwood being thrown into prison, safely out of harm's way. In addition, if he were proved to be guilty of bank robbery, his statement would carry no weight whatever with the police. Even if he told the police all that Garratt had confessed to him—that Sir Roger Hogarth was a member of the league—the police would not credit the story. Valling himself would utterly deny it, and so the Governing Circle would be safe.

The whole thing became clear to Nelson Lee in a moment. But he realised that the league was going to a lot of needless trouble—for Greenwood knew practically nothing. That was perhaps the real crux to the whole question. The Governing Circle did not know exactly how much Greenwood had been told. They had, therefore, taken elaborate precautionary measures to ensure their own security.

The fact that Greenwood was entirely innocent mattered nothing to the league. If he was a peril to them—or even an imaginary peril—he would have to be sacrificed. He was simply a victim of peculiarly unkind circumstances.

Nelson Lee suddenly became aware that Mr. Greenwood was regarding him curiously. For the detective had been frowning very thoughtfully. He smiled now, however.

"I have reason to believe that your position will become a very uncomfortable one before the morning is out, Mr. Greenwood," said Nelson Lee quietly. "But I should advise you to keep perfectly calm——"

"What on earth do you mean?" demanded Greenwood sharply.

"You will understand for yourself very shortly—unless I'm vastly mistaken," replied the detective. "I have formed a theory, and I believe the data will soon be to hand to substantiate that theory. Whatever happens, however, please rely fully on me."

"Good heavens! You startle me, Mr. Lee!" exclaimed the cashier blankly. "Do you mean to suggest that I may be suspected of this infernal robbery?"

"I merely repeat what I have already said," replied Nelson Lee evenly. "There is no necessity for you to become alarmed in any way whatever. I faithfully promise that you will come to no harm; although you may possibly be put to a certain amount of indignity and inconvenience. My theory may be wrong, of course. We will see."

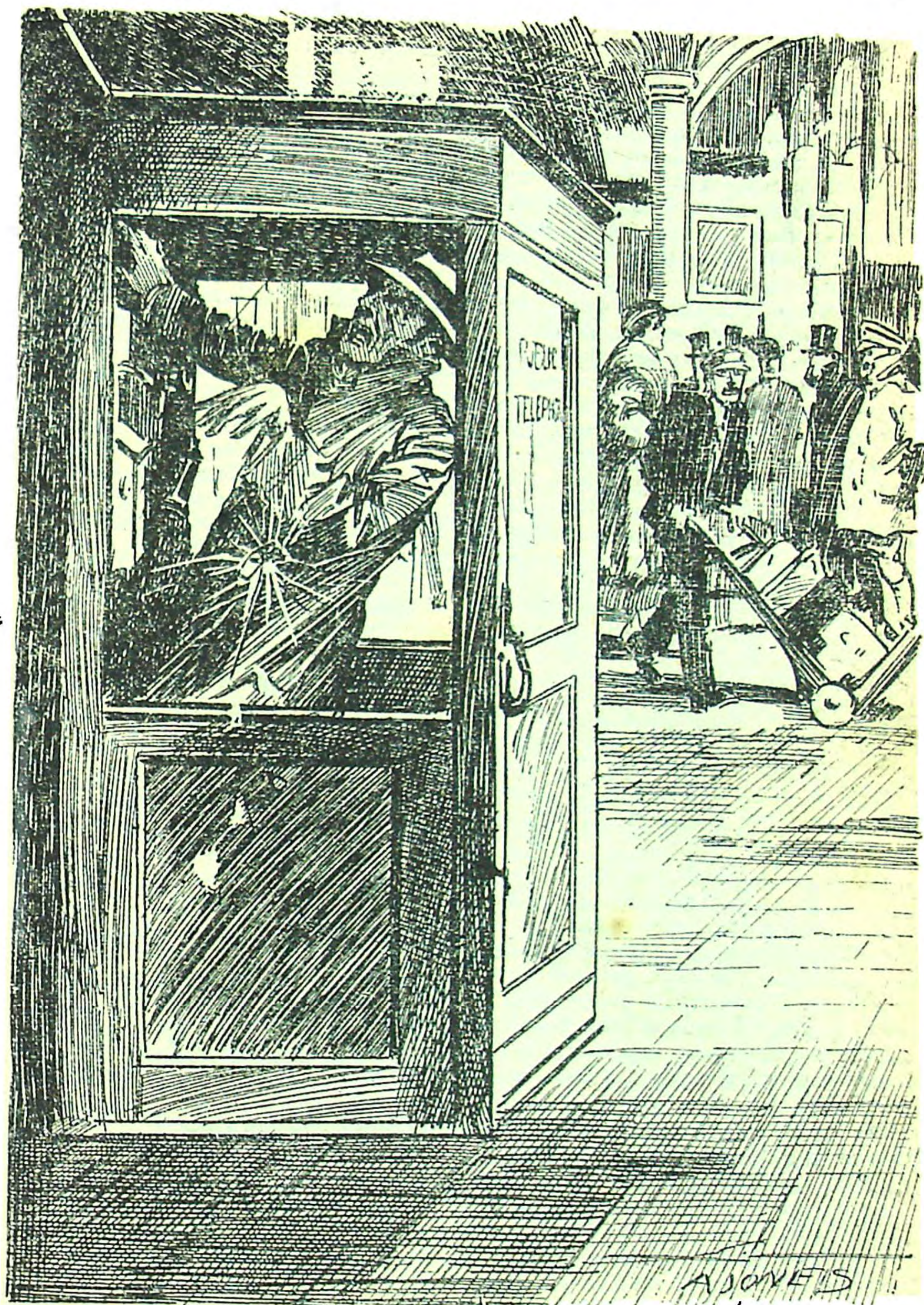
Mr. Greenwood was rather puzzled, but he made no further comment. The two men then crossed over to the safe. As they did so Inspector Lennard looked at Nelson Lee with an excited expression.

"I've made a discovery, Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed briskly. "Bring your magnifying lens out, and have a look for yourself."

"Hallo! Some finger-prints?" queried Nelson Lee.

"Rather, guv'nor!" ejaculated Nipper. "A whole collection!"

Nelson Lee looked at the safe keenly. It was a comparatively small one, but Greenwood very often left valuable securities in it. The burglary had been done particularly neatly. There was a large irregular hole cut completely in the safe door, apparently by an oxy-acetylene apparatus. The steel had simply been melted away, and a large slab of the door-front had



"I need your protection, Mr. Lee— Ah-h-h!"
 Garratt's voice rose in a choking scream for a moment, and then died away into a sob. At the same second Nelson Lee heard a sharp crash; then utter silence. [See page 17.]

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therefore dropped out. But Nelson Lee knew that if oxy-acetylene had actually been employed, the apparatus must have been an exceedingly compact and portable one.

Gazing at the place Lennard pointed to, Nelson Lee's keen eyes detected some faint marks upon the dull paintwork. They were just round the side of the safe, as though someone had gripped the steelwork.

"We'll soon make the marks more distinct," said the detective crisply.

He took from his waistcoat pocket a tiny box, and sprinkled some of the contents—a fine powder—upon the indistinct marks. Immediately they stood out clearly as a man's finger-prints. They were perfectly clear and well-defined.

"Ah, this will probably prove to be a valuable clue," said Nelson Lee calmly. "What do you say, Lennard?"

"Most decidedly," agreed the inspector, who was more than a little pleased with himself. "You see, Mr. Lee, I've made an important discovery upon my own, after all. I wonder if you will go one better?"

"But what about these finger-prints?" asked Mr. Greenwood. "I suppose they were made by the burglar?"

"Undoubtedly," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "I have observed something about the finger-prints which positively proves that they were made by the burglar. Now, Mr. Greenwood, please don't get excited. Will you kindly allow me to take an impression of your two hands?"

The cashier flushed angrily.

"Certainly not!" he exclaimed. "Good gracious, you don't insist upon this, I suppose, inspector?" he added, turning to Lennard. "I really cannot submit—"

"I assure you, Mr. Greenwood, that no good will come of your taking up this attitude," interrupted Nelson Lee suavely. "I am convinced that you were in no way connected with the burglary——"

"So I should hope, indeed!" snapped Mr. Greenwood.

"Then why do you object to have your finger-prints taken? If you are innocent no harm will come of it; and if you are guilty you are doing yourself no good."

Greenwood laughed strangely.

"I will do as you request, Mr. Lee," he said with forced calmness; "but the whole thing is preposterous!"

Detective-inspector Lennard was looking a little grim, and Nipper somewhat startled. The manager had now departed for his own office. In a very few minutes Greenwood's finger-prints were impressed clearly upon a blank piece of paper. Lennard took them and compared them closely side by side with the marks upon the safe. When he looked round there was a very peculiar expression upon his face, and the corners of his mouth were grimly tightened.

"The finger-prints are identical!" he announced deliberately.

Nelson Lee permitted himself to indulge in a queer smile in Nipper's direction. But Vernon Greenwood turned deathly pale, and gripped at the table for support. It seemed to him as though a bombshell had suddenly fallen into his office.

"The thing is absurd!" he cried hoarsely. "They cannot possibly be my finger-prints! Ah, of course—what a fool I am to forget! I must have made them last night, or perhaps a day or two ago!"

He breathed with relief, and laughed somewhat. But Nelson Lee, after a quick look at Lennard, faced the cashier.

"You have not touched the safe this morning?" he asked quietly.

"No. The police would not let me near it."

"Then there is ample proof that those finger-prints were made during the course of the burglary," replied Nelson Lee. "They were certainly not there when you left this office last night!"

"Mr. Lee is perfectly correct," exclaimed the inspector grimly. "I have noticed the same feature about the prints, Mr. Greenwood, as my friend has noticed. They were made by fingers which were coated with oil and iron filings—that fact is perfectly clear. There is oil, and there are iron filings close by the jagged rent in the safe door. I do not think you can deny——"

"I do deny it!" cried Mr. Greenwood frantically. "I tell you I must have made those finger-prints at a time altogether previous to the robbery!"

"That is absolutely impossible," said Lennard with conviction. "The oil and the iron filings prove beyond question that the marks were caused by the man who actually committed the theft. I am afraid, Mr. Greenwood, this affair is taking a rather ugly look. I am amazed at the turn events have taken!"

Greenwood sank into a chair limply, his face bloodless.

"It is beyond me!" he muttered huskily.

"Surely you can prove an alibi?" asked Nelson Lee. "If you provide the inspector with an outline of your movements during the night——"

"Of course!" exclaimed Greenwood, starting up. "Oh, but I'm afraid there will be a difficulty!"

"A difficulty?" repeated Lennard curiously. "Were you not at home last night, at Putney?"

"I was, up till eleven-thirty," replied Greenwood. "I was called away then, however, and did not return until four in the morning."

The inspector nodded his head, and smiled to himself.

"That is rather awkward, is it not, Mr. Greenwood?" he said smoothly. "Indeed, I think it is necessary for me to take notes upon this interesting subject. So you admit you were absent from your house from eleven-thirty till four? That has a decidedly unhealthy smack about it. Can you tell me your movements during those hours you were absent from home?"

Greenwood cleared his dry throat.

"A motor-car called for me late last night," he said huskily. "Oh, it must be some vile plot against me. I begin to understand now why I was taken away on that motor-car! It was to make this case against me absolutely proof positive. The chauffeur of the car informed me that a Mr. Mason—a friend of mine—was seriously injured upon the road near Guildford, and that he was asking for me. But when I was in a very deserted piece of country the chauffeur tricked me into getting out of the car, and then drove off, leaving me in the road."

"That was very awkward!" said Lennard drily.

"Oh, I know you don't believe me!" went on Greenwood bitterly. "How can I expect you to? On the face of it my story sounds like a faked-up yarn. Yet I swear before Heaven that it is the absolute truth! I was stranded on that desolate piece of road, on the other side of Esher, at one o'clock in the morning. The only thing I could do was to tramp back to Putney, my mind filled with amazed speculation as to why I had been submitted to such an outrage. I arrived home just before four, admitted myself by a latchkey, and went to bed."

"And your wife——"

"For Heaven's sake don't bring my wife into this wretched business!" interrupted Greenwood hoarsely. "My wife and children are at present at the seaside—they left yesterday morning. Good gracious! Everything seems against me! You will assume, I suppose, that I sent my wife away so that I should have the house to myself."

"The fact remains that nobody saw you enter your house?"

"Yes. That is so."

Detective-inspector Lennard gave Nelson Lee a fixed look, and then turned his eyes towards the door. Nelson Lee nodded almost imperceptibly, and Lennard immediately left the office—having received his unofficial colleague's assurance that the suspected man would not be allowed to leave.

"This is all some vile and diabolical plot, Mr. Lee," said Greenwood, looking from Nelson Lee to Nipper with alarmed eyes. "I did not commit this robbery! I have told nothing but the straightforward truth!"

"I believe every word you have uttered," said Nelson Lee quietly.

Mr. Greenwood sprang up from his chair.

"You believe in me, then?" he cried. "I thought that you——"

"You should never allow your thoughts to run away with you," interjected the detective, with a smile. "My theory has proved to be perfectly correct. I warned you that you would have to submit to something of this sort. No doubt you will be arrested, Mr. Greenwood; but do not lose heart. In spite of the evidence I am positive that you are innocent."

"What about the finger-prints, guv'nor?" asked Nipper softly.

"Yes, those finger-prints are mine—made by my own hand!" exclaimed Greenwood. "How can you explain those away, Mr. Lee? The whole thing is a deadly mystery to me. They are the impressions of my fingers, and yet I did not make them."

"The police would say you were lying, but I know differently," said Nelson Lee. "Do not your own very words suggest something to you? They are your finger-prints, but they were not made by your fingers. In short, they are forgeries!"

"Forgeries!" gasped Nipper.

"But—but that is impossible!" protested Greenwood blankly, but with a wild hope in his eyes. "How do you know this, Mr. Lee? How can you prove it?"

"I cannot prove it at the moment, but I am convinced that I shall be able to do so long before anything serious occurs," replied the detective reassuringly. "I guessed they were forgeries the very instant I saw them. No experienced cracksman would accidentally leave such a damning piece of evidence against himself. Those prints were impressed upon the safe deliberately, and for the sole purpose of being discovered by the police, and for putting the police on the wrong track."

"But—but——"

"I am quite sure my theories are correct," went on Nelson Lee smoothly. "The police do not credit that finger-prints can be forged; they regard them as positive conclusive evidence against a man. You can't prove that these impressions were not made by your own hand, for you are without an alibi. You are trapped, Mr. Greenwood—and very cleverly trapped, too!"

"Good heavens!"

"There is no cause for alarm, however; I am convinced of your innocence, and that you are the victim of a cruel plot."

"But who is responsible, Mr. Lee? Who has done this devilish thing?"

"At present I'm afraid I must leave you in ignorance on that point," replied Nelson Lee evenly. "You may have guessed that Inspector Lennard has gone out to inform his superiors of the turn events have taken. You must be calm, Mr. Greenwood. You will certainly be detained on suspicion, for the circumstantial evidence is complete. You may rest absolutely assured, however, that I will prove your innocence."

Vernon Greenwood laughed strainedly.

"By Jove, you give me a good heart, Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed gratefully. "I will steel myself for the ordeal, and will hope against hope that all will come right——"

The door suddenly opened, and Detective-inspector Lennard appeared, closely followed by Superintendent Valling. The latter was wearing a cruel little smile upon his lips, but he frowned when he saw Nelson Lee. He walked straight over to Mr. Greenwood and tapped the cashier upon the shoulder.

"Mr. Vernon Greenwood, you will please consider yourself under arrest," he said, rolling the words round his tongue as though their utterance gave him keen pleasure. "Inspector Lennard has informed me of the evidence which he has obtained against you. And this, I may tell you, has been substantiated by other evidence still more conclusive.

"Well, Mr. Valling," said Greenwood coldly, "it is strange for us to meet again, after my interview with you at Scotland Yard, in this dramatic fashion. May I inquire what the fresh evidence consists of?"

The superintendent laughed softly.

"The Putney police were telephoned a short while ago," he replied, "and your house was entered and searched. Locked in the cupboard of a lumber-room the police found the oxy-acetylene apparatus with which you forced the safe! The stolen securities have not been recovered, however. I should advise you to divulge their whereabouts——"

"Since I did not take them, it is impossible for me to do so," replied Greenwood, who was now deadly calm. "The scoundrels who plotted against me must have done their work thoroughly. An oxy-acetylene apparatus in my house! By Heaven, I am past being amazed!"

"This bluff is all very well, Mr. Greenwood, but it is really an unwise course to pursue," said Valling mockingly. "Take your prisoner away, inspector."

And Mr. Vernon Greenwood, with set lips, strode out of the bank and was driven swiftly away in a taxi, which was waiting in readiness outside. In less than a minute he was being whirled away to Bow Street Police Station.



CHAPTER VI.

A Curious Meeting—An Impulse of the Moment—Nelson Lee Arrives.

MRS. JONES shook her head.

"No, sir; Mr. Lee's out just now," she said. "He didn't say when he'd be back."

"What about the young 'un? Isn't Nipper in?"

"No, and Nipper ain't in, neither," replied Mrs. Jones. "Did you have an appointment, Mr. Merrick?"

"An appointment—no!" exclaimed Douglas Clifford. "But as Mr. Lee isn't in at present I'll go up into his consulting-room and wait a while."

"There's a party up there already, sir."

"What sort of party?"

"A young lady, sir," replied Nelson Lee's housekeeper. "Miss Zingrave, I think she said—or Zingrove. Some such name as that."

"Miss Zingrave!" cried Clifford delightedly. "By Jove!"

And before the astonished Mrs. Jones could get her breath for further speech Douglas Clifford was mounting the stairs, three at a time.

It was several days since Clifford had visited Nelson Lee, and now, it appeared, he was to meet somebody quite different; and, to tell the truth, Clifford was exceedingly glad that the detective wasn't at home. If Vera

Zingrave was alone in the consulting-room—well, Providence must have sent him round at such an opportune time.

Outwardly, Douglas Clifford was a gentleman of middle-age, with a grey beard and moustache; and he was known to everybody as John Merriek, a man of wealth and leisure. In reality, although the hair was his own, the colour was false. For Clifford was a young man, well under thirty.

His story was a curious one. It was he who had supplied Nelson Lee with all the amazing facts concerning the League of the Green Triangle. And the famous detective and Clifford had sworn a deadly compact to work together and to wreck and ruin the league until it no longer existed.

Clifford had already done a great deal of work in connection with the great campaign, but at present his efforts were not required. Nelson Lee only enlisted the young man's help when the necessity arose.

And if anybody on earth knew the secrets of the league it was Douglas Clifford. For he had known the organisation when it was just starting to grow. He had fallen foul of Professor Zingrave over five years before—and those five years had been ages of torture for the young man. He had been a prisoner in the league's hands, incarcerated in a ruined castle in the north of Scotland. Zingrave's object had been to gain possession of Clifford's huge fortune; but the plot had failed.

For Clifford had escaped, and was now walking London openly, but cleverly disguised. The league thought him dead, and thus he had a great advantage over his enemies. Although he was doing no actual work at present, the resolve to use all his energies in wrecking the league was as strong as ever. If necessary, he was prepared to spend his whole fortune in the great task which he and Nelson Lee had undertaken.

And Vera Zingrave?

Why had Clifford shown such eagerness when he had heard her name? She was the daughter of the professor—the very chief of the league! And yet Clifford, the league's sworn enemy, was obviously delighted to hear of her presence.

The reason was simple. Before Douglas Clifford had been made a prisoner by the villainous society he had met Vera—then a mere schoolgirl of seventeen—and had been strangely attracted towards her. Afterwards, upon his re-entry into the world, he had again met the girl, and had learned many things which had greatly worried him beforehand, and which now gave him tremendous relief and delight.

For the fact was made known to him that Vera was in utter ignorance of her father's villainy—that she was a pure, innocent girl, untainted by the scoundrelism which flourished around her.

And just recently, while on a trip to America, Clifford had met Vera on board the liner, and they had grown much better acquainted, and had come to a better understanding. Vera, it appeared, was not Zingrave's real daughter. He was her stepfather—and that fact brought infinite relief to Clifford's worried mind.

He had explained to her, in a veiled, vague way, that he was compelled to adopt a disguise, and had asked her to keep the fact that he was still alive a strict secret. Vera had respected the young man's wish, and so it came about that these two—the man who had been tortured by the league, and the daughter of Professor Zingrave himself—were fast friends. And that friendship showed distinct signs of ripening into something more intimate.

Clifford was naturally delighted to learn that Vera was alone in Nelson Lee's consulting-room. He burst into the room with a flushed, eager face, and saw instantly that Mrs. Jones had not misinformed him.

"Miss Zingrave!" he exclaimed eagerly. "By Jove, this is a ripping surprise!"

Vera Zingrave was sitting near the fire, with a magazine in her hands. Her rich sable furs had been removed, and her delightful little figure was set off to splendid advantage as she sat there in the full light from the window. She was a wonderfully beautiful girl, and as she looked up quickly her cheeks—absolutely innocent of paint or powder—flushed prettily. Her eyes were deep, deep brown, and gloriously expressive.

"Why, Mr Clifford, I didn't expect to meet you this morning!" she exclaimed, with obvious delight. "It is indeed a surprise!"

They shook hands, and Vera flushed a little deeper as she felt the warm pressure of his grip.

"This is the first time we've met since we landed at New York off the *Titania*!" exclaimed Clifford. "I've been wondering how on earth I could manage to see you, because I've got lots to talk about. Chance has come to the rescue, however, and here we are together in Nelson Lee's consulting-room, of all places!"

"Yes, it's curious, isn't it?" said Vera, smiling.

"It's splendid!"

Vera sat down, and looked up at her companion as he lighted a cigarette. There was a soft look in those delightful eyes of hers. For she felt a strange sympathy for this young man, who was compelled to disguise himself to look twenty years older than his real age; and Clifford, in his turn, felt a keen desire to tell Vera the whole awful truth. She was pure—she was just a winsome, glorious girl. It was terrible that she should constantly associate with a man who was a scoundrelly rogue. However gently and lovingly Zingrave treated his stepdaughter, the fact remained that he was utterly unfit to breathe the same air as she did.

"Why are you here, Mr. Clifford?" asked Vera, raising her eyes to his, and thereby causing him to flush a little awkwardly.

"Somehow those frank brown eyes always sent a thrill through Clifford.

"Oh, I came to see Mr. Lee," he answered, taking a seat as close to her as he dared, and shifting his chair so that he could look at her beauty in the full light. "But I often drop in here—Lee's a great friend of mine. There's nothing surprising in my being in these apartments; but you—well——"

"Well?" smiled Vera prettily.

"Oh, I suppose it's like my infernal cheek to mention it," said Clifford uncomfortably. "I was wondering what brought you to Gray's Inn Road."

"I came to consult Mr. Lee."

"Jove! Not in a professional capacity?"

"Oh, yes."

Clifford looked concerned.

"I hope everything is all right?" he asked anxiously. "Has anything happened, Miss Zingrave? Your father, perhaps—— Oh, no, your father wouldn't send you here!"

"I don't see why he shouldn't," Vera said innocently. "But, as it happens, I came quite unknown to my father. I came on the spur of the moment, as soon as I heard some dreadful news."

"Dreadful news!" ejaculated Clifford. "Not—not concerning yourself——"

"Oh, you silly!" cried Vera impetuously. And then she flushed, realising that her exclamation was far from formal. "I—I came to see Mr. Lee in connection with something awful which has happened at the London and Home Counties Bank. Mr. Greenwood, the chief cashier, is in great trouble, I believe. I'm awfully concerned."

Clifford felt a dead-weight on his heart.

"Is Mr. Greenwood a friend of yours?" he asked, his eyes full of anxiety.

"Oh, yes. A great friend!"

"By Jove!" he exclaimed in a dull voice.

Vera laughed gaily, and there was a note of roguish fun in that laugh.

"What is the matter, Mr. Clifford?" she asked, with a delicious little smile on her dainty lips. "You seem quite concerned!"

"I—I—Hang it all, who is this Mr. Greenwood?" he asked bluntly. "Have you known him long, Miss Zingrave?"

"Oh, quite a long time," replied Vera. "You see, I often visit Mrs. Greenwood and her two daughters. They are all friends of mine."

Clifford breathed freely and laughed. At the same time he puffed furiously at his cigarette to hide the colour of his cheeks. Confound it! He was blushing like a schoolgirl! But how on earth could he help it when those brown eyes were regarding him so steadily, and with such twinkling gaiety?

"Mr. Greenwood's quite a middle-aged man," went on Vera softly. "Indeed, he's about the same age as you appear to be, Mr. Clifford." Then a look of concern crept into her eyes. "Oh, I wish it were possible——"

She broke off hesitatingly.

"You wish what were possible?" inquired Clifford.

"Oh, I don't like it!" Vera broke out impulsively. "This—this disguise business, Mr. Clifford! I wish you could become your normal self. I should just love to see you clean-shaven—as you used to be when you first visited Father's house five years ago!"

"Would you, really?" asked Clifford eagerly.

She blushed.

"It would be so much nicer, wouldn't it?" she asked demurely. "It's horrid having to go about looking fifty years of age when you're only thirty."

"Oh, I say, I'm not thirty!" protested Clifford. "I'm a youngster yet—only twenty-seven. A man always feels a boy until he's past thirty!"

Vera laughed gaily.

"It's a curious thing, but I always look right through your disguise and see you as you really are," she said simply. "Although you seem to be an oldish man I never imagine you to be really old. Do you think it will be very long before you can resume your natural self?"

Clifford looked grave.

"I don't know, Miss Zingrave," he replied quietly. "It depends upon many things. I wish with all my heart I could be perfectly frank; but it's impossible. The circumstances are so unfortunately awkward."

He clenched his fists. Oh, this secret-keeping was intolerable! He felt a wild desire within him to tell Vera everything. After all, Zingrave was only her stepfather, and the shock would not be so terribly severe. And it was only right that she should know of Zingrave's villainous career.

Why should he delay? Why not relate his story from start to finish, and let her judge? They were quite alone, and another opportunity might not occur for weeks or months. Almost mechanically he half resolved to blurt out the truth. The delightful magnetism of her presence seemed to have cast a spell over the young man, and robbed him of his customary coolness.

"I have a terrible revelation to make, Miss Zingrave," he said, bending closer to her and unconsciously laying a hand upon the arm of her chair, and slightly touching her delicate hand. "I want you to be perfectly calm!"

Vera looked very serious, but she did not move her hand away.

"You frighten me, Mr. Clifford!" she exclaimed, with wide-open eyes.

"I don't want to do that," he went on tensely. "You must not be frightened. It mainly concerns myself and your——"

Clifford paused as footsteps were heard mounting the stairs. He had been about to say that what he had to tell concerned himself and Vera's father. But the words were never uttered, for a moment later the door of the consulting-room opened, and Nelson Lee's well-proportioned figure appeared: and Nipper could be seen in the background.

"Hallo! Visitors here!" exclaimed Nelson Lee genially. "My dear Merrick, I'm delighted to see you. By Jove, and Miss Zingrave, too!"

Vera jumped up.

"I called to see you professionally, Mr. Lee," she exclaimed in business-like tones. "While I was waiting Mr. Merrick came up and we have been chatting for quite ten minutes. Do you think you will be able to spare me a few minutes?"

"My dear young lady, my attention is all yours!" Nelson Lee assured her.

"About an hour ago I heard that Mr. Vernon Greenwood is in rather serious trouble," said Vera quickly. "I went to the bank to cash a cheque, and asked for Mr. Greenwood. He and his wife are friends of mine, you see. The clerk was very mysterious, and even hinted that Mr. Greenwood might be arrested! Oh, it was preposterous——"

"Mr. Greenwood was arrested twenty minutes ago," interjected Nelson Lee quietly. "He is now at Bow Street!"

"Oh!" gasped Vera in distress. "Oh, is—is this true, Mr. Lee?"

"Perfectly true. I was present when Mr. Greenwood was taken away."

"But it is ridiculous!" cried the girl indignantly. "Mr. Greenwood is a perfectly honourable man! Why has he been submitted to this terrible ordeal——"

Nelson Lee laid a hand gently on Vera's arm.

"Please do not upset yourself, Miss Zingrave," he exclaimed softly. "Mr. Greenwood is in no danger. He is suspected of robbing the bank—indeed, the circumstantial evidence is absolute. But it is merely a ruse on the part of the real burglar. I am in possession of certain facts, and Mr. Greenwood will soon be released. The very instant I have concluded my inquiries I shall prove his innocence!"

Vera smiled.

"You are a wonderful man, Mr. Lee," she said frankly. "You have calmed me all in a moment, and I am sure that you are not saying this to me just for the purpose of setting my fears at rest. I was going to ask you to take up the case; but it appears that I am far behind time. You are already hard at work."

A few minutes later Vera took her departure. Her little hand rested for quite a long time in Clifford's broad palm, and he pressed her fingers warmly. Her eyes were shining rather regretfully, and Clifford instinctively knew that she was sorry to have to go so soon. She gave a tiny hint, and Clifford grasped it eagerly. Next minute he was escorting her to the street, and took the liberty of deliberately ignoring at least four taxis until Holborn was reached.

As he walked back he realised that Nelson Lee's arrival was perhaps opportune. It was far better—for the present, at least—that Vera should not be told of her stepfather's sins. Now that he was calm he told himself that he would have to check those impulses of his to blurt out the dreadful truth. The only trouble was, when he was basking in the sunlight of Vera's eyes he scarcely knew what he actually was saying. Her very presence seemed to make him confused.

"Miss Zingrave is a sweet girl, and at the earliest moment she must be rescued from her stepfather's control," said Nelson Lee, when Clifford got

back into the detective's consulting-room. "At present, however, it would be unwise to reveal the truth."

"What is all this about Greenwood?" asked Clifford.

"I am busy on the case at the present moment," replied Nelson Lee grimly. "Zingrave does not even hesitate to sacrifice his daughter's friends. Greenwood's arrest has been brought about entirely by the machinations of the league."

"By Jove!"

"I am going to get extremely busy at once," went on the detective. "Ostensibly, I am working on Mr. Greenwood's behalf. In reality, my object is to rid Scotland Yard of an unmitigated scoundrel. Superintendent Valling's career is nearly at an end."

And Nelson Lee briefly outlined to Clifford the facts of the case, and then went on to describe exactly how he was going to bring about Greenwood's release. When he had done, Douglas Clifford laughed shortly, and remarked that the innocent cashier—the latest victim of the league—was as good as released already.

In spite of the forged finger-prints, in spite of the incriminating oxy-acetylene apparatus, in spite of the absence of an alibi, Nelson Lee had a scheme which would—with any degree of luck—ultimately bring about Vernon Greenwood's release, and the downfall of still another member of the Governing Circle.



CHAPTER VII.

"Old Bandy"—Josh Grayson Knuckles Under—An Unexpected Trap.

TUCKED away behind Tottenham Court Road, quiet by day and quiet by night, was a tiny backwater known as Gallon Mews. Its inhabitants were ordinary people—mostly consisting of coachmen and chauffeurs. But there was one denizen of Gallon Mews who was something of a mystery. He was an old man, with grizzled white hair and a long, straggly beard. His face was weather-beaten and brown, and his legs decidedly bandy. Yet, when the occasion demanded, he could move those old legs of his with wonderful alacrity.

Nobody knew his name, and certainly nobody was at all curious to know what it was. To one and all who came in contact with him he was known simply as "Old Bandy"—this name having been given him in consequence of the curved appearance of his legs. As a matter of fact the other inhabitants of Gallon Mews never had many opportunities of coming in contact with the mysterious old man. His abode was certainly in the mews—in a simple room over one of the smaller stables—but it was only occasionally that he afforded his neighbours the opportunity of gossip.

For Old Bandy was very seldom at home. His comings and goings were erratic and irregular. Upon the night of the day that Vernon Greenwood had been arrested, the old fellow suddenly appeared after an absence of several weeks.

And even now he only stayed in Gallon Mews for a short time. One curious fact about Old Bandy was that the other denizens of the mews had never, on any occasion, witnessed his entry or his departure. He simply appeared there, nobody knew from where.

It was so on the present occasion. A light was observed at his window at about nine o'clock, and a few minutes later he emerged into the mews,

had a word or two with a fellow-resident, and then toddled off—saying that he would be back later.

To let the cat out of the bag straight away, Old Bandy was none other than Nelson Lee, the celebrated detective.

The disguise was an extremely clever one, and Nelson Lee had found it to be of great service on countless occasions. When he wished to make dangerous inquiries in absolute secret he usually adopted the "Old Bandy" disguise. Sometimes he had lived in the mews for a month on end; other times he only stayed a few hours. It all depended upon the nature of the work he had in hand.

He always stole into the mews in the darkness, let himself into his room, and then adopted the disguise. Once transformed he often remained so for days on end. Not a soul guessed his real identity, and he came and went without exciting the slightest suspicion.

To-night he went straight from the mews and visited a certain Mr. Martin Caine. The latter gentleman was one of the detective's staunchest allies. Yet Martin Caine was one of the Controlling Agents of the League of the Green Triangle.

At the outset of Nelson Lee's campaign against the league, he had saved Caine from certain death—and Caine, in consequence, had sworn eternal faithfulness. And he had proved as good as his word, for Caine had supplied Nelson Lee with valuable information on many an occasion.

To-night his short interview with the detective was extremely satisfactory; although he only knew the most superficial facts. They were, nevertheless, quite sufficient for Nelson Lee to proceed immediately with his inquiries.

In a word, Caine told his master—for he always considered himself a servant of Nelson Lee's—that the man who had really burgled the London and Home Counties Bank was Mr. Joshua Grayson, and that the gentleman lived in a certain quiet, and not extremely respectable, street in Wapping. The information was practically nothing at all—but it was enough for Nelson Lee. The bare facts gave him great elation of mind, for he could now get straight on the track.

Nine-forty-five found Old Bandy, harmless-looking and about as dangerous as a kitten, outside the dingy door of Josh Grayson's abode. He tapped upon the door softly, and waited. Almost immediately footsteps were heard, and a moment later the door opened; and Nelson Lee saw a well-dressed man before him.

"Well, grand-dad, what do you want?" demanded the man curiously.

"Are you alone?" wheezed Nelson Lee mysteriously.

"Yes."

"Nobody else in the house?"

"Not a bedashed soul!" replied Mr. Grayson elegantly.

"Then I must speak with you privately—at once! My news is vital!"

"What's the idea?" growled the other suspiciously. "If this is a wheeze

—"

Old Bandy bent close, and placed his mouth close against Grayson's ear.

"The Green Triangle!" he breathed.

"Oh! So that's the lay?" ejaculated Grayson promptly. "Come right in, old boy!"

Nelson Lee followed his companion down a dark passage, after the door had been closed, and the detective was perfectly cool and even-minded. He was going to play a big game of bluff, but he felt quite prepared. His plans were running smoothly.

Grayson led the way into a back room. It was comfortably furnished, although rather drab. Upon the table were the remains of a meal,

illuminated by an incandescent gaslight from the wall, near the fireplace—in which glowed a bright blaze.

Josh Grayson lived alone, and he was a man of many parts. Sometimes he dressed shabbily, like a common workman. But at present—as usually—he was smart and spruce. Josh was a flash gentleman crook—although his apparent profession was that of a bookmaker.

He sat down, lighted a cigarette, and looked at his companion.

“Well, old pal, what about it?” he inquired genially. “What’s the game?”

Nelson Lee was sitting with his back to the light, and he gave a wheezy little chuckle. Before he answered he produced a cigar, and carefully lighted it.

“I am here in connection with the bank affair,” he said softly.

“Oh, that! Well, I did the job O. K., didn’t I?” exclaimed Grayson. “Greenwood is arrested, and he’ll be bunged in the stone jug as sure as your whiskers are like a bedashed nunny-goat’s!”

“But the swag—what about that?” asked Nelson Lee. “You removed securities and bonds to the value of thirty thousand——”

“They’re here—in this room!”

“Ah! That is well. And the apparatus with which you forged Greenwood’s finger-prints?”

Grayson jerked his cigarette impatiently.

“That’s here, too,” he answered. “But, see here, old ’un, what’s the lay? Who sent you here? You know—or ought to know—that my orders are to take the goods to my agent to-night at eleven-thirty. What’s the idea of this visit?”

Nelson Lee laughed.

“I merely wished to have a few words with you, Mr. Grayson,” he said coolly. “You have very kindly given me the information I required. The stolen goods and the finger-print apparatus are in this room! Excellent!”

“What the thunder——”

“It will really be much more comfortable for you to keep your seat!” went on Nelson Lee suavely. “Your position will be decidedly awkward if you persist in rising, my dear Grayson. My hand is wonderfully steady!”

Grayson snarled out a fierce oath, and kept his seat. His visitor’s words had caused him to shift his gaze to Nelson Lee’s hand. There was something in the detective’s fist which had a decidedly unhealthy look about it—a neat little revolver, with the barrel pointing precisely at Grayson’s skull.

“What’s this?” grated the gentleman crook furiously. “By thunder! You’re a blamed rotten ’tee! Curse me for being a fool! You—you——”

“Steady—steady! It will be far better to keep calm!” murmured Nelson Lee.

The detective’s very coolness unnerved Josh. His face went pale, and the string of expletive was choked in his throat. He suddenly flashed his eyes, and then laughed in a strained fashion.

“You’ve got me!” he grunted. “I give you best, hang you! Well, what’s next?”

Nelson Lee puffed gently at his cigar.

“First of all, I wish to point out that the very first movement on your part will result in exceedingly unfortunate consequences,” he said. “I know all about you, Mr. Grayson, and I shall not hesitate to pull trigger if you contemplate resistance. My requirements are not overwhelming; I have no wish to interfere with you for the present.”

“Oh, cut this jaw!” snarled Grayson. “What’s your game?”

"I knew, as soon as I saw those impressions upon the safe, that they were forgeries," said Nelson Lee calmly. "Mr. Greenwood is innocent—and you are guilty. You have confessed the fact to me by admitting that you have the stolen bonds——"

"That's round the point!" interjected Josh curtly.

"Very well, I will be brief. I want you to hand over to me—now, this very minute—the bonds and securities you burgled, and the apparatus with which you forged Greenwood's finger-prints."

"And suppose I tell you to go to blazes?"

"Well, I should decline to undertake the journey!" replied the detective. "In addition, this little shooter of mine has an unfortunate habit of remaining steadily pointed at your head, Mr. Grayson. When I am thwarted I am inclined to become somewhat unsteady in the fingers, and I tremble to think what would happen if my trigger-finger twitched just a trifle too violently!"

Josh Grayson swore.

"I don't know who you are, but you're a bedashed cool card!" he said fiercely. "I'm helpless—I can't do anything but obey your orders. But the league will drop on me heavily for this—by thunder they will!"

"I am aware of that," said Nelson Lee quietly. "The league will probably hold you entirely to blame for what occurs to-night—and you will be murdered. But the league is a terrible power to fall foul of."

The detective meant this. He knew quite well that Josh Grayson's life would be in considerable peril when the Governing Circle learned that he had handed over the stolen property and the finger-print stamp to an unknown detective—for Grayson had not the slightest idea of his companion's identity. But Nelson Lee had no wish to be primarily responsible for Grayson's murder, scoundrel though the man was.

He placed his cigar carefully on the edge of the table, keeping his eyes upon Josh the whole time. The revolver in his right hand was steady as a rock. From an inner pocket he produced a small leather bag, and it thumped rather heavily upon the table.

"What's that?" asked Grayson suddenly. "Look here, you hound, this business will be the death of me! The league will have me outed if I hand those securities and finger-print——"

"But if you get away from London—from England—at once, the league will have no opportunity to 'out' you," interrupted Nelson Lee evenly. "You're a pretty complete villain, Grayson, but I'm not going to lead you into tragic trouble. I'll be straightforward with you. There are fifty pounds in that bag—fifty pounds in gold—and a liner leaves Southampton to-morrow morning for Australia. Take the money, sail to Australia in that boat, and start life afresh."

"Bah, you can't bluff me——"

"Examine the bag!" said Nelson Lee quietly. "I am perfectly sincere."

A minute later Josh Grayson dropped the little leather bag into his pocket, and his eyes shone with a fixed purpose.

"By Jupiter! You're the whitest 'tec I've ever struck!" he exclaimed earnestly. "I will go to Australia! And I'll quit the darned league and all its rotten trickery. I'll make a clean start on the other side of the world!"

He jumped up, crossed over to a cupboard, and produced a little bundle of papers. Realising that Nelson Lee would not—even now—relinquish his vigilance, he opened the bundle before the detective's eyes, and Nelson Lee was soon perfectly satisfied that he was being shown the stolen documents. He thrust them into his pocket; meanwhile keeping Grayson carefully covered with the revolver.

"You see, my friend, I cannot trust you," he explained. "I really believe that you mean what you say. But I am a man who takes no chances."

"I reckon you're a wonder, boss!" said Josh plainly. "I'm dead helpless."

As Nelson Lee buttoned up his coat over the bonds and securities Grayson again went to the cupboard, and this time he placed on the table a curiously-made rubber stamp. It was in one piece, and was, indeed, a wonderful piece of work.

"It gives an exact impression of Greenwood's finger-prints," said Josh. "It was a long time before we got our opportunity to take Greenwood's real impressions, but we got them at last—and then made the rubber-stamp. It's a neat job."

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"My business with you is finished, Mr. Grayson," he exclaimed calmly, placing the finger-print forgery into his pocket. "You have acted in the wisest manner possible; and I hope you will take the good advice I have given you. Have done with the league, and go abroad!"

The gentleman crook nodded grimly.

"It's my only chance!" he exclaimed earnestly. "I'm fed up with the league, in any case. This night's work will change me from to-day! I'll start anew—and do my darndest to make good!"

"Good man!" said Nelson Lee.

In two strides he reached the door, opened it, and passed out into the passage—leaving Josh Grayson staring thoughtfully after him. Nelson Lee closed the door quickly, and then walked briskly along the passage.

"By James! I never anticipated such success!" he murmured jubilantly. "And I really think Grayson is in dead earnest——"

The detective's sentence died on his lips, and a hoarse cry arose from his throat. For a startling thing had happened. It was so unexpected, so entirely unsuspected, that Nelson Lee had no time to move a finger to help himself.

The passage was dark, but the faulight over the front door showed as a dim oblong of subdued light amid the blackness. He was nearing it when his right foot, striding forward, found no flooring!

Since he had entered the house, in fact, a gaping hole had appeared in the passage floor! Nelson Lee flung up his arms in a desperate attempt to save himself, but it was useless. He plunged down, into pitchy blackness—and realised, even as he dropped through space, that he was caught in a deadly trap!

Josh Grayson had beaten him, after all!

CHAPTER VIII.

The Tables Turned—Grayson's Confession—A Surprise.

"**B**Y thunder! So you're Nelson Lee!" exclaimed Josh Grayson fiercely. "Nelson Lee, a prisoner in my house! The league'll reward me liberally for to-night's job!"

The great detective made no reply. His head was throbbing agonisingly, and his thoughts were bitter and angry. He had blundered badly—he knew it. And the knowledge did not tend to make him feel cheerful.

Like an idiot, he had believed that Grayson was sincere, and had never suspected a trap. To do the detective justice, not one man in ten thousand would have suspected danger in that dark, deserted passage.

Plunging down, he had landed in a little cellar, and had come off without doing himself any real injury. His head, however, struck the stone wall, and partially stunned him. This had provided Grayson with his opportunity. The man scrambled down a ladder, against the wall of the cellar, with a candle and a length of stout rope. In less than three minutes Nelson Lee was bound hand and foot, and propped against the wall. He had been too dazed to offer resistance.

Once bound, his scattered wits began to return. And as he fully realised his position he also realised that Grayson had removed the stolen documents and the finger-print stamp from his pockets, and had transferred them to his own.

After that Josh ripped off his victim's disguise, and the flickering candle light revealed the fact that the crook's prisoner was none other than Nelson Lee. Grayson was simply bubbling over with excitement and triumph.

"Nelson Lee, eh?" he repeated, with a cruel chuckle. "You darned fool! You thundering bungler! Did you think you could set yourself against the League of the Green Triangle?"

"I am not dead yet, my gloating friend!" said Nelson Lee calmly.

"You're as near dead as a man is who's walking to the gallows!" replied Josh, with grim conviction. "In less than three hours the league will act—and then Nelson Lee, the famous detective, will be no more!"

He laughed derisively.

"The 'famous' detective!" he jeered. "Why, you haven't got the brains of a rat!"

"Go on, Josh—go on! This sort of talk just suits you," exclaimed Nelson Lee with astonishing composure. "A man of your stamp usually gloats and sneers over a helpless victim. Really, you are quite amusing!"

"By gum, you've got nerve—I will say that!" exclaimed Grayson admiringly. "But it won't help you a mite. I'm off to give the word now—you'll be safe enough down here. The league will present me with a bonus worth accepting for capturing you! Mr. Nelson Lee, I tender you my best thanks—you've done me a really good turn!"

He glanced at his watch, and was surprised to find the time half-past ten. Without further words, he tightened his prisoner's bonds, and then gagged him. And the ropes and the gag were so tight that Nelson Lee knew that escape was impossible.

"I'll see you later, boss!" said Josh jeeringly.

He took the candle, and mounted the ladder, chuckling evilly to himself. But when he reached the top—when he stepped into the passage—he received the biggest surprise of his life.

A short, slim form confronted him!

"Your hands—up with 'em!" rapped out a sharp, grim voice.

Grayson's eyes goggled from his head, and a gasp left his lips. The slim lad revealed by the candle light, was pointing a revolver at Josh's chest.

"What the—— By Jupiter! I—I——"

"Up with your flippers!" roared the lad.

Josh grated out a curse, and hesitated. The revolver was suddenly thrust forward, and it gleamed wickedly in the candle-light. In sudden alarm, Grayson stepped back, so flustered that he forgot that he was on the very edge of the gaping trap-door. His left foot tripped on the edge, and a wild yell escaped his lips.

Too late, he endeavoured to recover his balance!

The mischief was done, and he fell back, the candle flying to the ceiling and extinguishing itself. Next moment a dull thud sounded, and then an

agonised groan. But the scoundrel was knocked out—he remained still, groaning faintly.

"Serve you jolly well right!" growled Nipper. "Hold tight, guv'nor—I'll have you free in two jiffs!"

Nelson Lee smiled in the darkness.

As a matter of fact, he had been expecting something of this sort—although he had not hoped for such a complete victory. His young assistant had acquitted himself well.

Nipper's appearance on the scene was not so startling as it first seemed. Nelson Lee had anticipated trouble when he set out on this project, and had instructed Nipper to follow him to Gallon Mews, and then continue the shadowing until his master had run Josh Grayson to earth.

Nipper had obeyed his instructions to the letter, and had seen Nelson Lee enter the house he was now in. After waiting anxiously for a considerable time—so it appeared to the worried Nipper—he had faintly heard his master's hoarse cry as he plunged into the cellar.

That had been enough for the lad.

Brisk action instantly followed, and he very soon succeeded in opening the front door. Creeping forward, he had gazed down upon Nelson Lee and Grayson, and had been fully prepared for the scoundrel when he ascended the ladder. What happened immediately afterwards was rather startling. Nipper had certainly not expected Josh to emulate his victim's example.

In less than two minutes Nipper was in the cellar, and had cut Nelson Lee's bonds. The light from an electric torch now illuminated the scene. The detective tore the gag from his mouth, and breathed a little heavily.

"Good lad, Nipper!" he said fervently. "You've done wonders."

"Oh, rot, sir! I only nipped in when I heard your sweet yell——"

"Never mind my yells, sweet or otherwise—you have turned the tables, young 'un," exclaimed Nelson Lee crisply. "And I am afraid Mr. Grayson has seriously injured himself. Hold the light, Nipper. We'll examine the rogue."

Grayson was just conscious, and his face was pale and drawn. He had fallen backwards, and thus received the full dire benefit of the cruel bricks. Blood was streaming from his head at the back, and his mouth was curiously twisted.

Nelson Lee's examination was short, but when he looked up at Nipper the detective's face was grave.

"Well, guv'nor?"

"I am afraid it is far from well, my lad," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Grayson is booked for the last journey this time. He is dying rapidly. Indeed, I doubt if he will ever fully recover consciousness again. He may last another half-hour."

Grayson uttered a croak.

"Dying, am I?" he muttered thickly. "I heard you, Lee. I'm not unconscious yet. By thunder, I thought I was finished this trip. Oh, well, you've beaten me, you hounds. I didn't reckon on the kid stepping into the game."

"Better not speak," said Nelson Lee gently. "You will only hasten the end——"

Grayson growled.

"Bah, what does that matter now?" he exclaimed. "A minute or two is of no matter. See here, I'm a darned bad lot, and now that I'm on the last lap, I can realise that Greenwood's been put into a rotten position."

"Ah! You wish to confess?"

"That's the size of it," breathed Josh faintly. "But I'm not going to confess a thing except this Greenwood affair; except, perhaps— You're ready, eh? Write away, then. I, Joshua Grayson, burgled the London and Home Counties Bank, and forged the finger-prints of Mr. Vernon Greenwood, for the purpose of having him arrested for my crime. I afterwards placed an oxy-acetylene apparatus in Mr. Greenwood's house at Putney, in order to make the evidence conclusive. Got that?"

"Yes," replied Nelson Lee, who was busily taking down the words in his notebook.

"I reckon I've got enough strength to sign the blamed thing!" muttered Josh. "Prop me up."

But while they were doing so Grayson was suddenly seized with an attack of faintness. A curious gurgle sounded in his throat, and his eyes gleamed almost with fright.

"He's going, sir!" whispered Nipper, awed.

"Not he, young 'un!" said the detective sharply. "Come, Grayson, pull yourself together, and sign this confession."

"Guess—I—will!" gasped Josh. "And there's something—else. Write this down: I also killed William Garratt in a telephone-box at Charing Cross Station, by—shooting him—with an air—pistol."

"Oh, so you were that poor fellow's murderer!" said Nelson Lee grimly.

"The skunk—the traitor!" grated Grayson. "He deserved death. I don't like to go, though, without getting it—off my mind. Give me the pen, hang you!"

Propped up by Nipper, the self-confessed murderer took the fountain-pen and signed his name at the foot of the confession in a firm, steady hand. Then, as Nelson Lee put the pen away, and closed his pocket-book, Grayson sank back with a gasp.

"Didn't like doing that job!" he muttered. "It was pretty horrible. I've dreamed about it since— Glad I've got it off my chest. It'll do me no harm now—I'm going fast, anyhow!"

Nelson Lee uttered a laugh of triumph.

"By James! That was neat, Nipper!" he said exultantly. "Our murderous friend has cleared the way for me splendidly!"

"Rather, sir. But——"

"No time to talk, my boy. Bind a handkerchief round his head, and then secure his feet and hands with his own rope!" said Nelson Lee crisply. "He's rather helpless, as it is, and——"

"But he's dying, sir!" gasped Nipper. "He's at his last breath!"

"Nonsense!" laughed the detective. "Mr. Grayson is no more dying than I am! He has received a nasty crack on the head, and I expect he's feeling infernally faint. But he'll be well again inside a week!"

"Oh, my goodness!" panted Nipper. "Then—then it was a ruse, guv'nor?"

"Precisely! A ruse to extract this confession!"

Grayson sat up, furious and frightened.

"You hound!" he snarled. "I am dying! I can feel it—I know I'm dying!"

"Imagination, my dear fellow!" Nelson Lee assured him coolly. "I told you that you were dying, and your groggy condition lent colour to the little fiction. I was rather doubtful about the trick at first, but it has succeeded splendidly."

"By—by——"

"You can swear as heartily as you please after we have left!" interjected the detective sternly. "You're badly hurt, Grayson, but not seriously. And I have not the slightest compunction in leaving you in

this cellar until the police come to fetch you away! I think you are one of the blackest-hearted scoundrels I've ever had the misfortune to come in contact with!"

Five minutes later Nelson Lee and Nipper were in the street, striding quickly away. Grayson was bound securely, and there was no fear of his escaping; and his confession, and the finger-print stamp, and the stolen documents, were in the detective's pockets.

"What's the programme now, sir?" asked Nipper excitedly.

"We're going straight to St. John's Wood, young 'un," replied Nelson Lee briskly. "I wish to interview the chief commissioner of Scotland Yard at once, and at this time of night he will be at his private house. I have an inkling that much will happen between now and daylight."

CHAPTER IX.

A Game of Bluff—Valling Chooses—Conclusion.

GREENWOOD will be released at once, then?"

"To-night, Mr. Lee—before another hour has passed!" replied the chief commissioner of Scotland Yard. "The evidence you have placed before me is absolutely conclusive. The finger-print forgery apparatus and the missing bonds would have been quite sufficient in themselves. But Grayson's confession makes further doubt out of the question. Mr. Greenwood will be a free man before midnight."

Nelson Lee smiled.

He had kept his word to Greenwood sooner than he had anticipated; but, at the same time, the detective was not satisfied. His real object was to bring about the downfall of Superintendent Valling, and now, foremost in his mind, Nelson Lee had a plan which would probably bring about the desired end in one "fell swoop."

The case of William Garratt and Mr. Greenwood was at an end. Yet the scoundrel who had brought about the whole plot against the bank cashier was still free and unsuspected, and, what was more, there was not the slightest shred of proof against Valling. He had taken good care to safeguard himself.

There was only one way with which to bring about his downfall. That was by adopting a big game of bluff. Nelson Lee already had his plans hot in his brain, and he talked quietly to Nipper while the chief commissioner was busy at the telephone. The pair had arrived only ten minutes before, and already Greenwood's release was being effected.

"Well, that's settled, Mr. Lee," exclaimed Scotland Yard's chief, turning away from the telephone. "I don't know how you managed to discover all these things, but I really must congratulate you. Freely I admit that the C.I.D. were hopelessly wrong in this affair; they were positive that Greenwood was the culprit. That mysterious murder at Charing Cross is now cleared up, too—although there is still an absence of motive. Even Superintendent Valling, one of my best men, was dead sure that Greenwood was the man who burgled the bank."

"Valling had very good reason to be sure of Greenwood's guilt."

"I do not quite comprehend," said the commissioner.

"I will be perfectly plain," replied Nelson Lee grimly. "I am afraid I shall give you a shock—but plain speaking is always best. Superintendent Valling is a black scoundrel. It was he who engineered the plot against Mr. Greenwood."

The chief started, and then laughed sharply.

"That is absurd, Mr. Lee!" he said. "Valling is——"

"I repeat, Valling is a man who is a constant danger to honest men, and a foe of justice," continued Nelson Lee firmly. "You know me to be a straightforward man. I never make statements unless I am absolutely positive of my facts. On this occasion I reiterate emphatically that Valling is a deadly scoundrel!"

The chief of Scotland Yard breathed hard.

"I certainly know you to be a man who always thinks deeply before you make a serious statement," he said slowly; "but really, Mr. Lee, this is astounding. Knowing you as I do, I should be foolish to disregard your warning, much as I feel inclined to; but, since you accuse Valling of being a traitor to his trusted position, you surely can produce proofs to substantiate your accusation?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"That is the unfortunate part of the business," he replied. "I know Valling to be a villain—absolutely know it—and yet I cannot prove a single misdeed against him. He is a very clever man."

The commissioner tossed his cigar-end into the fire.

"Then we may as well dismiss the subject," he said curtly. "I thank you for your assistance, Mr. Lee, but I certainly do not hold with this attitude of yours. It is utterly unlike you. Unless you can produce positive proof——"

Nelson Lee bent forward.

"As I have said, I have no proof at present," he interrupted. "But there is a distinct possibility that the necessary proof will be forthcoming very shortly. I want you to assist me by doing one little thing."

"H'm! Well, Mr. Lee?"

"Valling is on duty to-night, I believe?"

"He is at the Yard, certainly," replied the chief, who obviously did not like this business at all. "He will be there until one o'clock, or a little later. What do you want me to do?"

"Merely this. At twelve-thirty you are to walk into Valling's office without any preliminary knock and confront him," replied Nelson Lee calmly. "If Valling is calm and cool, then you will make some little excuse and depart. But I am quite sure that Valling will be the opposite to calm. He will show distinct signs of guilt, and you will then declare that he is to be placed under arrest."

"Oh, but this is an outrageous suggestion!" protested the commissioner.

"I am a man who works for the good of my fellow-men," said Nelson Lee quietly. "I merely wish to see justice done. Valling is a serpent in our midst, and it is my desire to see him crushed. Please think carefully before you state your decision."

The chief was silent for a moment, chewing a new cigar thoughtfully, and frowning deeply. When he looked up an expression of determination was in his eyes.

"I believe you are acting as you think right, Mr. Lee," he said. "I have never known you to make wild accusations, and so I will do as you require, amazing as your requirements are."

"You will not regret taking this action?"

"No harm will come, anyhow, if Valling is an innocent man," replied the other. "I am to walk into his office at twelve-thirty, and confront him? What will he do—provided that he displays the signs of guilt you say he will—when I declare that he is to be arrested?"

"He will probably make a dash for freedom; he will, at least, make it plain to you that he is unfit to remain in a position of trust at the Yard!"

"Upon my soul, this is a most astounding business!" said the commissioner. "Very well, Mr. Lee. We will see what comes of it all."

Nelson Lee and Nipper rose to their feet, and the former's eyes were gleaming.

"We shall meet later," he said quietly—"at Scotland Yard!"

When the pair were out in the street the detective clapped Nipper upon the back.

"I think my plan will be successful, young 'un," he said briskly. "My object is to bluff Valling into admitting something of a damning nature. We have already played one game of bluff successfully to-night; let's see if we cannot bring off another, and a more worthy, coup. You know what you have to do?"

"Rather, sir," replied Nipper. "And I think Valling will do himself in. He'll give the game away as sure as the league's being steadily wrecked!"

"Oh, so it was imperative that you should see me personally?" said Superintendent Valling amusedly, turning in his chair and regarding the ragged street urchin who had just been shown into his office.

"Yus, sir!" said the boy bluntly. "This 'ere's for you?"

He handed over a sealed note, and Valling took it curiously.

"Where did you get this?" he inquired.

"A gent give it to me in the street five minutes ago," said the urchin. "Told me to bring it straight to you, and deliver the bloomin' thing into your own 'ands. He said as 'ow you'd give me a tanner!"

"Well, he said wrong!" rapped out Valling curtly. "Take the boy out, sergeant!"

And Nipper—for the urchin was Nelson Lee's shrewd assistant—left Valling's office, and hurried away from the vicinity of Scotland Yard.

The superintendent tore open the note carelessly, wondering who it could come from. As he commenced reading it, however, his face paled, and his hands shook as though with ague. In an instant he seemed to have aged ten years.

"Good heavens!" he gasped chokingly.

For the contents of that note were well calculated to give him a terrible shock. The note was written in the secret code of the League of the Green Triangle—and that fact alone convinced Valling that the thing was no fake. Indeed, he took the fact for granted, without thought, that the message was from the league. Why should he suspect anything else?

"Leave at once!" the message ran, with urgent abruptness. "Foxcroft has turned traitor, and the whole great game is up. The Orpheum Club has been raided, and the Governing Chamber is in the hands of the police. Zingrave has been arrested, also Hogarth, Gresswell, Yoni-Saka, and others. Don't delay a second—flee!"

No wonder Valling turned deathly white!

On the face of it, the note must have come from a Governing Member of the league. The very inner secrets of the organisation were mentioned, proving beyond doubt that the message was genuine. But what did it mean? How was it that he, at the very Yard itself, had heard nothing of the raiding of the Orpheum Club?

"Oh, it's clear enough," he thought rapidly. "The raid was undertaken by the West End police. Vine Street did the job, of course. By Heaven, I must leave at once, or I shall find myself trapped with a vengeance!"

His whole brain was throbbing with alarm and fear. Like a thunder-clap the end had come at last. The blow which every Governing Member had thought absolutely impossible had fallen. The game was up.

A member of the Governing Circle had sent the note in the faint hope that it would be of service. Well, there might still be just a chance of his getting clear of the Yard before the news of his guilt got through. Or

perhaps—and the thought sent a cold shudder down Valling's back—perhaps his own colleagues at the Yard were even now waiting for him to show himself—waiting for him to leave his office, and to——

Without any preliminary warning the door opened noisily.

Superintendent Valling thrust the note mechanically into his pocket, and twisted round in his chair. His face was like chalk, his eyes starting from his head. The new-comer was the chief commissioner himself!

Then, if not before, Valling knew that the game was up!

Superintendent Valling leapt from his chair with a snarl. His eyes were glittering, and his blood was boiling with rage and wild alarm. Never would he allow himself to be taken!

The commissioner started back aghast. Nelson Lee's statement was proving to be well founded, with a vengeance! Valling's appearance was the very embodiment of wild, frightened guilt. In a moment the commissioner knew that Valling was the scoundrel Nelson Lee had declared him to be. Usually suave and gentlemanly, he now had the appearance of a wild beast.

"Superintendent Valling, you are under arrest——"

"Arrest!" snarled Valling hoarsely. "Never! The game's up, I know, but I'll have a run for my money, hang you!"

He dashed forward, thrust the commissioner aside with brutal roughness, and hurled himself into the corridor. The commissioner picked himself up off the floor—for he had been knocked over—and hurried out. He was just in time to witness a dramatic scene.

Valling had hoped, in a dazed fashion, to rush away from Scotland Yard and seek sanctuary in one of the league's secret retreats—prepared in readiness for a time such as this; but as soon as he got into the corridor he halted, snarling like an animal at bay. For Nelson Lee and Detective-inspector Lennard were confronting him.

Valling acted promptly. Escape was impossible now; he knew that.

"You think you'll take me?" he snarled huskily. "You think I will submit to a trial and imprisonment? Never will I live to suffer shame and disgrace!"

He had taken something from his waistcoat-pocket, and, before he could be stopped, he pressed a tiny needle—which was enclosed in a spring case—into his wrist. The needle-point was coated with a deadly poison, and he sank to the floor without a sound, and without a shudder.

"Good heavens! He's dead!" exclaimed Nelson Lee, kneeling down and examining the fallen man. "I think you will admit," he added to the commissioner, "that Valling has now proved that he was unworthy of a position of trust in this establishment."

"I am amazed, Mr. Lee!" gasped the chief. "This—this is terrible!"

As the detective rose, he cleverly took the note from Valling's pocket, unobserved by the others. He had written that epistle himself, and it had served its purpose well—too well, in fact, for Nelson Lee had not suspected that Valling would take his own life.

And he did not want the Scotland Yard officials to get hold of it. They would not be able to read the code, of course, but it was better for Valling's death to remain an unsolvable mystery. Slowly, but surely, Nelson Lee and Douglas Clifford were proving themselves too good for the League of the Green Triangle.

THE END.

NOTICE TO READERS.

Owing to the illness of the author of the **Black Wolf Series**, the story promised for next week will unfortunately have to be held over till the week following —**EDITOR.**

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.

Hugh, however, is quite right, and after travelling many weary miles the travellers enter the "Green Land."

The party meet some fierce animals, and, after beating them off, prepare to make their camp, when they see some strange footprints. (Now read on.)

Defending the Cave.

"THEY are the footprints of those brutes!" exclaimed Hugh, staring in dismay at his friend. "This is their ford by which they go to and fro across the river. But what a lot of the fiends there must be!"

Ruxton nodded and looked very grave as he gazed at the marks. Even allowing for their having passed backward and forward more than once, there were evidently a great many more of them than was pleasant to think of.

"Gadzooks! If we're likely to have such a swarm of the beggars about our ears as there must have been here, it will take us all our time to beat 'em off without firearms," he muttered.

"And to think my spare rifles, and all my stock of ammunition, have been carried off by that thief, Grimstock," said Hugh, between his teeth, as the two walked away together.

The mention of Grimstock brought to their minds the question, what had become of him?

"Do you think it possible that he made for this place?" Val asked.

"I am sure he did. I have my own reasons for believing it, and I know they are good ones."

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Nelson Lee Library, 18/12/15.

"If so, I reckon he must have arrived before us—that means, that he must be somewhere in the country now?"

"Yes, very likely he got here by some other route, though, of course, the falls of snow we have had would account for our not seeing his tracks even if we had followed the same route."

"Then," said Val, "we shall have him and his gang to contend with by-and-by—we are pretty sure to happen on them somewhere. In our defenceless state that will be awkward."

"Yes; we must c'en tread warily, and keep a sharp look-out. If we do come across them we'll have to trust to our wits. Forewarned, however, is forearmed! This time we'll meet cunning with cunning, and try what strategy can do."

"I confess I don't quite follow your idea," Ruxton returned gloomily. "But I'm with you, heart and soul, in any plan that can be schemed out to defeat that arch-villain!"

Then, for the time being, they dismissed the subject from their thoughts and turned to the food question once more. The rest of the day was devoted to foraging for supplies and storing all they could get together, with their belongings, in the cavern they had selected.

A further examination of the place showed that there was a stream of water running through one of the inside chambers. There were also some big boulders which might be used for blocking up the entrance. Finally, they gathered as much wood as time allowed, and stored it within, and as night came on, they built and lighted fires both inside and out.

Bob Cable took first watch, and the others, thoroughly tired out, lay down on the rocky floor and were speedily asleep.

But their slumbers did not last very long. In less than a couple of hours, Hugh was awake by the sailor, who whispered to him to come and look out.

They had blocked up the entrance as well as they could with a heavy mass of rock, but there were crevices through which a limited view of the valley outside could be obtained.

Peering through one of these spaces, Hugh saw a sight which almost made him jump. There, by the same unearthly kind of twilight of which he had had experience the previous night, he could see that the space immediately in front of the entrance was crowded with a whole troop of the grisly-looking, yellow-haired horrors!

"Snakes, alive!" he muttered. "This means an attack in force! Bob, rouse up Mr. Ruxton and the others! Wake 'em quietly, but be quick about it, all the same. There is no time to lose!"

Beseiged by the Yellow-Haired Monsters—A Tough Struggle—Hugh Loses His Temper.

AS Cable went off to obey orders, Ruxton, who had already woke up, crept to his chum's side.

"Holy Moses! What a lot of grisly nightmares!" he muttered as he peeped out. "Surely we've found the long-sought missing-link at last."

"Looks like it, but I wonder what they're going to do?" Hugh queried, speaking in low, cautious tones. "They're precious quiet."

"They don't like the fire, I reckon. I thought they wouldn't. But it's burning low. Why's that? Wood damp, I wonder? It ought to have lasted through the night."

"Think they're waiting for it to go out?"

"I reckon that's their idea. Seems as if our first line of defence will shortly fail us. More reason to look after our second. I'll go and see how it's getting on."

Cable had by this time returned with Mike and one of their native followers. Ruxton beckoned to him, and they went away together.

The "second line of defence" meant some fires they had made in the inner caverns. They had found that while the first cave had a rather low roof, those next to it had very high ones—so high that the smoke went right up and gave no trouble. Possibly it found an outlet for itself through some crevice in the mountain above.

So, having got together an ample supply of wood, they had lighted several fires, and Cable had kept them going. They had also cut a number of long poles, which were stacked in a corner.

Amaki and his people had occupied one of these inner chambers, while the two leaders had remained in the outer one. Clad as they still were in their skin dresses, they had found themselves quite warm enough without either fires or sleeping-bags—the first time that such a thing had happened since their landing on the Arctic shore.

Ruxton glanced round and nodded approvingly as he noted that all the fires were burning merrily.

"Pop 'em in, sharp," he ordered, referring to the poles; and some of them were pushed end first into the fires, and left there.

"Now take Amaki out of it, and all you others come with me."

Amaki thereupon hobbled off into another cavern out of sight; and the rest went back to the entrance.

There were low guttural mutterings, growls, and other signs of restlessness going on outside.

"I don't think it will be long now before they make a move," Val whispered to his chum.

They all stood in silence awaiting developments, while the confused sounds grew louder and more threatening.

Each man was armed with a pole of extra size and weight, with the heavy ends cut into flat points in such a manner as to act as wedges when thrust under the great boulder which blocked the entrance.

They had not much longer to wait. Evidently their foes were afraid of fire, for they had made no move so long as the one outside retained a flicker of flame. Soon it subsided into a smoking boulder, and then, as Cable put it, the circus began.

The first signs of coming action took the form of an outbreak of growls and grunts, which gradually grew louder and louder as though—as Hugh said—the creatures were working themselves up into a suitable stage of rage and fury.

(To be continued.)

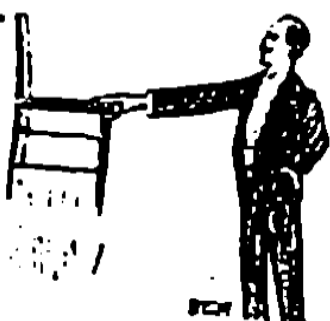
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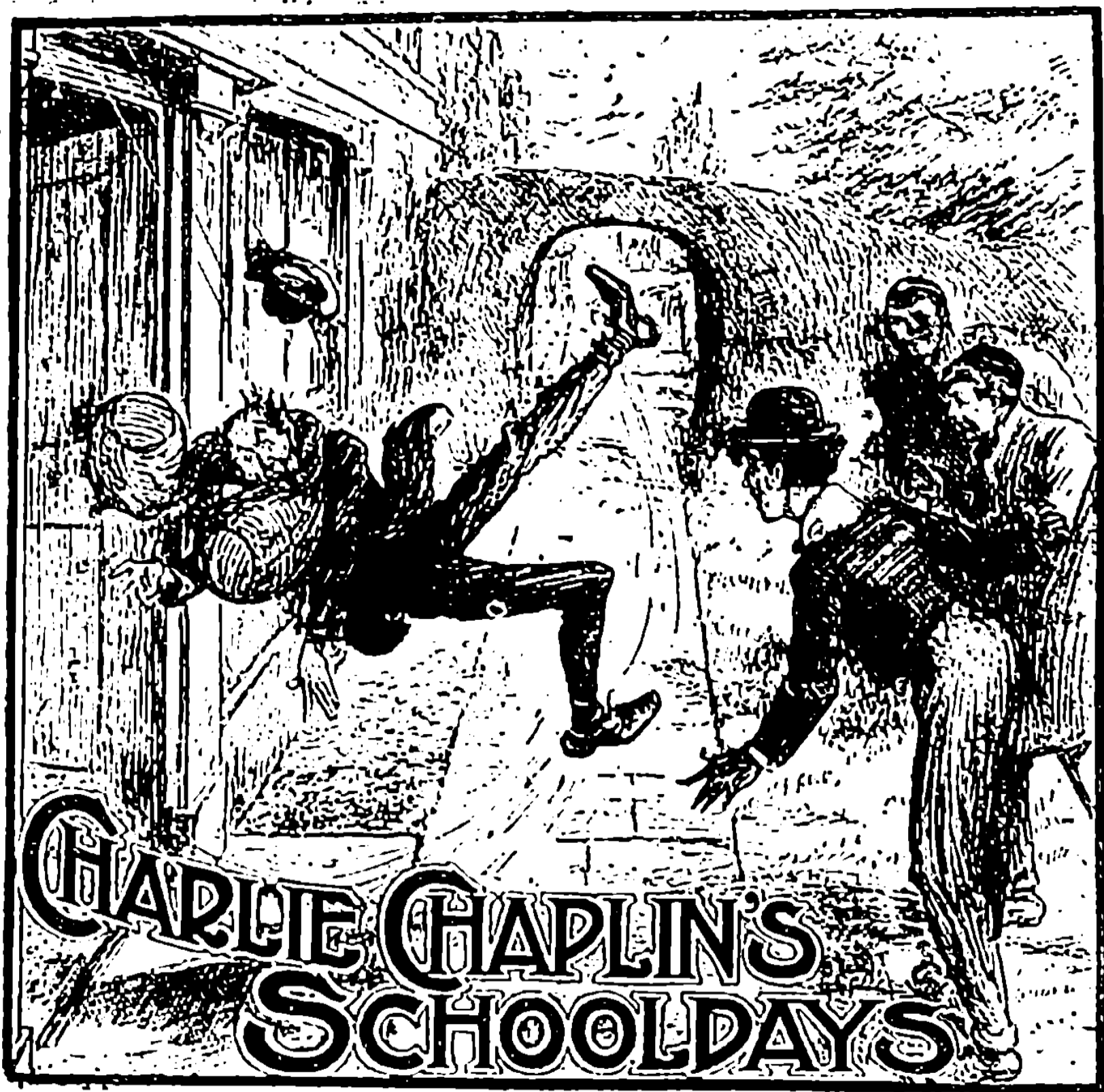
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