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THE THREE MILLIONAIRES.

OR, A LOTTERY IN LIVES.

A TALE OF NELSON LEE V. THE GREEN TRIANGLE.

*By the Author of "Twenty Fathoms Deep,"
"The Terror of Troone Towers," "The
Specialist's Last Case," "The Gold Cavern,"
"The Forged Finger-Prints," etc., etc*

(Illustrated by Arthur Jones.)

CHAPTER I.

The Indiscretion of Lord Sylvester.

THE gathering was really a most distinguished one. To begin with, the host was Mr. Duncan Slone, one of the richest men in London. He was, in fact, a millionaire several times over, and was most lavish in the display of his wealth. His house in Park Lane—where the present gathering was held—was furnished in a most magnificent manner, and his art collection was one of the finest in the kingdom.

Duncan Slone was a tallish man, and in ordinary clothes looked rather insignificant. But in evening-dress, as at present, he had almost a distinguished appearance. He stood upon the costly skin rug in front of the fireplace in his smoking-room, and lazily regarded his four companions as they laughed and joked over their friendly little gamble at solo-whist. Slone himself had been playing for a while, but he was now standing out in favour of the Earl of Mexthorpe, who had just arrived.

The earl was a bluff, hearty man, and, like Lord Sylvester, who was sitting opposite to him, was much interested in horse-racing. The other two men were Sir Gordon Hyde, the famous amateur astronomer, and Major-general Burns, a retired Army officer of immense wealth, who had been prominent in many a grim battle in far-off lands.

The wealth of the whole gathering, in fact, would have amounted to a staggering sum could it have been aggregated. For each and all were extremely rich. Slone, Mexthorpe, and Burns were millionaires, and the other two, although they never boasted of millions, always gave ample evidence of an unlimited supply of money.

Sir Gordon Hyde and Lord Sylvester were even more famous than their companions in many ways. Nobody had ever really troubled to ponder over their source of income. They were rich, and that was all that mattered.

Yet these two were far from being the honourable gentlemen they appeared to be. They were, in actual reality, both prominent members of the Governing Circle of the League of the Green Triangle!

Could that fact have been general knowledge, their great wealth would not have caused the slightest surprise. For the League of the Green Triangle was the most powerful, the most terrible, organisation of its kind in the world.

They were present at Duncan Slone's house to-night merely for their own pleasure. They had no "business" object in being there. Both of them were well known throughout society, and they had free entry into count-

less famous houses. Scotland Yard itself would have laughed at the man who vouchsafed the information that they were members of the criminal league which was a puzzle to the police of the whole United Kingdom.

But although these two were infamous in addition to being famous, the other three were all true gentlemen. Not a soul in the world could say a word against them.

Duncan Slone lighted a cigar and watched the play interestedly.

"You made a little mistake there, Sylvester," he laughed, as Mexthorpe reshuffled the cards. "If you had led diamonds instead of clubs you'd have won that solo without the least difficulty."

Lord Sylvester chuckled a little thickly.

"Off colour to-night!" he exclaimed, sipping at the whisky-and-soda which stood by his side. "I'm hanged if I can get any luck at all. But I've got another fifty pounds in cash, and as long as that lasts I'll stick it."

"If you're bent on playing to lose you'd better not prop to me!" said Mexthorpe genially, as he dealt the cards. "I don't feel inclined to have a partner who's ready to throw his money about just for the fun of it!"

The earl looked up at his host as he spoke, and Slone observed a slight wink. He nodded and smiled, knowing instantly the reason for that momentary lowering of an eyelid.

For Lord Sylvester was, strictly speaking, hardly in a fit state to play a decent game. During the last hour he had paid many visits to the whisky decanter, now and again partaking of a little old port by way of variety. The mixture was not calculated to keep his head exactly clear. Duncan Slone's cellar was an excellent one, and his vintages were of the finest quality and age.

It was not usual for Lord Sylvester to become intoxicated, even in a slight degree. He was fond of his spirits and his wine, but it was only on rare occasions that he allowed himself to overstep the mark.

To-day the league had completed one of its biggest swindling transactions, however, and Sylvester had played an active part in the affair. In consequence, his banking account was considerably swelled.

Presently, after the end of another game, he rose rather unsteadily to his feet and again visited the magnificent sideboard.

"Gad! This whisky of yours is like liqueur, Slone!" he exclaimed approvingly.

And, to show his appreciation of the excellent spirit, he refilled his glass almost to the brim, adding a little soda just for the sake of appearances. Then he carried his glass over to the fireplace and set it on the mantelpiece.

"Hurry up, Sylvester," said Sir Gordon Hyde. "We're waiting for you."

"I'm fed up with solo," replied Sylvester thickly. "Let's have something better—something that's a real gamble. Solo's too slow."

Mexthorpe laughed a big, hearty laugh.

"You've lost a fairish amount, anyhow—even since I've been here!" he exclaimed with a chuckle. "If we start playing for higher stakes you'll lose that fifty pounds of yours in no time!"

Sylvester took a big gulp of whisky.

"Plenty more money!" he mumbled. "I've got my cheque-book on me, old boy. And if I run dry altogether I can soon get plenty more!"

"That's fortunate for you," remarked Slone, with a smile. "Do you happen to possess a constantly flowing fount of plenty?"

"By gad, that's a pretty neat description," said Sylvester. "The league is certainly a fine concern to belong to."

Sir Gordon Hyde looked up sharply, inwardly startled.

"You'd better have a nap, Sylvester," he said, with a forced smile. "I'm afraid that whisky's got into your head!"

"Rot, my dear fellow!"

"What's that you were saying about a league?" asked Slone curiously.

Sylvester raised his eyes heavily. He was, in fact, fairly intoxicated, and he was utterly careless in his words. Indeed, he hardly knew what he actually was saying. Like all men who become the worse for spirits, he was quite ready to babble out the very inmost secrets of his soul.

"The league?" he repeated, looking up at Slone with watery eyes. "Oh, I belong to that organisation; Hyde does, too. Wonder you don't all become members, dear old boys! Double your fortunes in no time!"

Sir Gordon jumped to his feet.

"It's about time you went, Sylvester!" he said sharply. "You're getting a bit wild in your talk——"

"Never you mind me," interjected Sylvester with a chuckle. "I'm only telling these fellows that they'd be doing themselves a good turn if they joined the league."

Sir Gordon forced out a laugh. He knew perfectly well that it would be fatal to appear outwardly startled. If he adopted such a course it would be practically admitting to his companions that he was actually a member of the league Sylvester was referring to. The only thing to do would be to silence the intoxicated peer's tongue before it ran too far away with him. But, at the same time, Sir Gordon realised that it would be a difficult task. His fellow Governing Member was decidedly drunk.

"The league!" repeated Sir Gordon lightly, crossing over to Sylvester's side, and tapping his lordship on the shoulder. "You're imagining things——"

"Let him run on, Hyde," chuckled Mexthorpe, with a grin. "He's getting quite amusing. What's this league you keep referring to, Sylvester?"

Sylvester waved his hand jerkily.

"Only one league," he murmured. "Green Triangle, of course!"

"The Green Triangle!" repeated Mexthorpe.

"What on earth's that?" Major-general Burns roared.

"Oh, he's very far gone!" he chuckled. "The League of the Green Triangle is a villainous criminal society—a concern which Scotland Yard has been tearing its hair over for years past. So Sylvester imagines he's a deadly criminal, does he? By George, this is better than the latest revue!"

The others laughed heartily—Sir George Hyde with the rest. He dare not, indeed, give any display of the great alarm which was surging through his brain.

Sylvester looked annoyed.

"Don't believe it—eh?" he exclaimed, rising rather unsteadily to his feet.

"Ask Hyde here—he's a member, too. We're both members!"

Duncan Slone laughed.

"Keep it up, old man!" he murmured to Sir Gordon. "Let's humour him!"

"Nonsense!" replied Hyde bluntly. "I don't care for my name being coupled with a criminal society. It's high time Sylvester went home to bed!"

Lord Sylvester looked at Hyde with comic gravity.

"Dooce of a queer thing!" he said, his words almost running into one another. "Wha's the idea, S'Gordon? You belong to the Green Triangle, don't yer?"

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Sir Gordon.

"Don't get wild, man!" laughed Mexthorpe. "Sylvester's quite humorous to-night."

"A bit too humorous, I think," replied Sir Gordon sharply. "Come, Sylvester, I'll take you home if you like——"

"Nothing of th' sort," interjected the sporting peer. "I'm not goin' home yet. Goin' to have s'more of Slone's top-hole whisky. Goin' to tell all of you about the league. Splendid opportunities if you become members of the league, my boys! Shove your coats on, an' I'll trot you roun' to the Orpheum!"

"The Orpheum Club?" asked Duncan Slone.

"That's the place—league's headquarters, ole man!"

The four men roared with laughter.

"'Pon my soul, I didn't know you could be so comic, Sylvester!" gasped the Earl of Mexthorpe, mopping his eyes. "The Orpheum Club the headquarters of the notorious Green Triangle! That's about the richest thing I've ever heard!"

"Too funny for words!" chuckled Sir Gordon Hyde.

"S'fact, anyhow," went on Sylvester, with an inane leer. "Can't make you out, Hyde; anybody might think you weren't a Governing Member of the league by the way you're actin'! Don't take any notice of him, you fellers. He's one of Zingrave's most important helpers!"

Duncan Slone raised his eyebrows.

"Hallo, you're bringing Zingrave into the argument now," he chuckled. "I suppose you mean Professor Zingrave, the scientist? Well, what position does Zingrave hold in the league?" he added, with twinkling eyes.

Lord Sylvester reached for his whisky glass, but Hyde had removed it out of his reach.

"Lamentable lack of knowledge in this house," mumbled the intoxicated man. "Zingrave's the Chief of the League. Wonderful brain he's got, too! If you'll come round with me to the Orpheum I'll have you all elected members before the night's out!"

To hear that the famous Professor Zingrave was the Chief of the League of the Green Triangle, was just a little too much for Sylvester's listeners. They shouted with laughter at the very thought of such a preposterous notion.

Sylvester was really quite entertaining.

Not for one moment—not for a fleeting second—did Slone, Mexthorpe, or Burns have the remotest suspicion that their intoxicated companion had been speaking the actual, literal truth!

Yet it was the truth, every word of it!

And Sir Gordon Hyde was filled with a wild, almost insane alarm. The most cherished secrets of the league were now known to three absolute strangers—strangers, that is, so far as the league itself was concerned. And there was no telling when Sylvester's riotous tongue would check its headlong chattering.

Already, indeed, terrible harm had been done.

"The fool—the drunken, maniacal fool!" muttered Sir Gordon to himself—although he was outwardly laughing in company with the others. "Already his tongue has done immeasurable harm; and he will be the first to realise it when he becomes sober. What the end of this business will be I hardly dare imagine."

One fact alone was a great comfort to Sir Gordon Hyde. His three companions treated the whole thing as a huge joke. They merely thought that Sylvester was in such a jovial mood that he was talking absolute nonsense. They did not suspect that it was grim truth.

Sylvester must be taken away at once.

"I must be going," exclaimed Sir Gordon, glancing at his watch. "What do you say to an hour at the Empire, Sylvester?"

"Any ole thing you like!" replied his lordship dully. "Only don't try to stuff these good chaps with the rot that you're not a member of the Green——"

Sir Gordon laughed genially.

"Oh, we know all about that!" he smiled. "Up you get out of that chair! Your coat and hat are in the hall!"

Sylvester readily lurched to his feet, and staggered out of the room, followed by the smiles of his companions. Sir Gordon turned to the others.

"He's far gone," he laughed. "I say, you won't talk about this?"

"Talk about what?" asked Major-general Burns.

"Why, the rubbish Sylvester has been gabbling," said Hyde. "When he becomes sober, he'll feel several kinds of a fool if he knows that he's accused himself and I of being members of a murderous criminal society."

Duncan Slone chuckled.

"It would be pretty uncomfortable for you, wouldn't it?" he laughed. "All right, Hyde; we'll keep the thing to ourselves. There's no necessity for Sylvester to ever know what he has been saying."

"We'll keep it a deadly secret," said Mexthorpe solemnly.

And the others laughed afresh.

"My dear man, it's nothing to worry about, whatever," smiled Burns. "Nobody but we four heard what Sylvester said. And, in any case, it was so utterly preposterous, that there'd be no harm in spreading it broadcast. That, however, would make both you and Sylvester look decidedly ridiculous."

"I'm not usually sensitive," admitted Sir Gordon, "but when I'm publicly declared to be a member of the League of the Green Triangle—well, a thing of that sort is best kept private."

"Of course—of course," agreed Slone. "We promise to say nothing whatever."

And the other two gave Sir Gordon their assurances also. Hyde was considerably relieved. The mischief, at least, would spread no further—it was confined to these three men. The dangerous talk would not spread.

"Wha's matter, Hyde?" exclaimed Lord Sylvester, walking unsteadily into the room with his coat and hat on. "Thought you were goin' to take me to the Empire? Pity to leave, too. That whisky——"

"Oh, you've had enough whisky for to-night!" laughed Sir Gordon.

The next two minutes were occupied in a small variety of ways—hand-shaking, humorous remarks, and much laughter. Then the front door of Duncan Slone's house closed, and Sir Gordon Hyde lead his intoxicated companion away.

CHAPTER II.

Zingrave's Fury—Rogues in Council—A Plan of Action.

THE Orpheum Club was a mass of brilliant light, as usual. Being one of the most select clubs in the West End, it was naturally a magnificent establishment.

But every one of the men who used the club were Governing Members of the League of the Green Triangle. Hidden away, absolutely safe from discovery, was the League's Governing Chamber, where all the business of the wonderful organisation had its birth.

Less than an hour after Sir Gordon Hyde and Lord Sylvester had departed from Duncan Slone's house, Professor Cyrus Zingrave stood at the head of the long table in the Governing Chamber and faced the gentlemen who were collected there.

A hasty meeting of the Governing Circle had been called, in fact.

The circle was by no means complete, but there were, at least, a fairly representative throng. Lord Sylvester was sandwiched in between Edmund Cresswell, K.C., and Mr. James Coldrey, the well-known solicitor. Both the latter were regarding Sylvester rather curiously, for his lordship was exceedingly ill-at-ease, and trembling visibly.

The peer had, in fact, recovered sufficiently from his intoxication to realise the full gravity of what he had done. He knew that he had made a truly terrible blunder, and—like every other Governing Member—he had a wholesome dread of Professor Zingrave's uncanny eyes.

The professor was looking unusually grave to-night. As a rule, he was extremely genial, and wore a winning smile. But, although he had been told no actual facts, he felt a kind of uncomfortable sensation in the air, which foreboded a gathering storm.

The light from the shaded electric lamps gleamed upon his domed forehead, and his long black hair glistened like silk.

"It is not I, gentlemen, who have called this meeting," he said softly, in his musical, seductive voice. "I have an inkling that Sir Gordon Hyde has unpleasant news for us, and I do not intend to make a long speech. Sir Gordon, kindly put us into possession of your information."

Hyde rose to his feet.

"What I have to say concerns our colleague—Lord Sylvester," he exclaimed gravely. "It is of the utmost gravity——"

Sylvester jumped up in alarm, his face deathly pale.

"For Heaven's sake don't speak, Hyde!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "I—"

The peer's voice crackled in his throat, and he sank back into his chair, panting heavily. Professor Zingrave had turned his powerful, pitch-black eyes upon the interrupter, and Sylvester had absolutely no power left in him. Zingrave's gaze seemed to choke the words in his throat, and to paralyse his very brain.

"Continue, Sir Gordon!" said the professor evenly.

"An hour ago," went on Hyde, "both Sylvester and myself were at the house of Mr. Duncan Slone. With us were Slone himself, the Earl of Mexthorpe, and General Burns. I regret to say that Sylvester partook rather liberally of spirituous liquor, and became scarcely responsible for his words or actions."

"Go on," said Zingrave sharply—"go on, man!"

"To be brief, Sylvester drunkenly chattered out the very inmost secrets of the league," Sir Gordon declared. "I am afraid the affair is terribly serious——"

Zingrave rose to his feet.

"What did Sylvester utter?" he demanded, his usually gentle voice now quivering with scarcely suppressed passion. Even Hyde was somewhat taken aback by the fire of fury which blazed from Zingrave's eyes.

"Sylvester declared that he and I were members of the Governing Circle of the league," continued Sir Gordon reluctantly, "and that the Orpheum Club is our headquarters. In addition, he said that you, Professor Zingrave, were the chief."

Sylvester started to his feet again.

"I did not know what I was saying," he cried huskily. "I did not know——"

The professor smote the table with a loud smack.

"Did not know!" he thundered. "That is no excuse! A man who reveals the league's secrets in a drunken orgy is unfit to belong to the Governing Circle. Lord Sylvester, I have a mind to treat you as all traitors are treated——"

Sylvester choked back a sobbing cry.

"I am not a traitor!" he panted frantically. "There is no more loyal member of the circle than I am, Zingrave. I swear that I will never transgress again!"

"The mischief is done!" retorted the professor fiercely. "Of what use to talk of repentance now? Three total strangers know our secrets—secrets which are even withheld from our own working members."

Sir Gordon Hyde bent forward.

"There is one redeeming feature in the unfortunate affair, professor," he said quietly. "All three men treated Sylvester's remarks with open derision—they thought that they were merely the absurd utterances of a drunken man."

"Nevertheless they know—they are dangerous!" thundered Zingrave, whose fury was something amazing. "By all the powers, the folly of one fool may result in the undoing of us all!"

Sylvester was silent. He was dumb with the realisation of his own drunken act, and sat with pale face and twitching lips. The other Governing Members were all extremely startled, and many black, fierce looks were cast in the peer's direction. But, strange to say, the majority of the men were not bestowing their attention upon Sylvester, but upon Professor Zingrave.

It was an astounding thing to see the chief moved out of his usual calm. Many, indeed, had never seen Zingrave in a temper, and this was an entirely novel experience. The professor's musical voice was musical no longer. It grated harshly and vibrated with evil passion. The mask of geniality was thrust aside, and the real man—the real super-scoundrel—was revealed.

But, almost as swiftly as his fury had arisen, so it abated. Even while his fellow Governing Members were waiting for a fresh outburst, Professor Zingrave broke into a soft, silvery chuckle.

"I must apologise, gentlemen, for giving way to a moment of anger," he exclaimed softly. "Fury will only help to complicate matters—and in a crisis such as this we need our brains clear and keen. Let us discuss the matter calmly."

"If you will allow me to speak——" began Sylvester.

"You have spoken far too much already," cut in Zingrave icily. "You will be advised, Sylvester, to remain perfectly quiet during this discussion."

And the peer sank back into his chair, utterly subdued.

"Now, Sir Gordon, have you any more to say?" asked the professor.

"Very little," replied the baronet. "I wish to reiterate, however, that Burns, Slone, and Mexthorpe have absolutely no suspicion that Sylvester was stating the truth. They treated the whole occurrence as a good joke. Moreover, I extracted a faithful promise from them all that the talk would go no further."

Zingrave nodded approvingly.

"You were commendably thoughtful," he said. "The matter is confined simply to these three men. They are all honourable gentlemen, and they will keep their promise. I do not fear any harm whatever coming of the incident."

"But, my dear Zingrave, they are aware——"

"Pray let me finish, Sir Roger," interjected the professor, turning his uncanny eyes upon Sir Roger Hogarth. "One thing is positive, much as it is to be regretted. Those three men will have to disappear."

"Good gracious, you don't mean——"

"Tut-tut! Don't speak in such a startled tone!" snapped Zingrave. "Our very safety is at stake! Our lives may pay the forfeit if we delay action. The Earl of Mexthorpe, Duncan Slone, and General Burns must, one and all, die within the next month!"

Sir Gordon Hyde appeared startled.

"That is terribly drastic," he protested. "You said yourself that you feared no harm coming of the incident."

"Precisely," replied Zingrave, in a soft purr. "I make that statement, because I had already decided upon a course of action. No harm will come of it, because the three men will be silent for ever before they can make use of the information which Sylvester blurted out. There is absolutely no immediate danger."

"If there is no immediate danger," said Hogarth, "there will be none in the future."

"Use your wits, Sir Roger—use your wits!" exclaimed Zingrave testily. "Those three men treated Sylvester's talk as so much rubbish; possibly they will forget all about it inside a week. But in the future—when we least expect it—some little incident may occur which will bring Sylvester's statement back into a prominent position in their minds."

"Yes, but——"

"There are no 'buts'—my mind is made up," said the professor grimly. "Suppose, for instance, Sir Gordon Hyde were exposed? Such a thing is highly improbable, for we are all securely protected and above suspicion. But it is dimly possible, under certain conditions. Well, it would set Mexthorpe, or one of the others, thinking. That would perhaps be the beginning of the end. One thing would lead to another, and we should find ourselves in dire straits. As I have often said, we must be prepared for any and every emergency, and it is impossible for us to allow these three men to remain alive in possession of the league's secrets."

Dudley Foxcroft, the rich financier, looked doubtful.

"It is a terribly big order, Zingrave," he said dubiously. "Those three men are exceedingly well-known, and their deaths will create a considerable stir. Unless the work is done with extraordinary care, foul play will be suspected——"

"Have you no confidence in me?" interrupted Zingrave smoothly. "Before the task is attempted my plans will be matured to the last degree. I shall see, personally, that no loopholes are left. Already a splendid plan is simmering in my brain."

Sir Roger Hogarth grunted.

"It seems rather a pity," he remarked, with a shake of his head. "Three of the richest men in the country are to meet violent deaths—I agree heartily that such a course is absolutely necessary—and yet the league will benefit by not one penny. On the contrary, we shall go to considerable expense to attain our ends."

But Zingrave emitted a soft chuckle.

"That is where you are completely wrong, my dear Sir Roger," he replied. "The league will be the richer, at the conclusion of this episode, by over a quarter of a million sterling. To be exact, three hundred thousand pounds!"

The Governing Circle gazed at their chief in astonishment.

"I know you are a man of wonderful ideas, professor," said Foxcroft; "but really my own wits are not quite sharp enough to fathom——"

"It is not necessary for you to exercise your wits," interjected the strange scientist. "This money, moreover, will not be obtained by robbery or violence, but in a perfectly legal manner. I think, when I have related my scheme, that you will all congratulate me. I am already busily congratulating myself!"

"You make me intensely curious," exclaimed Hogarth.

"Upon the whole, Lord Sylvester," went on Zingrave, "this business may not end so disastrously as we first supposed. Nevertheless, I wish to warn you that if you allow yourself to become intoxicated again it will be impossible for you to remain a member of this circle. And you know as well as I do that no man can resign. There is only one way in which membership of the circle can be terminated!"

There was a sinister ring in Zingrave's voice, and Lord Sylvester knew only too well what the words implied. He passed a hand across his brow and uttered a deep sigh of relief.

"This has been a lesson to me," he murmured hoarsely. "If indeed we can make capital out of my terrible blunder, then I shall realise more than ever what a stupendous brain we have at the head of affairs. Pray set my anxiety at rest, Zingrave, and unfold your scheme."

The professor cast his eyes round the apartment.

"To begin with," he said. "I shall want three men to undertake the task. Those three will be Sir Roger Hogarth, Dudley Foxcroft, and James Coldrey."

The trio became instantly interested. Inwardly they were rather dismayed at having been chosen for the dread work, but they knew better than to dispute Zingrave's decision. Men had protested before, but the professor's iron will had always gained the mastery within a few minutes.

"You, Coldrey, will play the most important part in the undertaking."

"I!" exclaimed James Coldrey, in surprise.

"Exactly," continued the professor, with musical softness, his voice becoming fascinating and yet compelling. "Listen carefully, and make any suggestions you think advisable. I am not perfect, and suggestions are always welcome."

And then, with scarcely any interruption, Professor Cyrus Zingrave unfolded a plot which would ultimately end in the deaths of the Earl of Mexthorpe, General Burns, and Duncan Slone—and which would, incidentally, swell the league's coffers to the extent of three hundred thousand pounds!

It was a masterly scheme, complete in every detail, and failure seemed utterly impossible.

CHAPTER III:

On a Fresh Trail—Nelson Lee Learns Something of Importance.

MR. NELSON LEE, the celebrated crime investigator, gave Nipper a quick glance. The pair were seated in their consulting-room in Gray's Inn Road, and the time was early afternoon, two or three days after the meeting of the Governing Circle at the Orpheum Club. Nelson Lee was taking an easy day at home, dictating all kinds of useful information to Nipper, who was busily writing in a big reference book.

"That was the telephone, Nipper," said Nelson Lee, pushing his chair back.

As the detective was rising to his feet the soft tinkle of a bell made itself heard behind the wall near to where Nipper was sitting. The lad gave his master an answering look, and nodded.

"It's the private 'phone, guv'nor," he exclaimed. "Will you go?"

"Yes."

Nelson Lee left the consulting-room, and then entered his bedroom. Opening the door of a large cupboard near his bed—the cupboard was fitted with a strong Chubb lock, which Nelson Lee now opened—he entered the tiny compartment and thrust back a thick curtain. A small private telephone was revealed.

Nelson Lee lifted the receiver from its hook and placed it to his ear.

"Hallo!" he said softly. "Who's there?"

"That you, Mr. Lee?"

"Yes."

"You know who I am—M. C. I've got a piece of information for you," went on the voice at the other end of the wire—a voice which was only a whisper. The line being absolutely clear, and very short, Nelson Lee could hear even a breath.

"Well, Caine? Anything important?"

"Don't know, Mr. Lee. It might be—that's for you to find out. I thought I'd put you on to it, in case it's the beginning of something big."

"Good man," said Nelson Lee. "What's the information?"

"It won't seem much—just something that you might easily learn from any ordinary outside source. But as likely as not you know nothing about it, and I'm a bit suspicious myself. I believe a big game's on the go."

"You know nothing of any secret plans?"

"Nothing whatever," went on the whispering voice. "At least, I only know that the circle mean grim business. To-night Sir Roger Hogarth is having visitors at his house. Among them are Mr. Duncan Slone, the Earl of Mexthorpe, and Major-general Burns."

"Ah! That's very interesting."

"The circle are up to mischief, Mr. Lee. Those three men are millionaires, and are absolutely 'white.' What the game is I don't know, but I thought I'd give you the tip. Perhaps you'll be able to do something."

Nelson Lee stroked his smooth chin.

"H'm! I can see big possibilities," he murmured. "When a member of the Governing Circle has three visitors who are millionaires, it is fairly obvious that something big is afoot. Well, Caine, is that all?"

"That's all, Mr. Lee."

"You have no idea what the game is?"

"None at all."

"Right. I'll institute inquiries at once," replied Nelson Lee crisply. "Thanks for the information, although it is merely superficial. There is no telling, Caine; it may lead to something really important."

"I hope so, Mr. Lee," said the other. "I rang you up because I know, at least, one thing for certain."

"What is that?"

"Those three men have not been invited to Sir Roger Hogarth's house just for a social evening," replied Caine grimly. "The circle is up to some trickery, and I hope you'll be able to get on the trail."

"I will certainly take advantage of what you have told me. Good-bye, Caine!"

Nelson Lee replaced the receiver on its hook, pulled the curtain into place, and then left the cupboard, the patent lock snapping to with a click.

THE THREE MILLIONAIRES

11

The detective was looking very thoughtful as he went back to the consulting-room. The secret private telephone was a new innovation, and had been installed for one purpose only.

Nelson Lee's informant had been Martin Caine, whose life the detective had saved a good while back. Martin Caine was a controlling agent of the League of the Green Triangle, and he had sworn lifelong fidelity to Nelson Lee, and had agreed to help in every way possible in the latter's great campaign against the league.

The private telephone was only a short one, the other end of the wire being only a hundred yards away in an attic fourteen or fifteen doors away. Caine had rented the attic because he could come and go as he pleased. It would have meant death for him had he been seen by one of the league's spies visiting Nelson Lee. By making use of the telephone he could impart useful information to the detective without any fear of the fact being discovered, and without any danger of the conversation being overheard; for the instrument at the other end of the wire was also concealed in a carefully locked cupboard, and it was not necessary to speak above a mere whisper.

The telephone bell, being fixed on the other side of the consulting-room wall, the sound was readily heard; and any visitor who happened to be in the room at the time would think it nothing strange to hear a faint bell tinkle somewhere beyond the apartment's walls.

Nipper looked up eagerly as his master entered.

"Did Caine have anything important to tell you, sir?" he asked. "It's a week or two since we finished up that affair of Josh Grayson and Superintendent Valling, and it's about time we got on the track of another Governing Member of the league."

Nelson Lee abstractedly lighted a cigar.

"Well, sir, you're mighty thoughtful," went on Nipper. "You might let a chap into the wheeze."

"My dear Nipper, I was not aware that any wheeze, as you call it, was afoot," replied Nelson Lee, with a smile. "I'm not exactly sure whether I can make use of Caine's information. It needs thinking about."

And he informed Nipper of what had passed over the private telephone.

"Doesn't seem much in that, guv'nor," commented Nipper bluntly. "I think it's pretty certain that the league means mischief. But what can we do?"

Nelson Lee glanced at his watch.

"The first thing to be done, young 'un, is to find out why those three men are visiting Sir Roger Hogarth to-night," he said briskly. "And the best way in which to gain the information I require is to get it first-hand."

"Who from, sir?"

"From Major-general Burns," Nelson Lee answered, kicking off his slippers, and sitting down to don his boots. "You may remember that I was introduced to Burns some time ago by our excellent friend, Colonel Addison. I cannot describe Burns as a friend of mine, but he certainly knows me well, and will readily give me the facts I require."

Accordingly Nelson Lee was, a little over half an hour later, knocking at the door of General Vincent Burns's house in Berkeley Square. The general was at home, and shook hands warmly with his visitor as the latter entered Burns's private "den."

"This is a surprise, Mr. Lee," exclaimed the general. "I haven't seen you for a considerable time. Make yourself at home, my dear man. You will find cigars at your elbow."

Nelson Lee sat down and made himself at home. When one of his host's excellent cigars was burning evenly, he bent a little forward in his chair.

"I have certain reasons for seeking information from you which, at this present moment, I would prefer not to divulge," commenced the detective.

"I think you are visiting Sir Roger Hogarth's house to-night?"

"That's perfectly correct, Mr. Lee."

"Can you give me an idea as to who else will be present?"

"Certainly. There will be Mr. Dudley Foxcroft, the Earl of Mexthorpe, and Mr. James Coldrey, the famous society solicitor," said the general readily. "There may be one or two others, but I'm not exactly certain."

"What is the reason for the gathering?"

Major-general Burns laughed.

"There is no particular reason at all, so far as I know," he replied. "Sir Roger has merely invited me to dinner, and intimated that there would be cards afterwards. There is no other reason."

"There will be no business transaction?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Business? Begad, no!" ejaculated the general. "What on earth put that idea into your head, Mr. Lee?"

The famous detective smiled.

"I am seeking information," he replied. "Believe me, I have a very good reason for making these inquiries. To tell you the truth, I have a suspicion that something shady is afoot."

"Good gracious! You do not mean burglary?"

"Not exactly," said the detective, who was not at all satisfied with the interview—for so far he had learned absolutely nothing. "Are you quite sure nobody else will be present?"

The general was plainly puzzled, but quite good-humoured.

"My dear Mr. Lee, I couldn't for the life of me tell you exactly who has been invited," he answered. "I know it is to be a kind of male gathering, for no ladies will be present."

"Ah!" murmured Nelson Lee, with a quick flash of his eyes.

"Slone might come along, too," mused the other. "I'm not quite certain of that, however. And Lord Sylvester— Oh, no; I don't think Sylvester has been invited after his questionable behaviour at Slone's house a few nights back," he added smilingly. "Sir Roger was present, and I don't suppose he'll extend his hospitality to Sylvester."

Nelson Lee carelessly examined his cigar.

"To what are you referring?" he asked.

"Oh, Lord Sylvester became somewhat intoxicated at Slone's house the other evening," replied the general. "Begad, the man became quite amusing! You would have roared had you been there to listen to him."

"Was he so drunk, then?"

"My dear Mr. Lee, he was so extremely irresponsible that he talked the most utter nonsense," laughed Burns. "He actually got the preposterous notion into his head that he belonged to the League of the——"

The general stopped speaking with sudden abruptness, and looked somewhat confused.

"By George!" he muttered, biting his lip with vexation.

"What is the matter, general?" asked Nelson Lee evenly.

"Oh, I'm sure I can trust you, Mr. Lee," replied Burns. "I was entirely forgetting myself. I gave my promise to Sir Gordon Hyde that I would say nothing of the matter to a soul. And now, like a child, I've blurted it out."

The visitor smiled.

"Is it so extremely disgraceful, then?" he inquired.

"It's nothing—nothing at all," replied the general quickly. "Please get that idea out of your head, Mr. Lee. Since I have started speaking, I

may as well tell you the rest: only, as I gave my promise to Sir Gordon, I am confident you will let it go no further."

"I pledge my word on that."

"Well, then, the matter is really nothing of any consequence," exclaimed Burns. "Sylvester merely drunkenly stated that both he and Sir Gordon Hyde were members of the League of the Green Triangle. We all promised to say nothing just for Sir Gordon's sake. He would have been chipped unmercifully at his clubs had the ridiculous yarn been spread about. Sylvester, of course, was very intoxicated."

"So I should imagine," chuckled Nelson Lee. "By Jove, what a preposterous notion!"

Yet, at the same time, Nelson Lee's brain was filled with keen thoughts. He was well aware that both Lord Sylvester and Sir Gordon Hyde were members of the Governing Circle. And the full significance of the whole business struck him with great force.

Without seeking it he had gained some extremely useful information.

Outwardly he chuckled with the general at the amusing story which the latter had just told; but inwardly Nelson Lee was filled with grim suspicions. So Sylvester had drunkenly revealed some of the league's most cherished secrets!

Undoubtedly Professor Zingrave had been considerably startled and agitated when the news was imparted to him. Zingrave had then set his mighty brain to work in an effort to counteract the harm which had been done.

The significance of the facts could not be gainsaid. Lord Sylvester had made his statement to General Burns, the Earl of Mexthorpe, and Duncan Slone—who had, of course, laughed heartily at such rubbish. They had no suspicion that Sylvester had revealed the absolute truth.

And the three men had been invited to Sir Roger's house to-night!

Undoubtedly this fresh affair was a direct outcome of the other. The trio were to attend Sir Roger's house for a set and definite purpose; although what that purpose was they themselves would not learn until they arrived.

And Nelson Lee knew that his host and Mexthorpe and Slone were in great danger. What that danger was the detective did not know. But he was instinctively positive that Zingrave would not let these three men live while they were in possession of facts concerning the league. It was obvious that a conspiracy was maturing against them.

Nelson Lee's eyes gleamed.

If it were humanly possible he meant to save these three innocent men from the unknown peril which assailed them.

For the next half-hour the great detective talked very seriously with General Burns. At times he argued and pleaded; but at the finish he won the day.

And when he at last went striding up Berkeley Square, Nelson Lee wore a smile of satisfaction, and puffed at his cigar in high good-humour.

CHAPTER IV.

A Merry Gathering—Sir Roger's Amazing Suggestion—A Surprise.

"BY Jove! That was splendid, Mexthorpe! Let's hear another!"

The Earl of Mexthorpe smilingly shook his head.

"No, it's your turn now, Sir Roger!" he laughed. "I've told you a good story—one of the best I know—and now you've got to retaliate in kind!"

"Oh, well, if I must—I must," chuckled Sir Roger Hogarth. "I'm afraid my after-dinner stories, however, will tend to bore you."

Six men were sitting round the dazzling dining-table in Hogarth's well-appointed house off Portland Place. All were in evening-dress, and all smiled and laughed in lighthearted good-humour. Sir Roger himself sat at the head of the table, and upon his left were the Earl of Mexthorpe and Mr. Duncan Slone. The other side of the table was occupied by Dudley Foxcroft, Major-general Burns, and James Coldrey.

Dinner was over, and the men were sitting over their cigars and wine, laughing and chatting, and telling after-dinner stories.

The wine, in fact, flowed freely. As the time went on the glasses were filled and refilled. Nobody became even slightly intoxicated, but the influence of the rich "heady" old vintages very soon began to make the party hilarious and boisterous. The laughter rang continuously through the room, and everybody was feeling lighthearted and reckless.

The humorous yarns followed one another in quick succession, and Foxcroft related a story about a man who endeavoured to defraud an insurance company, and then became hoist with his own petard, which fairly made the company roar.

Coldrey followed this by another tale concerning insurance, and the little gathering again indulged in an outburst of merriment. In the midst of the laughter, Sir Roger Hogarth suddenly brought his palm down upon the table with a smack which made the glasses totter.

"Talking about insurance, I've got an idea," he exclaimed, bending forward with an expression of eagerness on his face. "I've often made up my mind to moot the scheme, but I've never really had a good opportunity. To-night, however, presents a chance which occurs only once in years!"

"What's the wonderful idea, Sir Roger?" laughed Duncan Slone.

"Out with it, man!"

Sir Roger gazed round the company.

"Well, one thing has struck me," he said. "We all seem to be very much of an age, don't we? I may be a year or two older than Coldrey, but I'll warrant I'll give him a decent run for his money before I peg out!"

"Oh, I'm as sound as a bell!" chuckled the solicitor. "Now, Foxcroft here has got a palpitating heart and a weak liver——"

"By George, what an insult!" cried Foxcroft. "I'll warrant my heart and liver are in thorough going order——"

"We won't discuss such a disgusting subject," interjected General Burns, laughing. "Out with your mighty scheme, Sir Roger."

Hogarth cleared his throat, and smiled.

"To begin with, I think we're all sportsmen?" he asked.

"Absolutely!" agreed Mexthorpe heartily.

"In fact, we're all pretty deep gamblers," went on Sir Roger. "I think every man I see rather prides himself that he's ready to take on anything that suggests a decent flutter."

"Hear, hear!"

"Get to the point, man!" cried Foxcroft. "We're deadly curious!"

"Have patience, my boy!" laughed Hogarth. "Patience is a wonderful virtue. Well, my idea is for the six of us to indulge in a huge gamble—a gamble which is something really worth risking a little pile of money on."

The company were instantly interested. The gambling spirit was strong in them all. Slone, Mexthorpe, and Burns, indeed, were inveterate gamblers. They were all three millionnaires, and they could afford to indulge their pleasures. Anything in the nature of a "flutter" appealed to them strongly.

And just at present, primed with wine as they were, they felt ready to enter anything which suggested a bit of sport.

Hogarth had timed his "great idea" to a nicety.

The three men, marked down by the league, were absolutely ready at that moment to fall headlong into any trap which was set for them—provided the trap was a deep and intricate one.

And this trap, indeed, was an unsuspected pit.

"A huge gamble—eh?" repeated the Earl of Mexthorpe enthusiastically. "By gad, let's hear it, Sir Roger. I feel deucedly reckless to-night!"

"Well, I'll tell you in a nutshell," said Hogarth, lighting a fresh cigar. "My plan is for us to hold a tontine—a tontine of six members!"

"A what?" asked Mexthorpe bluntly.

"A tontine!"

"And what the deuce may a tontine happen to be?" asked Duncan Slone. Sir Roger Hogarth laughed.

"Well, you amaze me!" he exclaimed. "Do you mean to say you all sit there and admit ignorance on the subject? Don't you know what a tontine is, Foxcroft?"

"I've got a hazy notion," admitted Foxcroft guardedly.

"Well, I'll tell you," the baronet proceeded. "A tontine is a system of insurance on gambling principles. As a matter of fact, it is a splendid scheme, and has been adopted scores of times—particularly on the Continent."

"Oh, I think I know what you mean," said General Burns. "So many people put up a fixed sum towards a large pool, and as long as they're alive they draw the interest on their own share. That, of course, automatically increases as the members gradually die off. Finally one man would be left, and he would gain possession of everything, both capital and interest. Strictly speaking, it's nothing more nor less than a gamble in human lives."

Sir Roger Hogarth laughed.

"Put it that way if you like," he said. "The advantage certainly lies at the door of the man who lives the longest. The idea was first thought of by a fellow named Lorenzo Tonti, an Italian banker who settled in France."

"And how long ago did this interesting gentleman live?" inquired Mexthorpe.

"Well, it was in 1653 that the scheme was first suggested by Tonti to Cardinal Mazarin as a means of raising a public loan," replied Sir Roger easily. "But the French people didn't favour the proposal until 1689. In that year Louis XIV formulated a tontine of something like one million four hundred thousand livres. The last survivor of that tontine died in 1726, and he was then in receipt of an income of about seventy-four thousand livres."

Duncan Slone sipped his wine and chuckled.

"I had no idea you had such historical knowledge at your finger-tips, Sir Roger," he exclaimed. "But, hang it all, there's no need to go into the history of the man who first thought of the scheme. What do you propose? Personally I'm rather struck with the idea."

"My dear man, it will be a splendid flutter," exclaimed Sir Roger enthusiastically. "We're all hale and hearty, and it'll be rather a novel method of insurance. I'm not suggesting the idea for the sake of the insurance, however, but just because it's a splendid gamble."

General Burns shook his head.

"Doesn't it strike you as being rather a grim business?" he asked quietly. "It won't be exactly pleasant for us to see one another die off, and know that we're benefiting by our friends' deaths——"

"Oh, that's rot!" interrupted Mexthorpe, in his blunt way. "There's nothing in it, after all. I say the same as Slone—let's go into it just for the fun of the thing."

"Splendid!" exclaimed Coldrey. "I'm with you, heart and soul!"

"You can count me, too!" put in Dudley Foxcroft.

The party laughed.

"Well, there's only Burns who makes any objections," said Sir Roger. "We'll soon get you round to our side, general."

"I'm not against the scheme, by any means," said Burns quickly. "But before we go any further, how much money do you propose we should pool?"

Sir Roger looked at his cigar thoughtfully.

"We're all well supplied with this world's goods," he remarked. "And there wouldn't be any fun in having a tontine at all if we didn't do it properly. How about a hundred thousand apiece?"

"That's a pretty tall figure," said Coldrey dubiously.

"Oh, we can easily run to a hundred thou'," exclaimed Mexthorpe promptly. "Gad, it'll be quite an interesting gamble. The last survivor will find himself the lucky possessor of his own hundred thousand, and a cool half million in the bargain—to say nothing of the enormous interest which will have accumulated meanwhile."

"No, my plan is that we each draw interest on our own money as long as we're alive," said Sir Roger. "My dear chaps, there's absolutely no risk in the affair whatever. The tontine will simply be a kind of amusement for us. We shall not part with a fixed sum of money, but simply put it aside for the purpose of the tontine. We shall continue to draw our own interest as though the tontine did not exist."

General Burns chuckled.

"If you're all determined to go into the thing, I won't be a blackleg," he said. "A hundred thousand is nothing to me, and I fancy it's merely a trifle to you other fellows."

James Coldrey looked thoughtful.

"It'll be a bit difficult for me to raise the money," he said. "but I shall be able to manage it. But who will take charge of the pool, Sir Roger?"

"Begad, yes!" exclaimed Mexthorpe. "We've got to decide that."

"Nothing simpler," replied Hogarth. "Coldrey here is the very man for the job, and he can put the whole thing into legal shape. Being a solicitor he'll know exactly what to do, and will invest our money in safe securities."

James Coldrey nodded.

"I'm willing," he agreed. "I'll act as solicitor and trustee for the tontine with pleasure."

"Then it's a settled thing," said Duncan Slone, with a lazy smile. "The tontine is now in existence—or will be shortly—with a capital of six hundred thousand pounds, equally divided into six shares."

"Oh, but we shall have to do the thing properly," put in Coldrey. "To be absolutely legal we must have another trustee. I should think you're the man for the job, Foxcroft—you're always in the City."

Dudley Foxcroft nodded assent.

"Right you are!" he agreed. "I'm perfectly willing to be the other trustee."

"That's settled, then," said General Burns, with a smile. "How long will it take you to draw up the necessary deed, Coldrey?"

"The deed?" asked Mexthorpe. "What d'you mean?"

"My dear man, this tontine is going to be a strictly legal concern," said Coldrey. "A deed has got to be drawn up and signed by us all. Then there can't possibly be any dispute about it in years to come—when I scoop the whole pool!"

There was a general laugh.

"Don't you believe it, Coldrey!" chuckled Slone. "I shall be the last survivor. If I run through my fortune meanwhile, I've got a nice little nest-egg in the tontine!"

"Well, it's rather early to talk of any of us pegging out," said the solicitor. "This insurance scheme is only a bit of a gamble to pass the time away. Look here, to-day's Friday. I propose that you all attend my office on Monday morning next, and will then sign the document in the presence of the necessary witnesses."

After that there was much talk and laughter. General Burns suggested that the shares should be fifty thousand, but Sir Roger promptly vetoed the suggestion. The others, too, were all in favour of sticking to the original amount. Sir Roger waxed eloquent, and it was generally acknowledged that the tontine idea was an excellent one.

Had the three "marked" men had any suspicions against their companions, they would perhaps have been a little more upon the alert. But they had been partaking liberally of champagne, and in their merry mood, the tontine appeared to them an excellent gamble. Perhaps, in more sober moments, they would realise that it was not a very pleasant thing to hold a kind of lottery in one another's lives; but, having gone so far, they would certainly not dream of backing out. Whatever their second thoughts on the subject may be, they would undoubtedly see it through.

Now and again Sir Roger Hogarth flashed towards Coldrey and Foxcroft a keen, triumphant glance. The victims had fallen into the trap headlong, unsuspecting, and without the slightest thought of peril.

The league's plan, in fact, had worked out perfectly. Mexthorpe, Duncan Slone, and General Burns had now merely to be quietly and unsuspectingly put to death. And these deaths would all be apparently accidental.

Once the trio were safely off the earth, the league would be in no danger from the knowledge they possessed, and would be the richer by over a quarter of a million. There would not be the slightest difficulty with regard to the financial business. The whole thing would be a legal undertaking, and the money would automatically become the property of the three surviving members of the tontine. The latter would then, of course, be declared at an end, and the pool divided among the three.

The whole scheme was bound to succeed—provided, always, that the victims died natural deaths, or by accidents.

It was well worth carrying the project through, in point of fact, regardless of the original object of the three murders. Zingrave had indeed turned Lord Sylvester's drunken blunder to good account. It was not often that the league made such a coup as a quarter of a million.

And this affair seemed certain of succeeding.

"There's just one thing I should like to stipulate," remarked Dudley Foxcroft, as the party were on the point of rising to adjourn to the smoking-room for a little game of cards. "This tontine had better be kept a secret."

"A secret?" asked General Burns. "Why?"

"Well, we don't want to get ourselves talked about throughout society."

"H'm! Perhaps it would be as well," said Mexthorpe. "Most people are infernal fools, and they'd get all sorts of wrong notions. Rumours would get about, and we should one and all be pestered with inquisitive busy-bodies."

"It's our concern," said Foxcroft, "so we'll keep it to ourselves."

"Yes, that's a good idea," agreed Sir Roger. "Are we all agreed?"

"Passed unanimously," smiled Duncan Slone.

And the six men passed out into Sir Roger's smoking-room—there to have a quieter and a more orthodox gamble with cards. Mexthorpe and Slone were heartily delighted with the evening's arrangement, but General Burns seemed decidedly thoughtful.

He did not take a hand at cards, but watched the others.

For an hour he remained, and then pleaded a "confounded" attack of indigestion—which required immediate attention at home.

After a cheery series of good-nights, the general took his departure, promising to attend the meeting at Coldrey's office on Monday morning.

Once out in the open, under the sky, Burns breathed a deep breath, and then hailed a passing taxi. He gave the driver his directions, and then the vehicle swiftly carried him through the West End streets and so on to Holborn.

The taxi turned into Gray's Inn Road, and finally deposited its fare on the pavement opposite Nelson Lee's door.

Major-general Burns quickly paid the cab-driver, and looked sharply up and down the street. He was sure that he had not been followed, but he thought it wise to get out of sight as soon as possible.

He let himself in by a latchkey, and then mounted the stairs to Nelson Lee's consulting-room. Opening the door, he found the apartment brilliantly illuminated, and a warm fire burned in the grate.

Standing before it was Douglas Clifford, Nelson Lee's able helper in the campaign against the League of the Green Triangle. Nipper was sitting down in a big armchair, reading. The pair looked up quickly as the door opened.

The general closed the door with a smile upon his face.

"Ah, you've come round to hear the news, Clifford, as I requested," he exclaimed coolly. "I'm afraid I shall have to keep you waiting a few minutes while I remove my disguise!"

Had Sir Roger Hogarth, or one of the others, been present in Nelson Lee's consulting-room at that moment, they would have received the surprise of their lives. For Major-general Burns no longer spoke in the bluff soldier's characteristic tones, but in a smooth, easy voice which was equally unmistakable.

The thing was amazing!

General Burns—the man who had attended Sir Roger's house, and who had agreed to become a member of the tontine—was, in exact truth, none other than Nelson Lee himself!

CHAPTER V.

Nelson Lee's Vow—A Visit to the General—An Agreement.

THE disguise had been a truly wonderful one.

Nelson Lee was a past-master in the art of disguise, but on this occasion he had almost surpassed himself. Not one of his companions at the dinner-party had had the slightest suspicion that Major-general Burns was not Major-general Burns at all. Three of the members of that party, at least, would not have slept comfortably that night could they have known the astonishing truth.

Nelson Lee soon removed the disguise, and then he lounged before the fire in his consulting-room in dressing-gown and slippers, with one of his favourite cigars between his lips.

"It was a difficult task to bring the general round," he admitted to Nipper and Clifford. "I thought that he would not give way at first, but I prevailed in the finish. I was rather handicapped by the fact that I couldn't explain my exact reasons. In the morning I shall go round to Burns and enlighten him a little."

"I should think he was rather astonished at your proposal to attend the dinner-party in his place?" asked Clifford.

"Naturally, he was at a loss," replied Nelson Lee. "I don't intend to tell you all that passed between the general and myself, because there is really not much of interest to recount. I merely assured him that I was working solely in his interests, and that it would be greatly to his advantage if he kept strictly within his own house and allowed me to impersonate him. As it turned out, my action will probably mean the saving of the general's life—and two other lives into the bargain!"

"Have you got on the track, then, guv'nor?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"Fairly and squarely, young 'un!"

"Good egg!" ejaculated Nipper.

"I'm afraid we are on the trail of a bad egg!" remarked Nelson Lee drily. "I have already decided who is next to meet with downfall. Another Governing Member of the League of the Green Triangle is marked out for his just punishment!"

"Who is it this time, Mr. Lee?" asked Clifford. "Superintendent Valling, of Scotland Yard, was the last Governing Member to meet a well-deserved fate. Who goes next?"

The famous detective looked grim.

"Mr. James Coldrey," he replied shortly.

"That's the society solicitor, isn't it?" asked Nipper. "The man who transacts all the legal business for the big pots?"

"Quite right, my lad."

"But why not Sir Roger Hogarth?" asked Nipper.

"To tell the truth, I have a choice of three," replied Nelson Lee. "I do not intend to bring about the downfall of three Governing Members at once, however. It is far safer to proceed steadily with our campaign. I have decided upon Coldrey because he is the man who will, I believe, take the leading part in the present plot."

Clifford stroked his grey beard thoughtfully. It was his own beard, but the greyness was artificial, thus forming a natural disguise. Apparently Douglas Clifford was an elderly gentleman; but in reality his age was only twenty-seven. He was compelled to adopt another name—John Merriek—and to cast aside his own identity. For had the league known that Douglas Clifford was alive, his existence would have been ended with terrible swiftness.

The league had tried to murder him once, and had failed. But they thought they had succeeded, and so Clifford held the trump cards. He and Nelson Lee had formed a compact to wreck the infamous organisation, and so far the campaign had been one long triumph.

"You speak of a plot?" said Clifford inquiringly—"a plot in which Coldrey will play a leading part?"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Listen," he said quietly. "I'll relate everything that passed at Sir Roger Hogarth's house to-night."

The great criminologist seated himself in his favourite easy-chair, and with aggravating deliberation examined his cigar to assure himself that it was burning evenly. Then he lolled back, and commenced speaking.

When he had finished, both Nipper and Clifford were somewhat puzzled. Personally, they couldn't quite see how the league's plan was to develop.

"I may be stupid," exclaimed Clifford, "but I'm hanged if I quite understand."

"My dear fellow, but for Martin Caine's apparently ordinary piece of information this afternoon, the doom of three innocent men would have been sealed," interjected Nelson Lee quietly. "I should certainly not have learned a thing about this tontine. By taking Burns's place at the dinner-party I have become acquainted with the whole infernal plot."

"But you are not aware of Zingrave's actual plans, are you?"

Nelson Lee regarded his companions from beneath lowered eyelids.

"I have wits of my own!" he remarked, as though further explanation were unnecessary.

"Then your wits must be much sharper than mine," said Clifford bluntly. "What about you, Nipper?"

"Well, I'm in a bit of a fog," admitted Nipper.

"Think, my dear chaps—think!" exclaimed Nelson Lee calmly. "I have already told you of the affair which occurred at Mr. Duncan Slone's house two or three nights back, when Lord Sylvester unwittingly revealed some of the league's secrets while in the presence of the three men who are now the object of the league's attentions."

"Well?" said Clifford.

"Well, a little thought will very soon make it plain to you that a deadly plot is being woven," replied the detective. "Burns, Mexthorpe, and Slone are acquainted with what Sylvester blurted out, and, therefore, the Governing Circle have decreed that the trio must die. This tontine is part of the scheme!"

"But how will the tontine encompass their deaths?" inquired Clifford.

"The tontine itself will not contribute in the least towards the actual murders," replied Nelson Lee. "It is merely a plan whereby the league will be repaid for the trouble it is put to in killing its victims. Zingrave intends to make the affair a paying one, and, as each man dies, so will the league reap a hundred thousand pounds. You see, it is Zingrave's intention to scoop in over a quarter of a million."

"Phew!" whistled Nipper. "That's a nice little pile!"

"By Jove, what an infernally clever plot!" exclaimed Clifford, half admiringly. "The hounds intend to murder three perfectly innocent men, and to obtain a small fortune from each without even resorting to robbery; for, to all intents and purposes, the financial transactions will be absolutely legal."

"Yes, it's clever," agreed Nelson Lee; "but it will fail!"

"What are your plans, Mr. Lee?" asked Clifford eagerly.

"That's it, sir," supplemented Nipper. "When do we start into business?"

Nelson Lee yawned.

"The only business I am going to start on at present," he answered languidly, "is to remove the clothes which at present adorn my person, and to tumble into bed. The league will not proceed with their dastardly scheme until the tontine is a legally signed transaction—and that will be on Monday. We have three clear days in which to make our plans."

"Can I help you in any way?" asked Clifford.

"I'm afraid not, at present," replied the detective. "You see, I acquaint you with all the facts of the case, and will certainly call upon you for assistance if I require you. For the present I should advise you to follow my example and get to bed."

And ten minutes later Douglas Clifford had taken his departure, and Nelson Lee and Nipper were proceeding to make the acquaintance of their respective beds.

The following morning Nelson Lee was fresh, and firmly resolved in mind to proceed with the case, and to ultimately bring about the downfall of James Coldrey. He was quite sure that he would soon receive some hint as to the league's future plans.

At eleven-thirty he called upon Major-general Burns, and found the retired soldier in his smoking-room, eagerly awaiting the visitor.

"Well, Mr. Lee, what's the meaning of this amazing affair?" he asked. "Did you actually appear at that dinner-party at Hogarth's last night?"

"I was in Sir Roger's house until late in the evening."

"And the deception was not discovered?"

"I was not suspected for a second."

"Well, you're an astounding man!" declared the general frankly. "But, begad, sir, what in Heaven's name does it mean? You were deucedly close about the business yesterday, and I hope you're prepared to lift the veil now. I can't possibly believe that there was any villainy afoot at Sir Roger Hogarth's house last night."

Nelson Lee looked the general squarely in the face.

"Will you trust me still further?" he asked quietly.

"Glad, man, I know you're a straightforward gentleman," returned Burns bluntly. "That's enough. Of course I trust you!"

"Then I tell you in absolute seriousness that unless you keep indoors and allow me to continue my impersonation of you, your life will be in considerable peril," said Nelson Lee grimly. "That's the perfect truth, general!"

"Good gracious! You amaze me!"

"That is hardly surprising, for the whole affair is amazing," went on the detective. "I will just tell you what occurred last night."

And he did so, in as few words as possible.

"By James, sir!" ejaculated General Burns. "And did you actually enter this deuced tontine—in my name, too?"

"I did."

"But I intend to have nothing to do with the confounded business!" said the general flatly. "Upon my soul, it may suit fools like Mexthorpe and Slone, but I'm not in the habit of gambling a hundred thousand——"

"My dear general, pray don't excite yourself," interrupted Nelson Lee gently. "Had you attended that dinner-party personally I have not the slightest doubt that you would have entered the tontine in spite of your present declarations. In point of fact, you would have been coerced into it against your will."

"Well, I won't argue," grunted Burns. "But you implied that there was something fishy afoot. So far as I can see, it's nothing else but an absurd gamble."

Nelson Lee fingered his watch-chain thoughtfully for a moment or two, and then looked at his companion keenly.

"Have I your word of honour that you will treat everything I tell you in strict confidence?" he asked abruptly. "Remember, I am working solely in your interests."

"I pledge my word, certainly."

"Then I will tell you something which will fill you with astonishment," proceeded the detective. "This tontine affair was suggested by James Coldrey, and the dinner-party at Sir Roger's was instigated by Coldrey for a definite purpose."

Nelson Lee had twisted the actual facts a trifle for his own purposes. He had no intention of informing the general that the plot was connected with the League of the Green Triangle. Since Coldrey was the man to be

exposed and dealt with, the general must know nothing against any man except Coldrey himself.

"I'm not filled with astonishment yet," grunted Burns bluntly.

"You will be in a moment. Coldrey suggested the tontine because he had already made his devilish plans," said Nelson Lee. "I'm not stating mere suspicions to you, general!—my information is absolutely positive. James Coldrey is a deadly scoundrel, and when this tontine is made a legal affair he will proceed with a series of deliberate murders!"

"Good heavens!" gasped Burns.

"You are surprised now?" asked Nelson Lee calmly. "Probably Coldrey intends to start with you yourself. Don't you see the idea, man? If Coldrey succeeds in getting rid of his five partners in the tontine he will be in possession of over half a million—legally. Being a solicitor, he will readily arrange matters smoothly for himself. The tontine is nothing more nor less than a carefully conceived plot!"

Major-general Burns was decidedly startled.

"But it is too horrible to contemplate, Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed, aghast. "No man on earth would think of such a cold-blooded plan! You cannot possibly be serious."

"I was never more serious in my life!"

"But the whole thing is monstrous and revolting!" cried the general. "I sha'n't be able to move out of the house, indeed! A fine thing you've let me in for, Mr. Lee!"

"I think you ought to be extremely grateful to me," retorted Nelson Lee grimly. "By acting as I have done your life is in no danger whatever. If it is humanly possible I want to save the others, and bring Coldrey to justice. To do this I shall be helped to a large degree if you, in your turn, will agree to help me."

"How the deuce can I help?" demanded Burns.

"By allowing me to continue my impersonation of you," said the detective. "It will be I who will carry your risks upon my shoulders. All you have to do is to remain indoors for the next week, while I go about in your character. Or, better still, I will arrange for my own car to take you away to a quiet country place while I remain in London in your identity. You are a bachelor, and it will be perfectly simple for me to occupy your house during your absence."

"But I cannot allow——"

"If you refuse to do as I advise, then I cannot be answerable for your safety," said Nelson Lee deliberately. "But if you fall in with my scheme, you'll be in no danger whatever, and will assist justice to a very marked degree. As a humane man, you cannot possibly refuse."

The general was decidedly flustered. But as Nelson Lee continued his arguments, Burns realised that the detective was right, and he agreed to take a holiday, and to allow Nelson Lee to assume his identity.

"Splendid!" murmured Nelson Lee, as he was on his way back to Gray's Inn Road. "By becoming General Burns for the time being, I shall be assisted to an immeasurable extent. I was forced to warp the facts somewhat for the general's benefit, but it was quite impossible for me to take him fully into my confidence. He is, at least, now perfectly secure, and so, when this episode is concluded, he will have everything to thank me for, and nothing to chide me with."

There was only one thing which worried the celebrated detective. The league's future plans regarding the tontine, and the methods by which the three victims were to be killed, were in deep shadow. But Nelson Lee felt confident that he would learn something definite before any actual danger assailed any of the "marked" three.

The league would surely not do anything drastic until several days, at least, had elapsed after the signing of the deed on Monday. Certainly they would not show their hand immediately after that legal gathering.

But on that point Nelson Lee was to prove sorely at fault. Even now, after all his experience of the league, he had not quite adequately grasped Professor Zingrave's terrible power.

CHAPTER VI.

At Coldrey's Office—A Terrible Shock—Clifford's Request.

MONDAY morning, at eleven-thirty precisely, found the inner office of Mr. James Coldrey's business apartments, off Parliament Street, Whitehall, in a decidedly busy state. Coldrey himself was smiling and genial, and the other five men who had entered the tontine were all in merry moods. If any of them regretted their decision, they took good care to show no sign of it.

Coldrey, Sir Roger Hogarth, and Dudley Foxcroft were in the best of tempers, and the Earl of Mexthorpe, bluff and hearty, made the whole company laugh by his bubbling good-humour. Duncan Slone was lazily amused, as usual, and Major-general Burns took care to say as little as possible.

Nelson Lee had not the slightest fear of his disguise being penetrated, but he nevertheless deemed it advisable to keep as much in the background as possible.

"Now, gentlemen, we're here for business!" exclaimed Coldrey smilingly.

"Just a moment, old man!" said Mexthorpe. "I must finish this story I'm in the middle of. Sha'n't be two minutes!"

"But I'm a busy man, don't forget!" protested Coldrey. "I'm not a gentleman of leisure like you other fellows. There's an appointment I simply must keep at twelve-fifteen, and——"

Duncan Slone laughed.

"Oh, let's humour him!" he said cheerfully. "Finish your tale afterwards, Mex."

"Go ahead, then!" exclaimed the earl. "The first thing, Coldrey, is whether you have all the money in the bank——"

"Every penny of it!" interrupted the solicitor. "I'm going to invest it in solid securities at the earliest possible moment. Pay attention, all of you! I'm going to read out aloud the document I've drawn up—the document which makes the tontine a legal and straightforward transaction."

"Let's hope it's not very long!" murmured Mexthorpe.

Coldrey started reading the deed aloud, and the five men listened. It was merely a matter of form, and they wanted to get it over and done with. The legal phraseology of the document was rather bewildering—to Mexthorpe, Slone, and Hogarth, at least. Nelson Lee understood every word, and knew that the thing was strictly correct. Not a lawyer in the land could have found fault with it.

One by one the six men signed their names, and General Burns came last. Nelson Lee signed the document in the general's bold signature without a tremor. He had been practising Burns's signature a good deal since the Saturday, and could have signed any of the general's cheques without the bank officials detecting the forgery.

Of course, the document was really worthless with that false signature; but, as the tontine was ultimately destined to collapse—Nelson Lee was determined upon that point—it was of no consequence.

After the six men had signed, two of Coldrey's clerks appended their names as witnesses. Coldrey blotted it, glanced over the list of names, and then carried it across to a safe.

"That's all!" He smiled. "You can go your separate ways now, and as soon as you please. The tontine is now a settled and established fact."

And, to all intents and purposes, it was. As soon as one of the six men died, so would a hundred thousand pounds become the property of the other five. And the first death occurred with terrible swiftness. Nelson Lee was not prepared for such dreadfully prompt measures, and he was in no way to blame for what occurred that same evening.

The League of the Green Triangle got to work without a day's delay.

The daring audacity of the thing was an awful blow to Nelson Lee, for he had been positive that no danger existed so early after the signing of the tontine. He was completely off his guard, and unprepared. In addition, he was in ignorance of the league's plans, and was thus severely handicapped.

At seven o'clock that evening, he sat in General Burns's house, smoking and thinking deeply. The general's butler had no suspicion that his master was away, and Nelson Lee acted his part to perfection.

The first thing, he decided, was to discover the league's plan of action. With that in his possession, he would be able to formulate his own plans successfully. James Coldrey was the man who had to go—

Nelson Lee became suddenly aware that a slight commotion was taking place outside in the wide hall, and the next moment the door opened to admit Roans, the general's elderly butler. Roans at this moment was looking somewhat flustered.

"The young rascal wouldn't take 'no' for an answer, sir!" he exclaimed indignantly. "I told him as you were hout, not caring to disturb you——"

"Oh, it's all right!" cried a youthful voice. "General Burns will see me——"

"You keep quiet, young man!" growled the butler. "It's this way, sir. I told the lad you were hout, and he wouldn't believe me. Actually forced his way——"

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"Nice state of affairs, this!" he snapped, in the general's voice. "What's the bother about, Roans? If the youngster wants to see me, let him come in! Don't look as if you were trying to imitate a freshly landed fish, man!"

Roans tried to retain his dignity.

"If you wants to see the young rascal——"

"Hang it all, sir!" roared the general. "Close your mouth, and get out!"

Roans retired, mentally deciding that the general had an extra bad attack of grumpiness that evening. Burns was a man of moods, and so Nelson Lee was forced to act the part. The butler had not the slightest suspicion of the impersonation.

Left alone, Nelson Lee faced the visitor—who was, of course, Nipper—rather grimly.

"Well, young 'un, what's the meaning of this?" he asked sharply. "You know very well that I told you not to come near this house, but to communicate with me by message?"

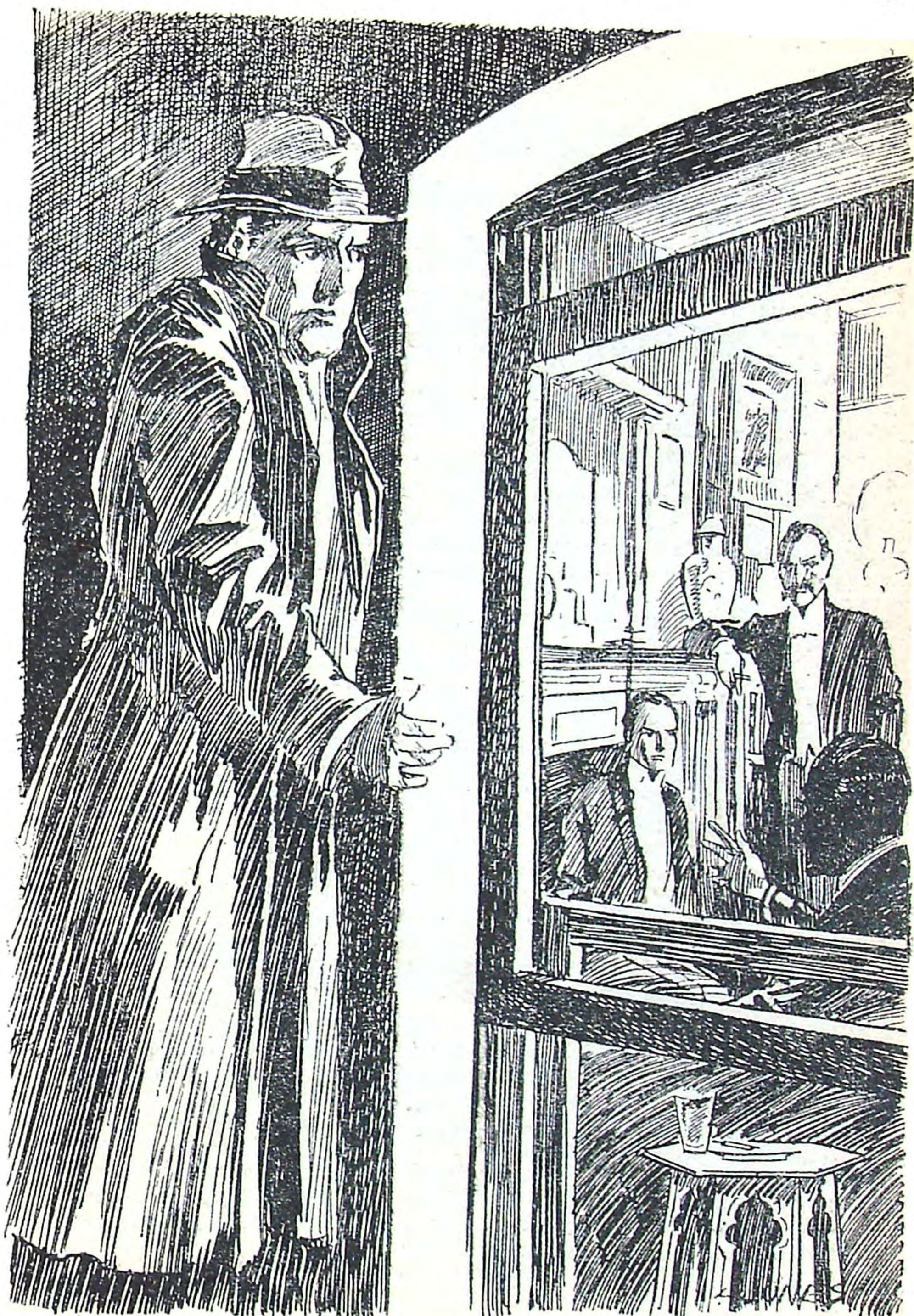
"Yes, I know, sir," said Nipper, breathing hard. "But I—I thought——"

"Well?"

"Haven't you heard, guv'nor?" asked Nipper quickly.

"Heard what?" snapped his master. "Don't talk in riddles, lad!"

Nipper bent forward, his face rather pale.



Nelson Lee overhears the League's plans.—See page 40

"The league's on the job, sir!" he whispered hoarsely. "They've brought off one coup already!"

Nelson Lee started.

"What has happened?" he asked sharply. "Quick, Nipper—tell me!"

"The Earl of Mexthorpe is dead, guv'nor!"

The detective muttered a grim exclamation, and grasped Nipper by the shoulder.

"Are you sure, young 'un?" he asked, in a terrible voice. "Are you positive?"

Nipper winced a little as Nelson Lee's strong fingers dug into his flesh.

"It's an absolute fact, sir!" he said huskily. "Mexthorpe was killed half an hour ago! I thought I'd better rush straight here and tell you!"

"You were quite right! The tragedy warranted your breaking my orders," exclaimed the detective. "How did it happen? How was the earl killed?"

"Almost outside his own house, sir—near Knightsbridge," replied Nipper quickly. "He was knocked over by a motor-car, and when they got him to the side of the road he was dead."

"And the car? What of the motor-car?"

"Oh, it went straight off, without even stopping!" said Nipper. "I had a chat with a man who saw the whole thing. The car was gone almost before anybody realised what had happened. It disappeared into the traffic, and the police will never be able to trace it."

Nelson Lee smote his brow angrily.

"What a fool!" he muttered, with grim fierceness. "What a dunder-head!"

"Who is, sir?"

"Who?" ejaculated the disguised detective. "Who? Why, who else but myself? I ought to have been more on the alert. I ought to have suspected this tragically prompt action on the league's part. By Heaven, I'll never forgive myself, Nipper!"

"But you're not to blame, sir!"

"I am!" rapped out Nelson Lee. "Poor Mexthorpe has paid the penalty for my criminal negligence! Oh, this is terrible, my boy!"

The detective was decidedly upset. The news was so unexpected and so staggering that he was completely robbed of his usual calmness and serenity.

Yet, in spite of the terrible news, Nelson Lee realised that no good would come of wringing his hands and bemoaning the fate which had overtaken the unfortunate Mexthorpe. Nipper insisted that his master was in no way to blame for the tragedy.

And Nipper was right.

Nelson Lee had had no cause whatever to suspect that the league would get to work so swiftly. That the "accident" was the result of Zingrave's machinations, Nelson Lee had not the slightest doubt. The fact that the motor-car had rushed off without stopping proved that it had been deliberate—to the detective, at all events.

To the police the affair was simply an ordinary occurrence. The motorist had been driving recklessly, had bowled over a pedestrian, and had mopped off without delay in order to escape the consequences; but, of course, the police had no inkling that Mexthorpe had been marked down for death.

There was one point which was comforting balm to Nelson Lee's wounded feelings. He made a small discovery which eased his mind to a large extent.

He and Nipper, without delay, left General Burns's house, and went straight to Knightsbridge; at least, Nelson Lee did. Nipper was packed off home.

In the character of the general, Nelson Lee inquired after his dead friend. He soon got into conversation with the doctor who had been called round to examine the body. The doctor was a brusque man, with a bluff manner.

"Huh! The earl was half-dead years ago!" he said bluntly. "This accident wouldn't have scratched an ordinary man, general. Mexthorpe was merely bowled over and severely bruised. Not a bone broken—not an internal injury of any sort."

"Then what was the cause of death?" asked Nelson Lee curiously.

"Heart!" said the doctor. "My dear sir, Mexthorpe's heart was as rotten as a piece of tinder-wood! Absolutely diseased and ready to cease beating at the first sudden excitement. Wonder is he didn't collapse before to-day."

"But he appeared to be the picture of health——"

"Bah! Can't judge by a man's appearance!" interjected the medico. "The cause of death wasn't the collision with the motor-car at all. Mexthorpe was dead before the car touched him! He saw his danger, and the shock was too much for him. Then he was knocked down. Clear case of heart disease."

Nelson Lee went back to the general's house in an easier frame of mind. If the Earl of Mexthorpe had been in such a precarious condition, his death would have followed very shortly, in any case. So the detective was greatly relieved—and terribly determined to bring Coldrey to justice. There were others in the plot who were equally as murderous as the solicitor, but Nelson Lee had set himself the task of exposing Coldrey.

That night he slept rather uneasily. But the following morning he received a letter which gave him great satisfaction. He read it as he sat down to breakfast, and his eyes gleamed as they glanced through the written words.

The letter was from Sir Roger Hogarth, and was an invitation for the general to join a house-party at Sir Roger's country mansion in Surrey. The baronet intimated that Duncan Slone would be a visitor, and mentioned several other well-known people. He dwelt, for a few lines, upon the tragic death of Mexthorpe, who, he said, was also to have been invited. An unkind fate had now decided otherwise.

"A house-party!" murmured Nelson Lee. "Ah, this is splendid news. The league intends to bring off its second coup amid the gaiety and whirl of a country gathering at Sir Roger's mansion. I wonder who is the intended victim—myself or Slone? It matters little, for the vile plot will fail. I shall be upon the spot to protect the pair of us. The league little suspects that the gruff, innocent-minded General Burns is, in reality, their deadliest foe!"

Later in the day—by previous arrangement—Nelson Lee visited the general's favourite club, and found the elderly "Mr. John Merrick" lounging in the smoking-room. Douglas Clifford was looking grave as they shook hands.

"So the brutes finished off Mexthorpe," he said quietly. "Jove, there wasn't much time wasted, Mr. Lee!"

The pair was sitting in a secluded corner of the smoking-room, quite to themselves, and safe from other ears. Indeed, being early afternoon, the room was almost deserted.

"I admit I was taken off my guard over that affair," said Nelson Lee. "But Mexthorpe was practically dead even before the accident, I understand. His heart was weak, and liable to stop work at any moment."

And he explained his interview with the doctor on the previous night. Then he handed Clifford Sir Roger's letter to read. When the young man had glanced through it, he held it in his hand undecidedly.

"You will accept this invitation?" he asked.

"Of course. Foul work is contemplated, or I am vastly in error," replied the detective grimly. "The house-party will apparently be a brilliant gathering; and if there is an unfortunate accident to either Slone or myself, nobody will be suspected. But the league's plans will fail this time."

Douglas Clifford seemed rather uneasy.

"Er—will you require any assistance?" he asked diffidently.

"Nipper will be down there, in disguise," replied Nelson Lee. "I have already decided upon that. He will stay at the local hotel, near Sir Roger's house, and will be ready for any commission I wish him to undertake."

"I was thinking of myself," said Clifford eagerly.

"I'm afraid your assistance is not necessary in this particular case, my dear fellow," replied the detective quietly. "You had far better remain in London."

Clifford pulled a long face, and glanced at Sir Roger's letter again.

"I—I was wondering if you could manage to get me an invitation to the house-party," he asked, colouring slightly. "Oh, hang it all, Lee, you know how the land lies with me! Sir Roger mentions that Vera—Miss Zingrave—will be among the party. By Jove, if I could only——"

Nelson Lee's eyes twinkled.

"I think I understand now," he chuckled. "You young rascal, Clifford! You've shown wonderful restraint in your conduct with Miss Zingrave, however, so I mustn't haul you over the coals. An invitation might possibly be managed."

"Oh, you're a brick, Lee——"

"Not so loud—not so loud!" interjected Nelson Lee softly. "Mind you, I don't quite care for your being present at the house-party, mixing with Hogarth, Foxcroft, Coldrey, and many other of our enemies. But your disguise is wonderfully effective, and incapable of being penetrated. We'll see what can be done."

"Thanks tremendously!" said Clifford, with eager eyes.

When he parted with Nelson Lee he was flushed and intensely anxious. For the rest of the day he was unsettled in mind; but, by the last post, a short note came from "General Burns," saying that everything was settled. The middle-aged Mr. John Merrick was to number one of Sir Roger Hogarth's house-party.

Whereat the middle-aged Mr. John Merrick was in the seventh heaven.

CHAPTER VII.

The House-party—On the Lake—The Tragedy of the Launch.

MELFORD DENE was a magnificent old country mansion, nestling amid high trees, in the centre of a delightful park. It was not Sir Roger Hogarth's ancestral home, for he had purchased it from an impecunious peer several years ago—with the wealth accumulated by his many shady transactions, and by the legitimate profits of his own business, with the League of the Green Triangle.

Sir Roger was fond of display and ostentation, and house-parties were common affairs at Melford Dene. This gathering, however, was very different from all the others that had taken place. It was not merely a pleasure party, but one with a set and definite purpose.

There were many well-known people present, including a fair proportion of ladies. Vera Zingrave, the professor's stepdaughter, was one of the guests, but she was chaperoned by an elderly maiden lady. Her father was too busy in London, attending lectures, etc., to accompany his daughter.

Douglas Clifford was very glad of this; for, although he was confident of his disguise, he would have been uncomfortable had he been under the scrutiny of Zingrave himself. The others, he was sure, would never entertain a suspicion against him.

He and Vera met before they had been at Melford Dene a couple of hours. And the meeting was a pleasant one for both. For they had seen one another on many an occasion before this—and Clifford had long since admitted frankly to himself that he was very much in love with Vera. And she—he felt sure—cared for him more than a little.

Vera Zingrave, although the stepdaughter of one of the greatest rogues of the century, was absolutely untainted by the villainy which the professor participated in. She was just a beautiful, pure, innocent girl, and knew nothing of the league. Her father had kept his dreadful secret well.

She had met Clifford years before, previous to his incarceration by the league, and she had met him often more recently. And the pair had, from the first, been drawn strangely towards one another. Clifford had explained his disguise by vague statements, and she knew that Mr. John Merrick was, in reality, a young man.

On many an occasion Clifford had felt like blurting out the truth regarding her stepfather, but he had always refrained. And so Vera was still in ignorance of the terrible truth. Some day she would have to be told; but Clifford frankly shrank from the task of telling her. The revelation would cause her pain and trouble—and for Vera to suffer a second's pain was misery to Clifford.

In spite of the fact that there was grim tragedy in the air, both Clifford and Nelson Lee enjoyed themselves the evening of their arrival. Sir Roger Hogarth, James Coldrey, and Dudley Foxcroft were all highly elated and in the best of spirits. They had good reason to be—for the league's plans were running as on oiled wheels.

Perhaps they would not have felt so confident had they known the real identity of Major-general Burns!

All was gaiety and laughter. After dinner there was a bit of an impromptu dance in the resplendent dancing-hall, and the house-party was already an assured success. Everybody got on well with everybody else, and the thought of tragedy and death was far from the guests' minds—with the exception of the Governing Members, and Nelson Lee, and Clifford. These latter scarcely thought of anything else but the actual grimness of this apparently gay gathering.

Throughout the evening Nelson Lee was strictly on the alert. But nothing occurred to excite his suspicions. Everything was in perfect order. The detective was worried more than a little, and would have given much for an opportunity of learning the league's settled plans.

When the hour came for the party to retire, Nelson Lee went to his room, after a final smoke in Sir Roger's library with the rest of the gentlemen. But the famous detective did not sleep. Far into the small hours he remained wide awake and absolutely upon the alert. But the great house was still and quiet; and at last Nelson Lee slipped between the sheets and instantly fell into undisturbed slumber. He was confident by this time that the league intended no action at present.

In the morning, at breakfast-time, something occurred which instantly gave Nelson Lee a clue as to the league's probable course of campaign. The detective was sitting next to Coldrey, and the whole party were gay, and

busily making plans for the day's doings. The weather was magnificent, and so everybody was anxious to be out-of-doors.

A good few were going golfing, others for a ramble through the park; but Coldrey apparently had an idea of his own.

"That little steam-launch of yours, Sir Roger, looks a splendid little craft," he said, as he sipped his coffee. "I should like to go for a little run on the lake, this morning, if you'll consent to come with me as passenger."

"I'm afraid you'll have to find somebody else," laughed Sir Roger Hogarth, from the head of the table. "I'm booked for golf this morning, Coldrey."

"The general will go with you," exclaimed Foxcroft. "You're interested with boating, aren't you, Burns?"

"Well, yes, to a certain extent," agreed Nelson Lee guardedly. "but I don't understand much about small steam-launches; and if Coldrey's knowledge amounts to no more than mine, we shall probably both go to the bottom!"

There was a general laugh.

"Well, there's always a chance of going down when you're on the water," smiled Coldrey. "But I think I shall be able to manage this little craft all right. Will you come with me, general? We'll have a fine little cruise, just the pair of us, while the others go gallivanting about on their different pleasures."

Nelson Lee laughed.

"All right, I'll go with you, Coldrey!" he agreed readily. "Might as well do that as anything else. I don't feel much inclined for golf this morning."

He bent over his plate as he finished speaking—but did not fail to observe a quick flash of the eyes which passed between Coldrey and Sir Roger. Immediately Nelson Lee was convinced that the scoundrels intended dealing with him—under the supposition that he was General Burns—that morning. Well; perhaps events wouldn't go quite so smoothly as his enemies anticipated.

After breakfast the detective was missing for a while, and when he turned up upon the broad terrace again, he found Coldrey already awaiting him. The rest of the party had gone, or were going, their separate ways.

"Hallo, here you are, general!" exclaimed Coldrey cheerily. "I've been waiting for you for ten minutes or more."

"Must have a cigar to start the day with," grunted Nelson Lee. "Don't suppose I shall feel much like smoking, though, once I get on that cockle-shell of a craft."

"You've been looking at it, then?" chuckled Coldrey.

"Yes; and I can't say I'm mightily impressed," replied Nelson Lee. "I'm not exactly keen on this trip, Coldrey, but we might as well go."

They walked off, the solicitor smiling a little to himself. Nelson Lee had uttered his words in the hearing of Sir Roger's butler—and that might mean a lot later on.

They walked through the park until they reached a thick plantation. Passing through this, steeply down-hill, they came in view of the lake. The latter was a big expanse of water, two miles long, and over a mile broad—an exceptionally large lake to be hidden away in the valley. For the water was surrounded on all sides by dense plantations, and much could happen upon the lake without a soul being the wiser. It was, in fact, an ideal spot for the morning's grim work.

Nelson Lee had not failed to observe one very significant fact. Sir Roger Hogarth and Dudley Foxcroft had arranged things so cunningly that the

rest of the house-party would be a considerable distance from the lake during the time of the little launch's cruise. There was no possibility whatever of anybody seeing what actually had happened.

When Nelson Lee and Coldrey arrived at the boathouse, they found that Sir Roger's chauffeur had been there for a quarter of an hour, and steam was almost up in the tiny boiler.

The launch was one of the smallest Nelson Lee had ever seen, and was almost no bigger than a motor-boat. It was, in fact, one specially constructed to Sir Roger's orders, for cruising about the lake. The steam was not generated by a coal fire, but by oil, and the control was simplicity itself. Once the oil was burning and steam up, the launch was quite equal to a whole morning's cruising.

The chauffeur was sent off immediately, and Nelson Lee and Coldrey stepped into the boat and pushed it out through the wide doorway into the open. Coldrey was sure that the chauffeur would not hang about, for he had orders to take the car out on a journey immediately. Nelson Lee and Coldrey, in fact, had the lake completely to themselves.

In spite of the fact that Coldrey affected a cheerful, easy manner, Nelson Lee noted that his companion was actually ill-at-ease and decidedly nervous. The thoughts of the crime he had in mind affected him more than he would have admitted.

"The infernal thing's hissing, Coldrey!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "It steam up? Better turn a tap on, or something, or we shall burst!"

Coldrey laughed.

"It's only the safety-valve," he smiled. "There's a good head of steam in the boiler, general. By Jove, we shall have a splendid cruise."

Nelson Lee took his seat, and Coldrey opened the throttle. Instantly the little propellor began to revolve, and the launch slowly moved out on to the bosom of the lake. It was a neat little craft, and slid through the water smoothly and quietly, puffing away with gentle throbs.

Coldrey was merry and gay; and his companion affected to be much interested in the scenery and the lake. Yet, in reality, "General Burns" was very much on the alert. He expected the solicitor to act soon now—and he was not mistaken.

When the launch was just about in the centre of the expanse of water Coldrey closed the throttle and stopped the engine. Then he bent over the machinery as though looking for something.

"Didn't you hear it?" he asked. "There's something wrong— Ah, look here!"

Nelson Lee leaned over, and looked also.

Without a second's warning James Coldrey lifted aloft a heavy steel implement, and it descended with deadly precision. Nelson Lee had expected something of the sort; but he had certainly not been prepared for such a sudden attack.

He had intended warding off any blow which was aimed at him, for he had been positive that Coldrey would attack him. Now, however, he realised, all in a flash, that he had a terrible foe to deal with. He twisted with amazing quickness, and the steel weapon, swinging down, failed to take full effect.

Had it struck the detective's head fairly and squarely, he would probably have been brained. As it was, the blow was a glancing one, and he only pitched forward, dazed and stunned. He lay, perfectly still, at his enemy's mercy.

"Thunder! The hound nearly wriggled away!" snarled Coldrey, between his teeth. "I've got the worst over, though! Now for quick action!"

He looked round swiftly and keenly. But nothing met his gaze but water and trees. He knew, in fact, that not a soul was within sight or earshot. Hogarth and Foxcroft were taking care of that.

But he was mistaken, after all.

For, perched in a tree, absolutely hidden from view, was a small, nimble form. It was none other than Nipper, Nelson Lee's clever young assistant. Nipper was disguised as a youthful pedlar, and he had stolen into the grounds of Melford Dene, and had seen his master and Coldrey embark on their cruise.

After that he had climbed into a tree, and had followed the course of the launch through a pair of powerful field-glasses. He had seen the little craft stop—and he had seen Coldrey's successful attack upon Nelson Lee. Now, pale-faced and breathing hard, he glued his eyes to the binoculars, and watched in an agony of suspense.

"Oh, guv'nor, you weren't quick enough!" he gasped, in despair. "The rotter downed you before you could turn! I've never seen such a sudden attack!"

The glasses brought the launch astonishingly near to him, and he could see everything that Coldrey was doing. The situation was terribly galling. He could actually see his master at the mercy of a murderous scoundrel, and yet could not lift a finger to help. And, moreover, he knew that he could not obtain help. He could only sit in the tree and watch.

"Great goodness! What's Coldrey doing now?" gasped Nipper to himself.

But even as he put the question he knew very well what Coldrey was doing. Very rapidly, Coldrey was tying Nelson Lee's feet together, and then Nipper saw something which made his heart jump. Fixed to the rope was a large, heavy weight!

"Oh!" cried Nipper aloud. "Oh, the guv'nor's helpless, and he's going to be 'chucked overboard with his feet tied, and with a weight attached. He'll sink like a stone, and—and—— Oh, what can I do?"

He knew, in the same breath, what he could do. And that was nothing—absolutely nothing—except watch in silent horror. Almost before he could steady the glasses again, Coldrey proceeded with his dreadful work.

With cold-blooded deliberation, which caused Nipper to shudder, Coldrey dragged his helpless victim to the stern of the little launch. He lifted the weight, and dropped it over the stern, and then slid Nelson Lee's unconscious form into the water.

For a second Nipper saw his master's disguised face, immobile and senseless; then Coldrey released his grip, and Nelson Lee slipped quietly and silently into the cold, deep water. A few bubbles marked the surface, and then—then——

Nipper almost screamed with helplessness and horror.

"He's gone!" he panted huskily. "The guv'nor's gone! Oh, what shall I do—what shall I do? That weight! There's no escape—he's unconscious! That weight will drag him to the bottom, and even if the water restores his senses, he'll be drowned—— Oh!"

The lad covered his face with his hands. The whole thing was so ghastly that Nipper could scarcely breathe. He was sobbing almost hysterically; for Nipper loved his master devotedly, and to see Nelson Lee actually murdered before his eyes was a horrible thing. He could not help in the least; he could not lift a finger to assist the doomed detective.

With a tremendous effort of will—for Nipper was one of the pluckiest young beggars on this earth—he placed the binoculars to his eyes again. But for a moment he could not see, for his eyes were blinded by the flood of tears which involuntarily gushed forth.

Impatiently Nipper wiped the moisture away, and when he looked through the glasses again he saw that Coldrey was still busy. The scoundrel had donned a lifebelt, and was bending down intent upon something in the interior of the launch. There was a tremendous head of steam generated now, and it was hissing from the safety valve in a roaring column.

"The boat's sinking!" gasped Nipper. "Oh, I understand! The brute is going to make out that there's been an accident, and that the gov'nor's got drowned!"

And there was no doubt that Nipper's guess was correct. For almost immediately afterwards Coldrey leapt into the water and commenced swimming slowly—for the lifebelt hampered him—towards the nearest point of land.

When he had separated himself from the launch by about two hundred yards Nipper saw that the little boat was bows down in the water, the stern sticking into the air at an acute angle.

Of Nelson Lee there had been no sign since he plunged silently into the depths. In a dull, agonised way, Nipper realised that he would never see his beloved master again. Not for a second did the lad entertain the faintest hope. With his own eyes he had seen Nelson Lee plunged to certain death—and Nipper always believed the evidence of his own eyes.

Suddenly the launch gave a final lurch and slid to its last resting-place. A great column of steam arose, and then, with a shock which gave Nipper a start, there was a terrific explosion.

The boiler of the launch had burst!

The explosion was a dull, booming one, and must have been heard for miles. Coldrey, being comparatively close, was almost deafened by the noise; but he smiled grimly to himself and swam on steadily. His mission was accomplished! The second of the ill-fated trio had been dealt with.

It was slow work reaching the shore, and while he was still a little distance out he observed a crowd of people rushing round the bank towards the spot where he would land. Douglas Clifford and Vera Zingrave were among the excited little throng. Dudley Foxcroft, in fact, had heard the explosion, and had taken it as a signal that success had crowned Coldrey's efforts. And upon his reaching the lake side he saw that his supposition had been correct; for the launch had disappeared, and Coldrey was swimming shorewards—alone!

Indeed, the solicitor was nearly exhausted when he finally reached the bank. There was no make-belief about it. The swim had been a long one in the icy water, and Coldrey was not accustomed to such strenuous exercise.

He was dragged out by Clifford and Foxcroft, the others looking on in horror and filled with dread foreboding.

"The general!" gasped Clifford, his heart thumping with terrible doubts. "What's happened to General Burns, Coldrey?"

Coldrey panted heavily, and sank to the grass.

"Engine went wrong!" he whispered hoarsely. "Launch sank—haven't seen Burns since explosion. He's drowned! I tried to save him——"

Clifford staggered back as though struck.

"Drowned!" he echoed, with agony in his voice. "General Burns is drowned! Great Heaven! It can't be true!"

"I did my best!" groaned Coldrey. "Engine smashed—hole in boat—sank in two minutes! Only saw Burns for a second. He was struck, I believe, by wreckage. It was terrible—terrible!"

Dudley Foxcroft's eyes glittered with triumph for a fraction of a second, and then he uttered an exclamation of startled horror.

"What a tragedy!" he said huskily. "Poor Coldrey! You did your best, we know!"

Coldrey lay with closed eyes, breathing heavily. The others looked on, too shocked by the grim tragedy to say much. Douglas Clifford had a dull look in his eyes. For he knew it was not Major-general Burns who had met a terrible death, but Nelson Lee! And Clifford was dumb with the realisation of it. Nelson Lee dead! It was too ghastly to think of. In his efforts to save other lives, the great detective had sacrificed his own! Fate had worked in cruel paths indeed!

CHAPTER VII.

After Dark—Nipper's Joy—An Exclamation—Clifford Speaks.

TRAGEDY was in the air at Melford Dene during the rest of that day. The house-party, so gay and cheerful in the morning, was now subdued and quiet. Faces were grave and serious, and the guests spoke in low, quiet voices.

By six o'clock in the evening Coldrey had recovered sufficiently to sit in a big chair before the fire and tell of the tragic "accident." He appeared to be almost broken-down with grief, and everybody pitied him sincerely. Duncan Stone, in fact, was so upset that he was pale and haggard. The horror of death—and especially sudden, unforeseen death—always affected him greatly.

Coldrey's story was swallowed whole by everybody—everybody, that is, except Clifford. The young man realised that the affair had been no accident. It was part of the league's grim plot. The league, of course, had no idea that they had really failed, for Coldrey was certainly under the impression that he had drowned General Burns. Nelson Lee, in his efforts to frustrate the villains, had fallen a victim himself.

Clifford was so tremendously worried that he hardly knew what he was doing. He dare not say a word, for he felt sure that not a soul would believe him if he made his accusations. He had not the slightest atom of proof to offer.

Sir Roger Hogarth, apparently gravely troubled, declared that it would be useless to resort to dragging operations in the lake. The water was of an unknown depth, and it was quite impossible to recover either the launch or the body.

The house-party, of course, was at an end. The guests could not possibly remain after such a tragic occurrence. The majority of them would leave Melford Dene the next morning.

Clifford was very thankful for one thing. By a previous arrangement he had agreed to meet Nipper at a secluded spot a short distance from the lodge-gates at seven o'clock exactly. Possibly Nelson Lee had advised the meeting of his two faithful lieutenants, guessing that something might happen to himself.

Everybody at the great mansion could talk of nothing else but the tragedy of the morning. Coldrey's story, and the utter absence of General Burns, left absolutely no doubt as to the latter's fate. Clifford was the only one who knew the real, awful facts.

At a quarter to seven he went out into the grounds for a smoke. Once under the dark sky he set out briskly down the drive, and arrived in the roadway well before seven.

The rendezvous was a little stile a short distance up the road. And when Clifford arrived a dim, small form parted from the dense blackness of the hedge, and clutched his arm. It was Nipper—Nipper, poor lad, nearly out of his mind with distraction.

"Is that you, Mr. Clifford?" he whispered.

"Yes!" answered Clifford quickly. "Heavens, Nipper, what a terrible thing has happened to-day! Mr. Lee has been murdered!"

"I—I can't realise it," muttered Nipper, in a ghost of his ordinary voice. "And yet I saw it done—I saw everything! Oh, I've been almost mad ever since!"

Clifford gripped the lad's shoulders.

"You saw it done?" he asked, his worst fears confirmed. "Then there is not the slightest suspicion of doubt? Mr. Lee was actually done to death?"

In a heart-broken voice Nipper told his companion what he had seen that morning through his binoculars. Clifford listened in silence.

"It was absolutely cold-blooded!" Nipper said fiercely. "Mr. Lee was taken unawares and rendered senseless. Then he was flung into the water with a great weight tied to him. Oh, the fiends—the heartless devils!"

"Come, Nipper, you mustn't get hysterical——"

"No; we shall need all our coolness," said Nipper bravely. "You and I have got to bring Coldrey to the gallows. Poor old gov'nor! To think that we shall never see him again——"

"There's not the slightest need to think that, my dear Nipper, for you can see me now if you choose to exercise your eyes," said a cool, well-known voice. "I am very happy to inform you that my body is not reclining peacefully upon the bed of the lake."

Nipper and Clifford swung round with their hearts in their mouths. A dim form had silently approached and was now standing before them, a glowing cigar-end faintly illuminating the grizzled features of General Burns.

"Gov'nor!" cried Nipper chokingly. "Is—is it really you?"

"Well, I still look like the general, but it's undoubtedly I," replied Nelson Lee coolly.

Amazing, stupifying, as it seemed, the new-comer actually was the celebrated detective.

Nipper simply leapt forward and hugged his master. And the lad was thankful for the darkness, for it served to conceal the tears of joy which had started from his eyes. For a moment Nipper was almost overcome.

"Oh, gov'nor," he gasped, "we thought you were dead! We were sure of it—positive of it! We'd given up every vestige of hope. And now you turn up as safe and sound as though nothing had happened. Oh, you old bounder!"

"That's not the way to talk to your master, young 'un!" said Nelson Lee, with mock severity. "My dear Clifford, you'll ring my arm off if you pump at it much longer. Upon my soul, one might think I'd come back from the dead."

Clifford took a deep breath.

"What does it mean, Mr. Lee?" he asked huskily. "Nipper says that he actually saw you drowned before his eyes! Everybody at Melford is mourning your fate—or, rather, the fate of the general, which amounts to the same thing."

"Excellent!" Nelson Lee exclaimed softly. "That is just what I wanted. Coldrey and his associates are now completely off their guard. I fancy it will be a comparatively easy matter to entrap Coldrey like the proverbial rat."

"He's worse than a rat!" said Nipper candidly, his face glowing with sheer delight, and feeling as though he'd like to jump yards in the air. "Coldrey's a reptile—an insect—a rotten scorpion!"

"Our excellent friend would hardly feel complimented," laughed the detective.

"Oh, blow it!" exclaimed Nipper. "What's the meaning of it, guv'nor? You've got to explain right away. It's the most amazing thing I've ever known. I saw you whacked on the napper, and I saw you chucked overboard with a weight tied to your tootsies. I don't see how you possibly could have escaped. It's simply astounding!"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"On the contrary, my good Nipper, my escape from death was simplicity itself," he replied calmly. "There was not even anything startling in it. If you both care to listen I will explain how I succeeded in bluffing our enemies."

"But—but that weight tied round your——"

"Don't interrupt, young 'un," went on Nelson Lee. "As soon as I heard Coldrey suggest a trip on the lake with me alone I guessed that grim work was afoot. Foxcroft and Hogarth made convenient arrangements for the disposal of the rest of the party, which would leave the lake deserted save for Coldrey and myself. I knew at once that Coldrey would attempt to murder me."

"I thought the same thing," remarked Clifford. "But I was perfectly easy in mind. I was sure that you would not fall into the trap."

"Well, you can guess that I was strictly upon the alert," said the detective. "Immediately after breakfast I went down to the boathouse and had a look at the launch. I saw at once that if Coldrey succeeded in stunning me he would be compelled to drop my body over the stern—for the launch was so small that it would have been risky to place so much weight upon either of the sides. The stern, too, offered the handiest place for dropping a dead weight like myself overside. The idea instantly occurred to me that it would be rather a neat thing to allow Coldrey to drown me—apparently—and thus gain a big advantage over the common foe. Rather curiously I guessed actually what was going to happen, for I did not fail to observe a heavy weight which was already in the launch. There was also a length of stout rope. I realised that a grim time was ahead of me, and accordingly made preparations."

"What did you do?" asked Clifford curiously.

"Within the boathouse I observed a length of hose-piping, and the sight of it put an idea into my head," replied Nelson Lee. "Without much difficulty I attached a long line to the stern of the boat, together with the rubber hosepipe. The end of the pipe was well out of the water, but safe from observation. And both pipe and line were fixed in such a manner that they would not foul the propeller. My preparation completed, I left the boathouse—and only just in time, for Sir Roger's chauffeur put in an appearance a few minutes afterwards. I was quite confident that I could work the scheme I had in mind, and was fully prepared to fall into the trap which was set for me."

"By gum, what a stunning wheeze!" exclaimed Nipper, with shining eyes. "Oh, guv'nor, what a chap you are for ripping ideas!"

"Well, we started on the cruise," continued the detective calmly. "Coldrey evidently meant to do the job straight away, for as soon as we reached the centre of the lake, he stopped the engine, and attacked me. Although apparently unsuspecting, I was really keenly on the alert. I

saw Coldrey raise his weapon, and twisted round at precisely the correct second."

"But the rotter struck you a terrific blow, sir."

"So it seemed, Nipper," replied Nelson Lee. "In reality, I met the iron spanner—or whatever it was—before Coldrey's arm had gathered any force. Even then I received a pretty painful knock; but my wig and my hat dulled the blow considerably. Of course, I fell to the floor of the launch, seemingly unconscious. And Coldrey was so intent upon getting me overside that he never suspected a trick. He merely tied my feet, and attached the leaden weight."

"By Jove, you must have felt pretty uncomfortable!" exclaimed Clifford.

"Well, that was only natural, for no man is pleased at the prospect of a plunge into icy water at this time of the year," replied the detective. "As for the thought of death, that didn't worry me in the least. I knew that I was safe enough. As soon as I was slipped over the stern—as I knew I should be—I dropped fairly slowly through the water, and clutched at the rope I had placed in readiness. Holding on to this, I grabbed the end of the hosepipe, and removed a cork I had previously jammed in. Then it was quite a simple matter for me to breathe through the pipe, while I relieved myself of the ropes and the weight."

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Clifford enthusiastically.

"My dear fellow, don't keep repeating that!" said Nelson Lee. "The thing was actually commonplace. Even if I had missed the rope I should not have drowned. The weight carried me down, of course, but I could have ripped out my clasp-knife and cut myself free in a moment. I was not in the slightest danger for a second. But the rope and the hosepipe made my task easier and more simple."

"Where were you when the explosion occurred?" asked Nipper.

"Oh, quite a safe distance away, placidly paddling my way towards the bank, with my head under water," answered Nelson Lee calmly. "I'm a good swimmer, and it was a simple task. Now and again I paused to take breath; but I'll warrant nobody spotted me swimming to the shore. You see, I soon cut myself free, and then struck away from the launch. Upon the whole I am feeling pleased with myself."

"And with excellent reason," exclaimed Clifford quickly. "Everybody is positive that you were drowned. Coldrey himself hasn't the slightest suspicion that his murderous scheme failed."

"That's just what I required," said the detective. "Now, Nipper, as you're so glad to see me, perhaps you'll undertake a little commission."

"Fifty, if you like, sir!" replied Nipper joyously.

"Then hurry to the post-office and despatch a wire to Detective-inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard," said Nelson Lee briskly. "Tell him to meet you at eleven o'clock to-night—he can easily manage to reach Melford by that time. And the pair of you are to wait at this stile for my orders."

"What's the programme, Lee?" asked Clifford eagerly.

"Ah, I'm a bit lazy on that point myself," answered the detective. "I fancy, however, that our friends, the enemy, will lay themselves open to capture before so very long. In any case, Coldrey is doomed, for I have only to give evidence of his attempted murder, and he will be instantly arrested. That, in fact, is why I want Lennard to come. After all, Coldrey is the man I've decided to get."

"And he's finished, sir—absolutely!" said Nipper. "I was a witness of the whole affair. Why not have him arrested straight away, by the local police?"

"Because I wish to institute a few quiet investigations," replied Nelson Lee. "Don't forget that Slone is still on the league's list. If possible, I

want to discover by what means the league intends to deal with him. It is extremely improbable, of course, that he will be interfered with while staying down here."

Very shortly afterwards Douglas Clifford made his way back to Melford Dene. But he was now in a very different mood. The knowledge that Nelson Lee was very much alive, and that Coldrey was positively "booked," was like a tonic to Clifford. The situation, indeed, was absolutely in favour of Nelson Lee. James Coldrey was fondly telling himself that everything was perfectly all right—while, in cold truth, he was hopelessly trapped. The terrible charge of attempted murder—deliberate, cold-blooded murder—could be brought against him at any moment.

Clifford passed into the mansion as though he were walking on springs, puffing at his cigarette with keen enjoyment. Then he remembered himself, and allowed his face to become grave and troubled, in keeping with the general gloom of the house.

He passed through the conservatory into one of the smaller reception-rooms. The room was in darkness, except for the flickering, cheerful light of the fire. And as Clifford glanced towards the glowing coals, his face flushed with pleasure.

"Miss Zingrave!" he exclaimed softly. "I didn't expect to find you here!"

Vera was sitting before the fire, in the depths of a big easy-chair. She looked up, with a bright smile, as she heard Clifford's voice. And the young man thought he had never seen her look so pretty before.

And it was not because Clifford was in love with her that he thought her so pretty. She was, in fact, a strikingly beautiful girl—graceful, dainty, and altogether delightful. Already she and Clifford had passed many happy hours together since their arrival at Melford Dene. The tragic occurrence of the morning, however, had altered everything. Vera was obviously pleased to see Clifford.

"I can't keep my thoughts off to-day's terrible tragedy," she said, in a sad voice. "Oh, how unwise the general was to go on that trip. Even at the breakfast-table he expressed doubts, Mr. Merrick."

Vera knew Clifford's identity well enough, but, of course, she respected his secret. He seated himself close beside her, and looked at her dainty little face in the light of the fire. After a glance round, to assure himself that they were quite alone, he bent forward.

"I am not in a position to tell you any facts," he said softly, "but there will be a surprise for you before so very long, Miss Zingrave."

"A surprise?" she asked, lifting her long lashes. "Oh, you can't mean in connection with that awful affair of the launch?"

"I do," replied Clifford. "I wish I could be more explicit; but it is not within my power to say more than this—there is absolutely no need for you to worry yourself over the tragedy of the lake. In reality, it was not such a terrible occurrence— Oh, but I must not let my tongue run away with me. Perhaps to-night you will be enlightened."

Vera was exceedingly curious.

"Oh, I don't understand!" she exclaimed, looking at Clifford with wide-open eyes. "General Burns was drowned—he couldn't possibly have escaped. Do—do you mean to suggest——"

"I suggest nothing, except that we dismiss the subject in favour of one much more interesting," replied Clifford, without giving her time to protest.

"By Jove, you do look delightful in this firelight!" he added impulsively.

Vera blushed a little.

"Firelight is very deceptive, you know!" she murmured naively.

"Not in your case," he answered promptly. "I wish with all my heart I were in a different position," he went on, suddenly becoming serious, and talking in very low tones. "I am so terribly afraid that you will forget that I am really young, and not the old fogey I appear to be——"

"I shall never forget it," interrupted Vera simply. "I always picture you as you really are, and not as you appear to be. I, too, wish that you could become your own self. It would be so much better, wouldn't it?"

Clifford felt his heart jumping.

"Would you be really pleased?" he asked.

"I can't tell you how much it would please me," she replied gravely. "Oh, it would be splendid to see you again as you used to be when I first met you years ago. Perhaps some day, instead of looking old enough to be my father, you will look young enough to be my——"

Vera paused, slightly confused, realising that her impulsive words had a sound which was the reverse of formal. Clifford took instant advantage of his opening, and bent closer still, and looked straight into her eyes.

"Go on!" he murmured gently.

"There's nothing more to say," Vera answered shyly.

"Then I've got something to say," said Clifford, gripping one of her hands, and succumbing to the wild impulse of the moment. "Hang it all, I can't go on like I have been going on! You know well enough what I'm going to tell you, Miss Zingrave. Ever since I returned to London—ever since I met you in the vestibule of the Royce Hotel—I've had you in my thoughts constantly. It's not a bit of good beating about the bush," he added frankly. "I love you so much that I'm in constant fear of some other fellow turning up and claiming you. I think I should die if that happened! Vera, my darling, I wish to Heaven I could throw off this wretched disguise——"

"I think I understand," she said quietly, and quivering a little with the emotion of the moment, and rather taken aback by Clifford's direct methods of love-making. "I like you very much, Mr. Clifford—perhaps more than I care to say just now—but you really mustn't speak to me in this way."

"Why not?" asked Clifford quickly.

"Oh, can't you understand?" said the girl, in soft tones. "You are not yourself at all. You are apparently an elderly man, and you do not even use your own name. It is impossible—— Oh, you must forgive me for reminding you of all this, but can't you realise what I mean? Some day you will be able to resume your own identity."

"And then?" asked Clifford eagerly, his heart hammering. "What then?"

"Oh, then all sorts of things might happen," she smiled, with a roguish twinkle in her eyes. "You needn't be afraid of that other fellow coming along, because no such person exists!"

And Vera jumped up before Clifford could stop her, and tripped lightly out of the room. For a second he hesitated, and then sank back into his chair and stared into the heart of the fire. The glowing coals lit up his face, and it was flushed and happy. A joyful smile played about the corners of his mouth.

"By Jove!" he murmured gladly. "I'd wait years for that girl! But before I say another word to her about my feelings I must reveal to her the truth of her stepfather's villainy. After that——"

He paused, thinking deeply.

"Well, after that, as she herself said, all sorts of things might happen," he murmured. "And, by Jove, one thing—one certain thing—will happen!"

CHAPTER IX.

Some Interesting Information—Nelson Lee Makes Preparations.

THE night was very black, and Melford Dene was almost in darkness save for several lights gleaming out from upper storey windows.

The hour was not late, but most of the guests had retired early, for everybody's nerves were raw, and there was really nothing to sit up for. In the grounds a silent figure stood against a thick hedge, and looked at the mansion with grim satisfaction.

The figure was that of Nelson Lee.

The great detective had been prowling about the grounds of Melford Dene for two hours past. He had crawled up to windows on all sides of the building, in the hope of gaining some insight into the league's future plans. But so far his efforts had been unsuccessful.

In reality, Nelson Lee hardly expected to be successful. He was merely occupying his time until eleven-thirty, when he was to meet Nipper and Detective-inspector Lennard at the old stile. And he thought that he might as well be on the alert for any possible discovery.

To tell the truth, five minutes before he had been just about sick of his vigil, and had been on the point of departing. Then something happened which was to alter the whole course of his future plans. The electric light had suddenly been switched on in a room almost facing him. He knew at once that it was Sir Roger Hogarth's little "pet" study and smoking-room, to which he generally retired when in search of a quiet hour.

The library was a massive apartment, and was more or less used by any and every guest. But Sir Roger's little study was strictly allotted for his own private use. It was situated at the end of a long passage, and was quite by itself.

Upon seeing the light, Nelson Lee had had instant suspicions—more especially as he saw who had entered the room. The blind was up, and the detective noted that the occupants were Sir Roger Hogarth himself, Dudley Foxcroft, and James Coldrey—the three conspiring Governing Members of the Green Triangle.

"By James!" murmured Nelson Lee exultantly. "Luck at last! My waiting has not been in vain, after all. Unless I am greatly mistaken my three friends have retired to Sir Roger's den for a council of war. This is quite interesting!"

He slipped silently forward.

He reached the window and crouched silently there, but he could hear nothing but a low blur of voices. The words that were being uttered were indistinguishable.

Nelson Lee bit his lip.

"How infernally galling!" he told himself. "Very possibly the scoundrels are plotting something secret behind this window, and yet I can't hear a thing! I wonder if I dare——"

Without pausing to wonder any longer he climbed upon the window-sill which jutted out beyond the actual window, without making a sound.

The window actually was only open but a very few inches at the top; but he had, of course, been able to hear nothing from below. But when he was standing upon the window-sill, his ear was almost level with the opening between the top sash and the window-frame. And now, as he

had hoped, the voices became distinct and separate. He was forced to strain himself considerably, but his ears were always wonderfully keen—and exceptionally keen to-night. There was no wind, moreover, and utter silence reigned outside the house.

"I tell you everything is going wonderfully well," came Sir Roger's voice softly. "You brought off this morning's affair, Coldrey, in a masterful manner. Both Mexthorpe and Burns have now gone, and Slone alone remains."

"But you cannot possibly mean to do anything in connection with Slone——"

"Please let me do the talking, Coldrey," interjected Sir Roger. "Why do you suppose I got the pair of you here? Simply because Duncan Slone is going to be dealt with this very night!"

"Impossible!" came Foxcroft's voice sharply. "Be sensible, Sir Roger. If we kill Slone to-night there will be a terrible hubbub. So soon after the death of General Burns, another death would be regarded as more than suspicious!"

Hogarth laughed.

"On the contrary, Slone's death immediately would cause no suspicion whatever," he replied calmly. "That is why I am suggesting it. The very fact that Slone will be found dead to-morrow morning will be accepted as a regrettable outcome of the other tragedy. It will occasion no astonishment whatever!"

"The time is absolutely ripe for the final coup," exclaimed Sir Roger doggedly. "If you will listen carefully, I will explain why."

There was a moment's silence, and Nelson Lee set his lips in a thin line. His success was more than he had dared hope for.

"Once Slone is dead, then Sylvester's folly will have no harmful results," went on Sir Roger. "Moreover, the league will be the richer by three hundred thousand pounds—a small fortune in itself. The tontine is a perfectly legal affair, and you, Coldrey, having charge of it, will readily prove to the different executors of the dead men that the money is legally the property of yourself, Foxcroft, and I. Foul play will never be suspected, for we are all known to be rich men. After Slone's death the tontine will be declared 'off' by the mutual consent of the three of us."

"Exactly!" interjected Foxcroft. "We know all this, Sir Roger. But I strongly disadvise any action with regard to Slone for at least a month——"

"Tut-tut! I tell you the time is ripe to-night," persisted Hogarth. "If you would only use your brains you would know that I am speaking sense. But perhaps the significance of Slone's talk at dinner-time last night was lost upon you? His demeanour to-night, moreover, makes me all the more certain that prompt action will be the wisest."

Coldrey made a low remark, but Nelson Lee failed to hear it.

"Then I will tell you," proceeded Sir Roger. "What did Slone say last night? He declared that when he was unusually upset he invariably walked in his sleep—not sometimes, you understand, but always. He's a confirmed somnambulist, but is perfectly normal so long as things go smoothly. Under the stress of excessive worry or shock he rises from his bed and walks in his sleep."

"By Jove!" breathed Nelson Lee to himself. "I think I understand!"

"Slone to-night was haggard and pale," went on Hogarth. "It is almost a certainty that his somnambulistical proclivities will assert themselves during the night. Cannot you see why I am so dead-set upon prompt action?"

"Yes. I grasp the significance of your argument now!" Foxcroft exclaimed.

"Really our task is made extremely simple," said Sir Roger grimly. "You, Coldrey, will keep strict watch in the upper corridor to-night. When Slone appears—as I am positive he will—your task will be simple. What suspicions will be aroused if Slone is discovered in the morning dead upon the gravel in his night clothes?"

"Splendid!" ejaculated Dudley Foxcroft. "Not a soul will dream of foul play. Everybody heard Slone talk about somnambulism, and it will be unanimously thought that he walked in his sleep, his mind disturbed by General Burnes's death, and fell out of a window. By thunder, fate is helping us indeed!"

"The thing is so simple that there is not the slightest risk attached to it," came Sir Roger's voice again. "The house is practically asleep even now, and the work can be done without a soul knowing. A gardener, probably, will find Slone's body in the morning, and there will, of course, be a fresh sensation. But suspicions—none. An inquest will be held, and we shall give evidence of Slone's statement regarding his habit of walking in his sleep. What is more natural than the obvious explanation? Slone was upset by the general's tragic death, he walked in sleep, and evidently fell from a window. The jury can bring in no other verdict than that of accidental death, or death from misadventure. As I said before, the double tragedy will cause no sensational comment. Slone's death will be accepted as an outcome of Burnes's."

There was a moment's silence; then Foxcroft spoke again.

"Suppose Slone does not walk to-night?"

"I am positive that he will," replied the scoundrelly baronet. "But in the unlikely event of his sleeping peacefully— Well, if the night wears on, and he does not appear, it will be simple to enter his bedroom, stun him, and then throw him out of his own window. There are many ways. The ultimate result will be just the same."

"Yes, the thing is dead easy," remarked Coldrey. "I cannot see a flaw, and I congratulate you, Sir Roger, for your shrewdness. The plan has the added advantage of finishing the business straight out of hand. Events could not have shaped themselves better."

Perhaps Coldrey would not have made that remark had he been aware of the keen ear which was listening to the whole vile, murderous plot—the ear of the man the rogues thought they had already done to death.

"Coldrey is right—absolutely right!" murmured Nelson Lee, with terrible grimaces. "Events could not have shaped themselves better. But the result of this precious plot will be very different from the one my cold-blooded friends anticipate. It will end in the utter and complete downfall of still another Governing Member of the League of the Green Triangle!"

CHAPTER X.

The Sleepwalker—On the Parapet—Another Nail in the League's Coffin.

BOOM BOOM!"

Two o'clock boomed out solemnly from the great clock in the tower over the main building of Melford Dene. The whole mansion was in utter darkness, and the guests had long since fallen into the land of dreams.

In the west corridor, however, a dim figure lurked in one of the dark recesses. It was James Coldrey, waiting—waiting for his intended victim

to appear. Within sight of where he stood, he could clearly see the door of Duncan Slone's room.

But, although he had kept his vigil for an hour and a half, so far nothing had occurred. Slone had not appeared, and the whole house was wrapped in silence. The dread work could be accomplished, when the time came, without the slightest risk.

Coldrey was cold and rather nervous. The wait had told on his nerves considerably. But he was a callous rogue, and was quite prepared for his murderous task. If Slone did not appear by four o'clock, then other methods were to be employed.

Another ten minutes passed, and then Coldrey quivered a little. A faint sound had reached his ears. He drew himself up, alert and excited. His eyes were fixed steadily upon Duncan Slone's door.

"Ah!"

The exclamation was noiseless—a mere, silent intake of breath.

Slone's door was slowly opening!

A moment later the sleepwalker appeared, and Coldrey crouched back, quivering with intensity. Slowly and deliberately, Slone turned into the corridor and commenced walking away. He was attired in his dressing-gown, and a big white sleeping-cap adorned his head. Coldrey could scarcely see this, for the dimness was thick.

Like a shadow, the solicitor crept after his victim, intent upon discovering Slone's somnambulistic intentions before the attack. If the sleepwalker showed any signs of descending to the ground floor, then Coldrey would pounce upon him immediately.

But Slone walked on until he came to a small staircase, leading to the attic floors. Up these he went, slowly and silently, like a grim ghost. Coldrey was rather unnerved by the deliberateness of the sleepwalker's gait.

He stole slowly and silently after the other.

Arriving upon the upper floor, Slone paced the passage until he came to a little door. This he slowly opened, and disappeared.

"He's going up the tower stairs!" murmured Coldrey. "By Heaven, can it be his object to walk upon the roof? There is a door leading out of the turret right on to the roof itself! My task will be simple if Slone gets on the roof. A push, and all will be over!"

Coldrey was fairly excited with triumph by now. He slipped through the little doorway in the track of Slone, and heard the latter ascending the circular stone steps which led to the roof-door.

The roof of the main building of Melford Dene was curiously constructed. Right on the top was a flat platform, from which the surrounding country could be seen for miles, and from the platform it was possible to walk along the stone parapets, a foot-and-a-half wide—which surmounted the old walls.

As Coldrey crept up the stone stairs, he heard a bolt quietly shot in its socket, and when he arrived at the top the cold night air fanned his face.

Duncan Slone was on the roof!

Coldrey gazed out keenly, and stepped upon the platform. The night was not black, for a half-moon was striving to pierce the dark clouds. Slone had already left the platform, and he was standing perfectly still upon the narrow ledge, seemingly a statue.

"By the powers," gasped Coldrey, "I could not wish for a finer opportunity!"

For his victim was standing perfectly still, with his back turned, a sheer drop of seventy feet before him! The face of the building was smooth, with no projections whatever. One little push, and Duncan Slone would plunge to certain death!

Without delay—for delay might rob him of the opportunity—Coldrey slipped forward on to the precarious ledge. It amazed him to see Slone standing there, asleep, and utterly unconscious of the dread peril in which he stood. Even without Coldrey's helping hand, he might probably fall to his doom.

But Coldrey meant to make certain.

Under ordinary circumstances he would not have ventured upon that dangerous parapet, but he was thrilled with the prospect of easy victory now, and never thought of danger. Silently, softly, crouching with his hands outstretched, he moved nearer and nearer to the still, statue-like figure of the unconscious sleepwalker.

It was a grim picture—the helpless somnambulist and the intended murderer!

And but for these two, the scene was desolate and deserted. The great house was asleep, and the night was still and dark. As Coldrey neared his victim, however, the moon slowly came out from retirement, and shed a weak, watery light upon the scantily clothed sleepwalker.

Then, quite amazingly sudden, a change occurred. Duncan Slone turned swiftly, and with one movement he tore his dressing-gown off, and slipped the sleeping-cap from his head. His face was turned towards Coldrey for the first time.

The solicitor halted as though turned to stone. A queer, choking sound came from his throat, and he awoke to activity. His hands clutched at his collar, and his face had turned to the colour of chalk.

"General Burns!" he screamed shrilly.

The face before him was the face of General Burns! Coldrey shivered with sheer, palpitating terror. His victim of the lake was standing before him—still, silent, and grim. The moonlight gleamed upon the general's face, and made it grey and cold. It was the face of a dead man!

A wild cry forced its way out of Coldrey's throat, and he turned to flee. In that awful second he thought that the dead had appeared before him, and he was filled with terrible, mad panic.

But the figure was that of Nelson Lee!

It was Nelson Lee who had lured Coldrey into the trap, so that another man, another witness, could catch the scoundrel at his terrible work. And that other witness was Detective-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard.

As Coldrey turned towards the platform, panic gave him assurance, and he reached the safety of the broad leads in three bounds; but he failed to reach the turret-door, for another figure stepped from behind a chimney-stack and barred his way.

"Caught red-handed!" exclaimed a grim voice. "James Coldrey, I arrest you——"

The solicitor snarled out an oath.

"A trap!" he shouted frenziedly, realisation dawning upon his scattered wits. "By thunder, you haven't got me yet!"

He wrenched himself away from Lennard's detaining grip, and turned towards the sloping tiles, which led to the very apex of the roof. In a second he was scrambling madly over the slippery tiles.

"The fool!" roared Nelson Lee. "He'll slip! He'll plunge——"

Even as the detective was speaking, James Coldrey gave voice to a dreadful shriek. He felt himself skidding, and knew the fate which was in store for him. It was the fate he had mapped out for Duncan Slone!

It was all over in a few seconds.

A slithering of feet, a final hoarse cry, and then a thud as Coldrey struck the projection at the edge of the roof. Next second he toppled over to his

doom. Nelson Lee and Detective-Inspector Lennard stood rooted to the spot, waiting—waiting——

Far below a faint, sickening "plop" sounded.

"Well," exclaimed Lennard huskily, "fate's decided things a heap quicker than the British criminal courts could have done."

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James Coldrey was dead when Nelson Lee reached the ground. His end had been merciful and sudden, although the cold-blooded scoundrel had done nothing to deserve mercy. Lennard frankly stated that, in all his experience, he had never seen anything quite so horrible as Coldrey's deadly attitude upon the ledge, when he had been about to hurl Duncan Slone—as he thought—to his death.

Nelson Lee had easily arranged the substitution. He had entered Slone's room by the window, and had warned the millionaire of the terrible fate in store for him. And, while Nipper escorted Slone to the village hotel, Nelson Lee remained and acted the sleepwalker's part.

Not for a moment had the detective anticipated such a dramatic finish to the case. The facts which came out at the inquest were bare, superficial ones. Nelson Lee himself did not appear in the affair at all, except in the personality of Major-general Burns.

It was universally thought that Burns himself had escaped from Coldrey, and that he had communicated with Scotland Yard. And Coldrey was the only criminal who was exposed. He was, in fact, the only one who could be exposed. There was no proof whatever against Sir Roger Hogarth or Dudley Foxcroft. They, Nelson Lee decided, would meet their just deserts later on.

The fontine was an absolute failure, for Coldrey's proven guilt made the whole thing null and void. The Earl of Mexthorpe was the only man who had suffered, and he would probably have died very shortly in any case.

Major-general Burns himself, when he interviewed Nelson Lee, was rather startled, but as all the facts of the case were kept out of the newspapers, he did not mind. Any publicity would have been distasteful to him.

James Coldrey was dead, and he received all the blame for the murderous plot. It was thought that he alone had planned it, and that he ultimately intended killing the other two—Hogarth and Foxcroft—as well, in order to win the fontine.

The League of the Green Triangle was never even thought of.

But Nelson Lee's campaign was progressing, nevertheless. His efforts had resulted in the foiling of Zingrave's foul scheme and the saving of two innocent lives, and another Governing Member had been dealt with.

The league, however, was materially as strong and as determined as ever. Revenue was still pouring into its coffers from hundreds of different quarters, and it was, as ever, a blight on the fair land of Britain.

Much was destined to happen. Countless adventures would have to be faced before the dreaded Green Triangle was beaten to its knees and finally stamped into extinction.

THE END.

Next week's long, complete tale will be entitled "The Mystery of Venice"—a tale of the "Black Wolf" and Nelson Lee.
Do Not Miss It.

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, make their camp in a cave. They are not left long in peace, however, for the brutes return to the attack a few hours afterwards in large numbers. (Now read on.)

QUICKLY now the threatening sounds increased. The growls and snarls became hoarser and more vicious; then one or two of the creatures would give vent to sudden howls, which the others took up in chorus. These turned to screams and shrieks, and they in turn grew in volume and intensity till the din became horrible to listen to.

"Saints deliver us!" muttered Mike. "Be the powers, 'tis Satan an' all his imps we've got t' deal with. 'This a priest we'll be whantin' to exorcise the fiends.'"

"It's five shillin's worth o' Guy Fawkes squibs an' crackers we want," said Cable. "That would be the very thing t' treat 'em to, I'm thinkin'."

Just then the clamour burst out into a roar; there was a rush at the entrance, and the boulder which blocked it began to rock.

The two leaders, aided by three others, were pushing against it with all their strength. They used their thick, heavy poles as levers; and when the rock was pushed bodily forwards by a sudden dash they levered it back.

But if the screaming, howling mob without were not exactly the uncanny imps Mike almost believed they must be, they were certainly perfect demons for strength. It had become a sort of pushing match, and those inside found it difficult to keep their feet on the smooth, rocky floor.

Once, Hugh slipped and fell; and as a consequence, the big stone was forced bodily back. A long arm with great, talon-like claws, appeared for a moment inside. Then there was an extra shriek of pain as Hugh recovered himself and aided to push the stone back, jamming the intruding arm.

"Get the other poles!" cried Ruxton to Cable. "We can hold on if you're quick."

The sailor had been previously instructed, and understood the order. With the three natives he ran off, leaving only the two leaders and Mike to hold the entrance meantime.

The perspiration ran off their faces, and they pushed and levered with all their might. The rock was steadily forced in, all the same; and this time, two long, horrible, hairy arms appeared inside. One of these came groping round and seized on Hugh's shoulder.

Other arms came round the other side, and one outstretched claw gripped Ruxton's pole.

Just then Cable and his assistants rushed up, bearing the other poles. The ends were red hot and flaming, and they were thrust through the openings each side of the rock.

Horrible yells of pain and rage followed, the intruding arms were hurriedly withdrawn, and the stone went back with a jerk into its place.

Then there was a pause; and the defenders were able to take a brief rest.

"That was a near thing!" exclaimed Hugh. "Another moment and they would have burst in! Take those poles back and shove 'em into the fire again lads, and stay there till I whistle. Then run like thunder with 'em here again;" and the men disappeared. "What do you say—shall we waste two or three cartridges amongst 'em? It might scare 'em," he asked his chum.

Ruxton shook his head.

"I doubt if it would have much real effect," he returned. "Better reserve 'em as a last resource. All the same, I shall keep my barker ready in case we're very hard pressed."

Cable and his men came up bearing some flaming brands.

"Why not throw these 'ere out at the galoots, sir?" he cried. "It'll be a sort o' hint like as we've got more inside."

"Good idea, Bob," Hugh returned. "We'll pull the stone back and give you room."

This manoeuvre was duly carried out, and a sudden uproar without, followed by comparative quiet, told that the "moral effect" had been considerable; at any rate for the moment.

Hugh, meanwhile, had been thinking hard, and the result of his cogitations was the suggestion that they should get a pile of wood near the entrance and fire it.

"I'm afraid they're bound to get in sooner or later," he reasoned. "I don't think we can hope to keep 'em out."

"I'm afraid so, too," returned Ruxton. "They're getting mad and reckless. You can tell that by the infernal din they're making again. Perhaps we'd better make ready to retreat behind our second line."

It was not a pleasant idea, the thought of abandoning the outer cavern and letting these fiends have the run of it. True, it was very doubtful whether they would break through the line of fires in the second cavern.

But the question was, would they in that case draw off at daylight? If not, if they remained in possession of the outer cavern and refused to vacate it, then the travellers would be in sorry case indeed. They would be "bottled up" in the interior caverns, and only safe from attacks so long as their stock of wood lasted.

"No," Ruxton argued, "we mustn't let 'em in here unless we're absolutely driven out. If we can keep 'em out till daylight we know they'll draw off; but once inside they may stay, and we shall be done for. All the same, there is no harm in lighting a fire here. The smoke may frighten 'em a bit, and if it gets too much to bear ourselves why we must trample it out."

So some wood was hastily fetched, and a pile of it was lighted with brands from those inside. Then the defenders braced themselves up for another struggle, which, they could tell by the growing turmoil, was imminent.

Once more there was a rush at the big rock, which began to rock and sway, and give beneath the pressure.

The smoke from the newly-lighted fire, however, curled upwards, and spread out through the crevices, where it surprised the enemy and caused them to hesitate; as was evident by the fact that the attack slackened.

Unfortunately, it also caused discomfort to the defenders, who began to sneeze and cough.

Hugh felt vexed, and angry, too. The idea had cost him some thought, and as it seemed at first to succeed so well, his spirits had risen. Now, when it appeared likely that they must either put the fire out, or themselves be driven away by the smoke, he felt sorely disappointed.

He was something more than disappointed, however; he was becoming impatient. He was tiring of keeping on the defensive, and his spirits longed for a fair and square fight. For two pins—so he felt—and if he had not known that it would have been mere useless folly, he would have liked to sally forth, like a knight of old from his fastness, brandishing a mighty war-mace and inflict fitting punishment on these ruthless disturbers of the peace.

In this mood, grumbling to himself, and growing every moment more wrathful against their hideous foes, he saw the stone suddenly pushed inwards so far that not only



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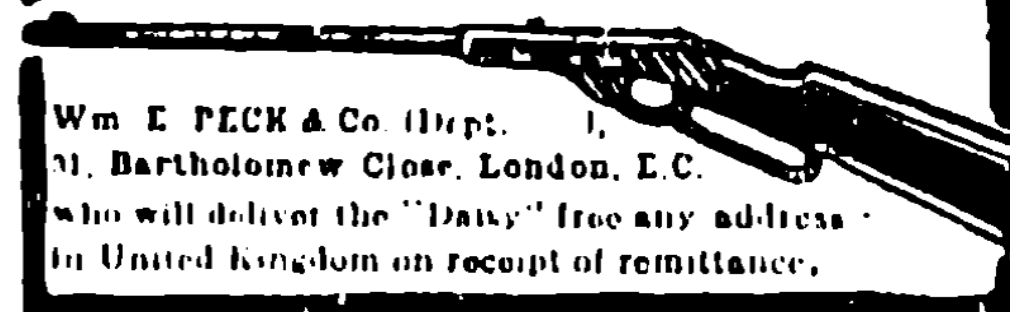
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an arm, but the shoulder came into view, with the horrible face and glaring eyes of the owner behind them.

Now it has been said that there was something in the uncanny glare of the eyes of these creatures, which seemed to arouse rage as well as loathing in the breasts of those they attacked.

In the peculiar mood Hugh was in at that moment the effect was instant and extraordinary. He had been about to hurl his whole weight against the stone to push it back and shut the intruder out.

But instead of doing that he suddenly made a grab at the creature itself, and, with irresistible fury, drew it into the cave.

"You want a fight, do you?" he growled between his teeth. "You want to get at me, eh? Well, you shall have your wish. Anything for a quiet life! Here I am, you handsome, yellow-haired beauty! And now I've got you I'm not going to let you go till I've pounded you into a yellow-hued jelly!"

"Push the stone back! Keep the other beggars out! But don't let any of the lads interfere with me," he called out to Val. "Let us two settle this matter between us."

And Ruxton, despite the seriousness of their position, could scarcely hold the rock back properly for laughing. He knew that Hugh's aid would be badly missed, but he determined to give his chum the chance he had asked for; at least, so long as it might be humanly possible to do it.

So, calling to the others to take Hugh's place, and instructing them not to interfere, he kept to his post in the gathering smoke; and at the same time had the satisfaction of looking on at as desperate a fight as he had ever seen or ever read of.

It was an extraordinary fight, as well as a desperate one, in which Hugh had engaged. But he did not trouble himself just then about anything beyond his wish to punish the intruder.

He felt, in a savagely determined way, that he meant to give at least one of these ugly monsters a hearty good drubbing, and teach it that an ordinary mortal could equal it in strength, in tenacity, and in other good fighting qualities—ay, and for the matter of that, in brute ferocity and fury to boot.

So he fought the demon-like creature hand to hand, face to face. He had thrown aside his pole, disdaining all weapons, resolved to meet the brute and conquer it in its own fashion.

When it rushed at him, he met it half-way; when it tried to grip him and wrestle, he gripped it and wrestled. When it tried to hug him and crush the life out of him, he hugged it in return, and did his best to crush its breath out.

When it hissed and roared, he hissed and roared back; and when it tried to throw him, he rolled over and over on the hard floor with it, as readily as though he had been practising a friendly bout at a gymnasium at home.

In fact, he enjoyed himself immensely, so he afterwards declared, and he certainly appeared to the others to be having a good time. They therefore made no attempt either to help him or to interfere in any way.

Meantime, the smoke was spreading fast. This had one good effect in that it disconcerted the enemy outside. So much indeed was this the case that the defenders were able to relax their vigilance, and give their attention to the spectacle offered, "free gratis," by the two combatants. It was certainly an interesting display, and it was plain that all were enjoying it.

(To be continued.)

