

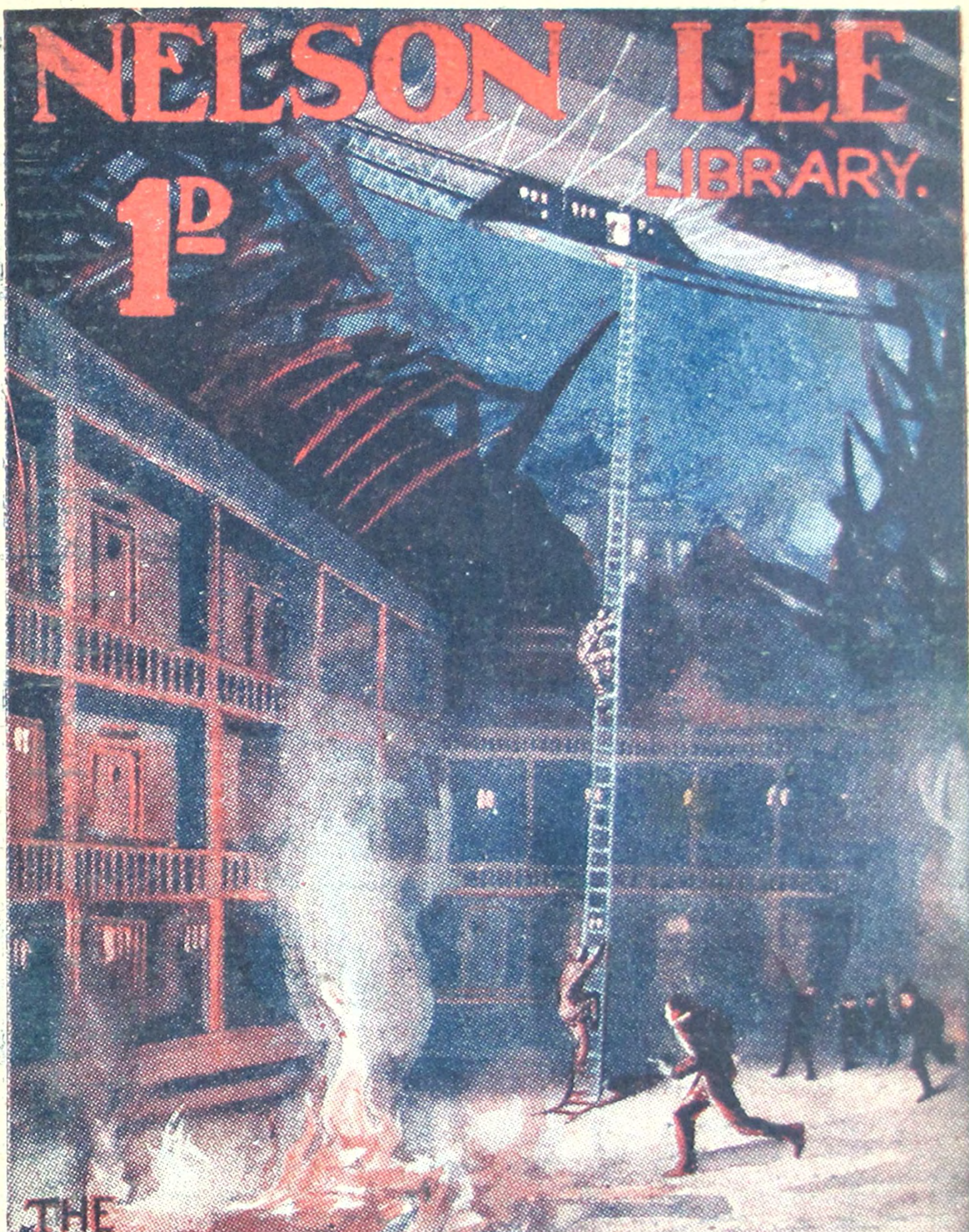
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THE PRISON BREAKERS

Another Story of NELSON LEE and his Thrilling Adventures
with THE LEAGUE OF THE GREEN TRIANGLE.

By the Author of "*The Terror of Troone Towers*," "*Twenty Fathoms Deep*," "*The Forged Finger-Prints*," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

At Portmoor—The Dash of Convict 131—Sims Jameson's Threat.

OUT of the great gateway of Portmoor Convict Prison came a long procession of drab-coloured figures. And beside them, at intervals, were other figures in peaked caps, and with rifles on their shoulders.

A batch of convicts, in fact, were just starting off for the day's work, as they always did, week in and week out, to the neighbouring quarries. And this morning the warders were rather uneasy, and strictly on the alert.

For the weather was misty, with distinct signs of becoming absolutely foggy before the morning was out. And, under such climatic conditions, it was necessary to be extra watchful, and ready for instant action. Opportunities did not often occur for one or more convicts to make a desperate dash for liberty, but when chance—assisted by the weather—did make an opportunity, some of the more daring and desperate characters were not slow to take advantage of it.

Not that there was much chance of ultimate escape. It was, indeed, many years since a convict had successfully gained his liberty. Dashes for freedom occurred at periodical intervals, but the unfortunate convicts were always recaptured at the expiration of a day, or perhaps two days.

The bleak moors surrounding the famous prison were deadly treacherous for a skulking convict who succeeded in giving the warders the slip. Bogs lay in unsuspected places, and there was scarcely an inch of shelter of any description. In almost every case the half-starved and frozen wretch was only too eager to surrender himself upon the approach of a search party.

Yet, in spite of almost certain failure, there were always men ready to take the desperate chance. And such a chance only occurred on foggy days, when a thick bank of dense mist would abruptly roll into the quarries off the moors and obliterate convicts and warders in less than a minute—before the latter could get their gangs together.

There was a prospect of such a thing happening to-day. Accordingly the warders were inclined to be snappy and irritable, for they did not relish the idea of scouring the desolate moors for possible fugitives.

The drab line marched silently along the hard road—silently, that is, so far as talking was concerned. Now and again a convict would remark something

to his near neighbour, but only in a soft whisper, and without turning his head. Conversation was absolutely forbidden.

"Now then, one-thirty-one, no lagging!" rapped out a warder sharply.

Convict 131 shook himself a little, and quickened his pace. He had been walking along deep in thought, and he scowled a little as the warder's curt tones cut through the damp air.

He was rather a refined-looking man, and bore himself upright and with a certain amount of dignity, in spite of the disadvantage of his attire of disgrace. He turned his head towards the warder who had spoken.

"I wasn't lagging!" he muttered fiercely. "Can't a man——"

"Keep your head straight, and don't jaw!" interjected the warder harshly. "You don't want a spell of 'solitary,' do you?"

Convict 131 set his teeth, and made no reply. The warder was not a cruel man by nature, but his work had made him harsh. Indeed, it was strictly necessary to be harsh in such a place as Portmoor. But even as the warder spoke he cast a rather curious glance at No. 131.

For the refined-looking convict was no ordinary criminal. A few short months before he had been famous and respected by the whole kingdom. There were very few people indeed—educated, intelligent people—who had not heard of Dr. Sims Jameson, the celebrated Harley Street brain specialist.

And now? Well, now he had dropped his name, famous as it was, and had been allotted a number. He was simply a unit—a criminal who received no better treatment than the commonest "tough" at Portmoor.

His downfall had been swift and sudden, and it had been brought about solely owing to the efforts of Nelson Lee, the famed crime investigator. After much investigation and labour Nelson Lee had exposed the physician for the scoundrel he was. Sims Jameson had been convicted to a heavy term of penal servitude for a most cold-blooded and deliberate attempted murder.

And Nelson Lee, moreover, was acquainted with one grim fact which the police were in absolute ignorance of. Dr. Sims Jameson had been one of the most prominent governing members of the League of the Green Triangle.

The Green Triangle! The most dreaded, the most powerful criminal organisation in the whole world. The terrible society which had baffled Scotland Yard for years, and which was still baffling them.

But Nelson Lee was not baffled, for he had been working against the league for a considerable time, and had disposed of several black scoundrels. Sims Jameson, in fact, had been the first governing member to feel the effect of Nelson Lee's campaign—the campaign he had embarked upon with the co-operation of Douglas Clifford, a young man who had suffered much at the league's hands.

For weeks past the disgraced Harley Street specialist had been hoping—and expecting—the league to make a move which would finally lead to his escape. But, so far, the league had not shown its hand at all. Sims Jameson had been left without a word, without a sign, to his fate.

This morning Jameson was feeling almost desperate with anger and impotent helplessness. Long before this he had been sure that the league would manage to let him know that they were thinking of him, that they were planning his release. And yet he had not heard a word.

It was all the more galling because of one certain fact. The governor of Portmoor was Mr. Oscar Sillard, and Mr. Oscar Sillard happened to be a governing member of the league himself! He had been installed in his responsible position by his influential associates for the sole purpose of being upon the spot should it be necessary to release any league member from the prison.

But during Sillard's régime Portmoor had been curiously free from criminals who belonged to the great organisation. One or two had managed to get themselves terms of penal servitude, but these men were not important enough to take trouble over. They would have to serve their terms in the usual course

Sillard was a treacherous-hearted man, or he would never have accepted the league's proposal and have become a member of the Governing Circle. He was being well paid both by the Government for his legitimate labours, and by the league for his treachery. Nelson Lee had already had an encounter with Mr. Sillard, and had formed a mental resolve to settle with the double-dealing prison governor at the earliest opportunity.

Dr. Sims Jameson, as he marched into the quarries, was filled with grim thoughts. He had seen Sillard several times since his term of imprisonment had begun, but Sillard had never taken the slightest notice of him. And yet, not so very long before, Jameson had chatted genially with his fellow governing member at the Orpheum Club, in the West End of London—the league's headquarters.

Why had Sillard made no signs?

Why was the physician being neglected and left to his fate?

"They've deserted me!" muttered Jameson to himself desperately. "By Heaven, I never thought that Zingrave would turn his back on me when I'm down! And I'm helpless—utterly, miserably helpless!"

Convict 131 worked mechanically once the quarries were reached. He hardly knew what he was doing, for his thoughts were far away. There was a bitter sneer upon his lips, and his eyes gleamed dangerously.

"It sha'n't go on!" he hissed to himself. "I'll end it all somehow—one way or the other! I hate them all—Zingrave, Foxcroft, Hogarth, Sillard! Bah, they've revealed their true colours to me at last! Now that I'm disgraced and safely out of the way they intend to leave me here to serve my term."

Jameson's hatred, in fact, almost amounted to a mad desire for vengeance. Had he received one little sign that the league had not forgotten him his mind would have been set at rest. But no sign was forthcoming.

It seemed as though he himself would have to make the first move.

And for several days past, Sims Jameson had had a desperate idea in his mind. As he now thought of it afresh he glanced up at the misty landscape, and then bent to his work again as a warder gave him a sharp glance.

"It might be possible this morning," he told himself fiercely. "If not, then the weather will be favourable some other day. Sooner or later my opportunity will come."

It might be supposed that Dr. Sims Jameson was contemplating making a dash for freedom. But he was a clever man, and was quite sure that any such dash would end in dismal failure. He knew only too well the insurmountable difficulties which beset a man who fled on the moor.

No, Dr. Sims Jameson did not intend to attempt escape.

But he could, at least, embark upon another enterprise which almost amounted to the same thing. To come face to face with Oscar Sillard—that was what he wanted. Then he would be able to tell the governor some caustic home truths.

He would be recaptured afterwards, of course; but he was prepared for that. If he could only break away from his keepers, and have five minutes—one minute, even—alone with Sillard, then he would be satisfied.

But he was a convict. What possible chance had he of having a word with the prison governor himself? None whatever—except by slipping away in a fog, and slipping away to Sillard's own office.

The thing was possible—highly probable, indeed. If a fog came to his assistance he knew that he could accomplish his purpose. The warders themselves would never suspect that the "escape" had made for the prison itself. And Sillard's office was a separate little building, easily reached from the roadway outside the prison gates. No high wall surrounded it, and there were no obstacles. Once inside the office he could remain there for any amount of time, for nobody would dream of looking for the escaped convict in the governor's sanctum. If Sillard happened to be absent he could conceal himself, and wait.

"It's possible!" muttered Jameson grimly. "And, by Jove, I'll try it the very instant I get a chance!"

And, as he had half expected, his chance came before another hour had passed.

The work in the quarries was going on with the usual monotonous routine. The convicts plied their picks and shovels, and the warders watched keenly. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the mist grew thicker.

It was such a slow process that the warders took scarcely any heed of the changing atmospheric conditions. They were compelled, moreover, to be very much on the alert this morning, and so they had plenty to occupy their attentions.

And then a shrill whistle rang out, and Jameson looked up furtively. Across the quarries he could see the warders rushing about getting their gangs to fall in, and, a little beyond, an impenetrable fog bank was approaching in rolling clouds.

Jameson's heart beat furiously, but he dared not move an inch or show any sign of what was in his mind, for the warder who had charge of his particular gang of convicts was looking somewhat startled, and was busily endeavouring to gather his men together.

But the fog rolled onwards with more than usual rapidity.

A feathery, wreathing cloud of vapour swept around Dr. Sims Jameson, and blotted him from the view of the warders who were hastening in his direction, blowing their whistles urgently.

Convict 131 found himself utterly isolated. Hoarse shouts reached his ears, and he guessed that other unfortunates were making a dash for liberty. It was only natural—such a thing occurred on nearly every occasion when a fog descended so swiftly. But, of course, their recapture would only be a matter of time.

The case of Jameson, however, was very different. He had no wish to escape; he only wanted to give the warders the slip for a short period of time. And he seized his opportunity without hesitating a second. Hesitation would have been fatal.

He turned sharply to his left, and pelted away through the fog, stumbling and slipping over the rough ground. But the physician had an excellent sense of direction, and knew the quarries by heart, for he had worked there week after week. Without losing his bearings, he finally arrived at the spot he had been making for—a narrow gap up which he could climb fairly easily, for the gap was a sloping one leading out of the quarries.

By wonderful good fortune Jameson did not meet a soul. He heard sounds of activity all round him, but he himself was rendered invisible by the yellow clouds around him. Once out of the quarries he knew which direction to take without a thought.

Luck favoured him, although he had a narrow squeak once. He halted just in time to see a gang of drab-clothed figures marching back to the prison, closely guarded. Jameson did not keep to the road, but ran along the moor alongside.

Very naturally the country on this side of the quarry—the prison side—was receiving very little attention from the warders who were on the look out for the desperate men who had escaped; for three had made a dash, in addition to Sims Jameson. They had all made for the open moor on the other side of the workings, and consequently Jameson was fairly safe.

But he had to go cautiously, for extra warders had been called out of the prison, and he heard running groups of them time after time. But he was in no danger of detection, and panted on doggedly.

The prison at last!

Jameson made a fairly wide detour in order to get past the great gateway, and then found himself opposite the great fence which surrounded Mr. Oscar Sillard's office. This latter was in reality an annexe of the governor's residence, but was only reached from the side on which Jameson now stood.

Without troubling to reach the small gate, Convict 131 leapt over the fence, and ran forward. He could see nothing, for the fog was as thick here as it had been the whole time. And in a few moments the black wall of the office building loomed up before the desperate man. A lighted window shone dimly through the vapour.

As Jameson was actually upon the doorstep, the door opened, and the slightly bent figure of Oscar Sillard stood before him, attired in heavy coat and hat, and muffled up in readiness to go out.

"Ah!" snarled Jameson triumphantly. "Sillard!"

The governor stared into the fog, rather startled.

"Well, what is it?" he asked sharply. "Who are you, man?"

"Who am I? You ask that!" exclaimed Jameson, in a low, quivering voice. "Don't you recognise me? I'm Jameson, your former colleague in the League of——"

Sillard uttered a gasp.

"Jameson!" he panted. "You—you have escaped from the warders! Good heavens, man, if you are found here——"

"Are you alone?" rapped out Convict 131. "Is your office empty?"

"Yes; but——"

Sims Jameson suffered no further argument. He gave his companion a push, and the pair entered the office, and the door slammed to. Oscar Sillard was pale and shivering with startled alarm, and he backed away towards the fireplace with almost a frightened look in his eyes.

"Why have you come here?" he asked hoarsely. "You fool, Jameson! Do you want me to be exposed and made into a convict like yourself? What chance of escape would you have then?"

"What chance have I now?" snarled Jameson fiercely. "What have you done? Nothing! What has the league done to get me out of this infernal place? Nothing at all! You hypocritical dog, you pretend to be my friend, and yet you now leave me to my fate! Not a sign have you given me that you or the league are working for my escape——"

"We are!" interjected Sillard frantically, nervous of the convict's threatening manner. "We are, Jameson. But it takes time; it cannot be done in a week."

"A week!" grated the other. "I have been here for months! Don't lie to me, you hound! You intend to forsake me. By all the powers above, I am not the man to be treated in this scurvy manner. I warn you, Sillard, that I will give the Green Triangle away unless you assure me that Zingrave is planning my rescue."

"Calm yourself, man!" gasped the governor.

"How can I be calm when there is nothing but years of this inferno before me?" exclaimed Jameson passionately. "I know the league's most cherished secrets, and if I choose I can bring the whole edifice crumbling about your ears. I can wreck and ruin the whole organisation——"

"Stop!" snapped Sillard sharply, grasping his companion's arm. "Listen to me, Jameson! I have made no sign to you, because such a thing is impossible. I am the governor, and you a convict. It is absurd to suppose that I can communicate with you."

"Bah! That is nonsense!"

"It is the truth," persisted Sillard. "Calm yourself, Jameson, and take heart. The league is giving great attention to your case, although I admit Zingrave has not been hurrying himself. Before so very long you will be rescued——"

"This month!" interjected Jameson harshly. "Unless I am released within this present month I will take a terrible revenge."

Sillard glanced at the door anxiously.

"I am going to London to-morrow," he said. "I will bring the matter to the notice of the Governing Circle. Have no fear, doctor, for your escape will be effected in a very short time. We have not forgotten you."

There was a moment's silence, and Jameson regarded Sillard with his piercing, dark eyes, now suspicious and wild. But the governor had spoken earnestly, and Convict 131's fears were somewhat calmed. His object was attained; he was face to face with Oscar Sillard, and he had spoken his mind.

A hoarse breath escaped the governor.

"I hear voices!" he exclaimed frantically. "Quick, man! Lay hold of me, and pretend to be throttling the life out of me!"

"I am not a fool," growled Jameson. "I do not want solitary con——"

"I will see that you are not punished," panted Sillard. "For Heaven's sake do as I tell you!" Then he let his voice rise: "Help! Warders! Help!"

Jameson stepped forward, and the next moment he had Oscar Sillard upon the floor, and was kneeling on his chest. Sillard gasped and gurgled in a manner which proved him to be an excellent actor, for Jameson was not hurting him in the least.

The door burst open, and two warders appeared.

"By thunder!" roared one of the men.

Jameson twirled round, apparently startled and furious, and then he dropped his hands to his side and stopped forward.

"I surrender," he said quietly. "I lost myself in the fog, and found myself here. Hang you all for spoiling everything!"

Sillard scrambled to his feet, dusty and dishevelled.

"Take him away!" he rapped out, in apparent fury. "A fine state of affairs! A governor of a prison is not safe from molestation in his own office nowadays! Somebody shall suffer for allowing this scoundrel to attack me!"

"Are you, hurt, sir?" asked one of the warders.

"Hurt! Do you suppose I can be knocked down and nearly throttled without being hurt?" snapped Sillard. "I was taken unawares—I had no chance. Two minutes ago this confounded fellow burst in upon me. Take him away, I tell you!"

Between the two startled warders Jameson was led to the door.

"Wait!" called Sillard. "The prisoner is not to receive the usual punishment for attempting to gain his liberty. I suspect he is slightly unhinged in mind, and hardly responsible for his actions. Take him straight to the prison infirmary, and have him put to bed. I will give further orders later."

"Very good, sir."

And Dr. Sims Jameson was marched off to the infirmary, there to enjoy comparative comfort and luxury. His scheme had worked out with excellent results. Instead of receiving a term of solitary confinement, he was taken to that portion of the convict prison where inmates were treated leniently.

In addition, Oscar Sillard now knew that further delay would be disastrous. If the league had done nothing, then they would now set their wits to work. And if they had already considered the question of effecting Jameson's release, they would hurry on their plans.

At last there was something for Convict 131 to look forward to.

CHAPTER II.

Nelson Lee's Shrewd Guess—The Meeting of the Circle—A Decision.

"**V**ERY interesting—very interesting indeed, Nipper!"

Nelson Lee, the famous detective, made that remark as he and his young assistant sat at breakfast on the following morning. Nipper looked up from his busy occupation—that of consuming eggs and bacon with huge relish—and an expression of inquiry was in his eyes.

"In fact," went on Nelson Lee, "I may say it is most singularly interesting."

"Well, you might let a chap into the secret, guv'nor," exclaimed Nipper. "What's the item of news that's so wonderfully curious?"

The detective removed a newspaper from before the cruet, where it had been propped, and handed it across the table.

"Read the paragraph for yourself, my boy," he said shortly. "It's in the left-hand bottom corner. It has not been given much prominence, but it is, nevertheless, the most significant piece of news in the whole paper."

Nipper glanced at the newspaper curiously.

"Do you mean this bit headed 'A Convict's Attack,' sir?"

"Precisely."

Nipper read the short paragraph through :

"A CONVICT'S ATTACK."

"Yesterday morning, during a sudden dense fog, several convicts made a desperate bid for liberty from the quarries at Portmoor Convict Prison, in Devonshire. One of the convicts lost his bearings in the mist, and found himself outside the office of Mr. Oscar Sillard, the Governor of Portmoor. The convict—No 131—forced his way into the office, found Mr. Sillard alone, and attacked him. Possibly the affair might have resulted in serious consequences but for the fact that two warders arrived upon the scene almost immediately afterwards. The criminal was retaken, and it is believed that his mind had become somewhat unhinged. Mr. Sillard is, fortunately, none the worse for his exciting adventure. The other escaped convicts, who made for the open moor, were all recaptured before nightfall."

Nipper handed the newspaper back with a rather puzzled expression.

"Well, I'm blowed if I can see anything particularly interesting in that, sir," he remarked. "That convict must certainly have been dotty to walk back into the lion's den. Oh, by gum! I remember—Oscar Sillard is a Governing Member of the League of the Green Triangle!"

"Well, young 'un, have you not formed a theory?"

"I'm afraid I'm not much good at theories, guv'nor," replied Nipper, scratching his head. "I'm useful when it comes to some brisk action. You're the chap for theories!"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"Perhaps you are forgetting one thing, Nipper," he said, calmly. "Perhaps the significance of the convict's number has escaped your attention. Both you and I met that interesting gentleman not so very long ago."

Nipper looked at the newspaper again.

"No. 131!" he exclaimed. "Why, of course, we were talking about it only last week. That's Dr. Sims Jameson, the former Governing Member of the Triangle, who tried to murder poor Charlie Markham!"

"Exactly," commented the detective. "The ordinary mind will gather absolutely nothing from that paragraph, but you and I are in the fortunate position of knowing the league's secrets, thanks to the information supplied to us by Douglas Clifford. And the singular fact is made clear to us that the Governor of Portmoor, a member of the Green Triangle, and Convict 131, also a member of the Green Triangle, met together in the former's office during a fog."

"By gum, I hadn't looked at it in that light before, sir."

"Does not the fact strike you as being very significant, Nipper?" proceeded Nelson Lee, stirring his coffee. "I would not mind staking all I possess upon one thing. Jameson had no intention whatever of escaping, but broke away for the sole purpose of having a few words with Oscar Sillard."

"But why?" questioned Nipper. "For what reason, sir?"

"Because the excellent doctor finds convict life a trifle harder than Harley Street luxury," replied Nelson Lee, drily. "In short, he is sick of it, and desperately went to Sillard to demand his escape being engineered. It is only a guess, but I'll warrant I'm not far wrong."

"I've noticed one thing about you, guv'nor," said Nipper, with his head cocked on one side. "Whenever you make a guess, things always turn out exactly as you say."

"That's because I never venture a guess until I am fairly certain of myself," replied the detective. "I shouldn't be surprised if that affair at Portmoor affects us in no little degree. It may be the starting point of another exciting adventure in our campaign against the Green Triangle."

"I jolly well hope so, sir," replied the lad. "The league's been pretty quiet lately since we dealt with James Coldrey, and I expect they've drawn their horns in a bit. It's about time we gave 'em another reminder that we're still alive and kicking!"

The criminalologist was rather thoughtful during the morning. And, truth to tell, his mind was still busy upon the subject that he and Nipper had been discussing at breakfast-time. As chance would have it, he was soon to have another reminder that the seemingly trivial affair at Portmoor would ultimately lead to big things.

It happened during the evening. Nelson Lee journeyed to the West End club to interview a late client, and passed the palatial and magnificent Orpheum Club. Knowing full well that the establishment was in reality the headquarters of the league, Nelson Lee naturally looked into the brilliant lobby somewhat curiously as he walked past.

"By James!" he murmured to himself, setting his teeth firmly.

But he didn't pause a moment—he walked straight on. But just inside the lobby he had seen the somewhat round-shouldered form of Mr. Oscar Sillard, overcoated, and carrying a handbag as though he had just come off a journey.

"Sillard in London!" thought the detective as he walked on. "Upon my soul, I really believe that I am on the track of another encounter with the league. It is high time, indeed, that Oscar Sillard was hounded from his high position, and exposed as the scoundrel he actually is!"

For what did Sillard's visit to London portend? Nelson Lee's shrewd brain suggested an explanation at once. Jameson's action in stealing a few words with the prison governor had born fruit without delay. Sillard had come up to London in order to inform the Governing Circle of what had happened, and to make plans for Jameson's escape.

This was, at least, the most obvious explanation. Anyhow, Nelson Lee decided to look very carefully into the matter, and to keep his eyes wide open.

An hour later, indeed, he was making certain inquiries and preparations. Almost at the same time a mysterious meeting was being held beneath the very cellars of the respectable Orpheum Club.

The Governing Circle of the League of the Green Triangle had met in solemn conclave to discuss a question of much importance. The circle, however, before hearing Sillard's news, were treated to a somewhat lengthy speech by Professor Zingrave, the chief, the very brain of the organisation.

Professor Zingrave was a famous scientist to the world at large; and, undoubtedly, he was a remarkably clever man. His knowledge of science and chemistry was extensive. But his most wonderful ideas and aims were not given in the interests of science. On the contrary, his whole heart and soul were in the League of the Green Triangle.

Zingrave was a remarkable man with a still more remarkable personality. As he stood at the head of the table in the governing chamber, his voice was low and musical. But every man present was held as though spellbound. The magic of his magnetic personality was very short of marvellous.

"I tell you, gentlemen, that there must be a big alteration!" he was saying grimly. "Think of the many faces that have disappeared from this chamber within the last few months. For years we have been absolutely free from disasters.

And yet, all in a comparatively short time, no less than four of our most valued colleagues have been taken from us; three are actually dead!"

"It is just coincidence," said Sir Roger Hogarth, the famous shipowner. "Scotland Yard knows nothing of us, Zingrave, and we are safe from everyone else. I agree with you that certain things have been going badly lately—but not because the league is on the decline."

Dudley Foxcroft, the rich financier, bent forward.

"A period of ill-luck has set in," he exclaimed. "It is just the same in all things in this world. On the Stock Exchange——"

"Tut—tut! This is sheer nonsense!" interrupted Professor Zingrave in unusually sharp tones. "There is no such thing as luck. The root of the whole evil is carelessness. There you have it in a word, gentlemen. Our undertakings have not received the minute attentions they should have received. It is the minute details that mar or make a whole elaborate scheme. There has been too much laxity—and it has got to stop. It has got to stop at once. In all our future undertakings there must be no more of this carelessness, which has deprived us of so many valuable members."

"You are right," agreed Sir Gordon Hyde, the well-known astronomer. "Though I'm hanged if I can exactly place the blame on any particular culprit!"

Professor Zingrave nodded.

"That is the difficulty," he agreed softly. "And the only thing we can do is to give strict attention to details in future. The league itself is still prosperous, although it is not to be denied that several of our most remunerative undertakings have fallen to the ground."

"We are not doing so badly, in spite of all," remarked Sir Roger comfortably. "Last week alone we scooped in close upon fifty thousand pounds. That was one of the best weeks we have had for a considerable time."

"Make no mistake," said Zingrave, grimly. "the league is at the height of prosperity, and the loss of Coldrey, Superintendent Valling, and the others, must be set down as grim reminders of the evils which ensue from over-confidence."

Oscar Sillard rose from his chair.

"There is one thing which must be done which will cost the league money, and not bring it profit," he said quietly. "Professor, I am here to lay before you the case of Dr. Sims Jameson."

Zingrave smiled rather sadly.

"Poor Jameson!" he exclaimed, in soft tones. "He, at least, is still alive. It is, indeed, high time that we devoted our attentions to the task of releasing him from penal servitude. During his career he served the league well, and we must show our appreciation by effecting his escape and smuggling him abroad—there to live under another name, with a deservedly large pension. He is unable to work for us any longer, but it is only fair that we should look after him in the future."

"Jameson is in Portmoor," said Dudley Foxcroft. "And Portmoor is a grim place for any man to escape from. With inside help it might be possible for us to——"

"Might!" repeated Zingrave. "We are going to get Jameson away—that is absolutely settled. And it may interest you to know that I have already a wonderful idea in my head which will lead to complete success."

The Governing Circle were interested at once.

For fully an hour a quiet discussion ensued. And when, at last, the Governing Circle arose, the plans for the rescue of Dr. Sims Jameson were all out and dried. They were daring plans—amazingly audacious plans—but failure seemed absolutely impossible.

And, without a doubt, the scheme would have ended in triumph and success, but for the fact that one man was alive in London at that moment—one particular man.

He was Nelson Lee.

Precisely as Nelson Lee had caused the undoing of the many other league undertakings—which Zingrave, clever as he was, set down to the carelessness of the league's own workers—so would the great detective cause the undoing of this, Zingrave's latest plan.

From the very moment of its conception the scheme for the release of Dr. Sims Jameson was doomed to failure. But some astonishing adventures and hair-breadth escapes were destined to befall before success crowned Nelson Lee's efforts.

CHAPTER III.

The Adventure in the Express—An Exchange in Identities.

THOMAS BRADDON settled himself in the corner seat of the express as it left Paddington at mid-day for the West of England. He did not take much interest in the two people who shared the compartment with him, but lit his pipe and picked up a magazine he had provided to while away the journey. He was a tall man, of about thirty, and was attired in ordinary plain clothes.

Yet, in reality, Thomas Braddon was a warder in one of His Majesty's convict prisons. To be precise, however, at the present moment he was not a warder in any prison. Just recently Braddon had been attached to the staff of a London prison and had received promotion.

He was now on his way to take up his duties at Portmoor, a warder there having retired into private life a short time previously. Braddon was booked to take his place.

He was rather inclined to be a little nervous, for although he had accepted his new position eagerly, he had never been to Portmoor. And, moreover, nobody at Portmoor had seen him, for the transfer had, of course, been arranged by correspondence. It is quite a common thing for warders to be transferred from one prison to another. Braddon would simply arrive at Portmoor, be taken under the wing of the chief warder for a few days, and would then smoothly settle down to his new work.

Braddon sat for a short time gazing out of the window as the express ran smoothly through the suburbs, and then found an interesting story in his magazine, and settled down to a comfortable smoke and a read.

His two travelling companions did not interest him in the least.

They, too, were reading, exchanging a few words at short intervals. The journey before them was a long one, and the train was one of the fastest—if not the fastest—of the day. It would not stop until Exeter was reached.

The carriage was not a corridor one, like the majority of the other carriages which comprised the train. These three were quite alone, and there was absolutely no fear of disturbance for hours.

London was soon left behind, and the express gathered speed and rushed through the cold, wintry countryside. The time passed fairly quickly, and at the expiration of an hour one of Braddon's companions turned to the other.

"About time now, eh, guv'nor?" he said softly.

"Yes, I was thinking the same thing, young 'un," replied the other. "I have been thinking the matter over, and, upon the whole, I have decided that it will be wise to show our friend here, straight off, that we mean absolute business."

"I've got an idea, sir, he won't be much trouble."

"I hope your idea is correct, Nipper."

For Warder Braddon's companions were none other than Nelson Lee and Nipper. They were not disguised in any way, but they were both looking somewhat grim and determined.

They had boarded this train with a certain, specific object—and that object would have to be carried out. For a considerable time they had waited on the platform at Paddington, had seen Braddon enter the compartment, and had followed. Then Nelson Lee had locked the door, so that other passengers would not enter. The guard, in addition, had been liberally tipped to ensure the trio being left to themselves. Braddon had observed the door being locked, but he had no objection. He disliked crowded compartments anyhow.

Quite calmly Nelson Lee leaned forward and tapped Braddon upon the knee. He was sitting exactly opposite the warder. Braddon looked up from his magazine inquiringly, and then opened his eyes wide.

Pointing directly at his chest, absolutely steadily, was a neat little revolver!

"What the deuce——" began Braddon.

"Please keep quite calm, my friend," exclaimed Nelson Lee coolly. "I merely wish to have a few words with you, and to place before you a proposal. I may say at once that if you do not agree to do as I require, force will be imposed."

"By George!" Braddon gasped, utterly amazed.

"Your name," proceeded the detective calmly, "is Thomas Braddon, and you are now on your way to Portmoor Convict Prison to take up your position on the staff as a warder. You have lately been in employment at Hendonville Prison——"

"Strikes me you know my history as well as I do myself!" interjected Warder Braddon sharply. "What's the game, mister? I suppose you think it's mighty clever to point that thing at my heart and act the fool?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"You are behaving admirably, under the circumstances," he said smoothly. "I wish you to understand, however, that I mean grim business. Now, if you will listen, I will outline to you exactly what I require."

"I'll listen when you put that shooter away," said Braddon curtly.

"Please make no mistake——"

The warder made a choice remark, which, incidentally, made Nipper grin.

"What do you take me for?" growled Braddon heatedly. "If it's robbery you're after it'll interest you to know that you've got hold of the wrong customer! Two minutes more of this darned nonsense and I'll pull the communication cord!"

"This revolver is fully cocked——"

"That's no concern of mine!" snapped Braddon. "I'm not afraid of the thing!"

Nipper chuckled.

"Our pal's a cool 'un, guv'nor!" he murmured.

Nelson Lee hesitated a moment, and then pocketed his revolver with a short laugh. Then he lit a cigarette and calmly regarded the man opposite to him. Braddon, meanwhile, was perfectly at ease, and wore a grim expression.

"Mr. Braddon, I apologise," said Nelson Lee. "I realise now, that I made a little mistake in opening my conversation with you. You are a man of courage and coolness, and they are qualities I greatly admire. Perhaps you will do me the honour of accepting my card?"

Warder Braddon rubbed his chin.

"Well, you don't appear to be lunny, certainly," he said frankly. "But I'm hanged if I can find any other explanation for your conduct. I seem to have seen your face before, too, somehow—the young 'un's as well."

"Perhaps this will assist your memory."

Braddon took the proffered slip of pasteboard and started as he saw the name neatly printed upon it.

"Nelson Lee!" he ejaculated in amazement. "I knew I'd seen your faces before, the pair of you! Nelson Lee and Nipper! Well, I've had a few queer experiences, but this is the limit!"

"You recognise us, then?"

"Now—yes," replied Braddon, the angry look dying from his eyes. "But—dash it all! What's the idea, Mr. Lee? Did you play that trick to test my nerves?"

"Oh, no; although you stood the test splendidly," said Nelson Lee. "To be perfectly frank, Mr. Braddon, I wished to make it thoroughly clear to you that I require a certain favour of you—and that you've simply got to grant it, whether you choose or not!"

Braddon grinned.

"Well, there's no two ways of looking at that," he remarked drily. "This is a queer go, and no mistake! Do you mind explaining things a bit?"

"That is my intention," replied the detective. "To be brief, I have certain reasons for wishing to visit Portmoor Prison unknown to a soul. Therefore I want you to let me go to Portmoor in your place, and in your name."

"The thing's impossible!" Braddon exclaimed blankly.

"By no means. I have taken care to be quite sure of my information," went on Nelson Lee. "You have never been to Portmoor before, and you are an utter stranger there. Therefore if I turn up and state that I am Thomas Braddon, late of Hendonville Prison, no doubts will be cast upon me. I shall simply be installed as a warder without delay. The whole thing is quite easy."

Braddon scratched his head.

"You'd be floored in no time," he declared. "I admit I'm not familiar with Portmoor myself, but I've had years of experience as a warder. They'd ask you questions about Hendonville, and you'd be unable to answer. No, Mr. Lee, it can't be done!"

Nelson Lee carelessly knocked the ash from his cigarette.

"It can be done!" he said evenly, "and it shall be done! We have plenty of time before us, and it will be quite simple for you to prime me with the events of your life in your former employment. I have had experience of convict prisons before, and I do not think you can teach me much about a warder's work. Come, Braddon, I will make it well worth your while to fall in with my scheme."

"I wasn't thinking of that, sir," said Braddon bluntly. "It's a good post and I don't want to lose it practically before I've got it! It's such an astonishing thing. Why on earth do you want to go to Portmoor as a warder?"

"I have my own reasons—and you may be sure they are reasons in the interests of justice," replied Nelson Lee smoothly. "You know me by repute, my friend, and I think you'll grasp the fact that I shall not jeopardise your prospects in any way. On the contrary, I intend to hand you twenty pounds for you to spend on a short holiday—probably not more than ten days. Afterwards I will present you with a similar sum, and will make everything perfectly smooth for you in your new job."

Warder Braddon looked thoughtful.

"But if you can make things all right for me afterwards with the authorities, and if you are working in the interests of justice, why didn't you arrange this matter with the authorities themselves?" he asked shrewdly. "Wouldn't it have been much the better plan?"

"It would, indeed," replied the detective. "Unfortunately, however, the circumstances are such that it was impossible for me to approach the authorities. I will be straightforward with you, Braddon. There is a man in high authority in Portmoor who is, in reality, a traitor. He is planning the escape of a convict, and if I had approached the authorities openly he would have been forewarned, and my plans would have been completely frustrated. It is because I wish to be unsuspected that I have adopted this rather singular course."

Braddon nodded comprehensively. But he did not for a moment guess that the man in high authority Nelson Lee had referred to was none other than Oscar Sillar, the governor of Portmoor himself!

If Nelson Lee had, indeed, approached the authorities upon the matter—as he could have done had he chosen—they would naturally have insisted upon Oscar Sillard being absolutely cognisant with the scheme. And that would have ruined everything, for Sillard was the very man Nelson Lee was after.

By adopting his present course, the detective was doing the only thing possible.

“Well?” he asked after a short silence. “What is your decision, Braddon?”

“If you’ll positively assure me that I shall get into no trouble——”

“My dear man, your arrival at Portmoor will simply be delayed for a short while—that’s all,” Nelson Lee hastened to say. “You will be provided with a holiday at my expense, and will have a nice little sum in your pocket at the conclusion of the episode. I think you have gathered—from the rather sensational manner in which I opened this conversation—that I will take no refusal.”

“Well, in that case there’s nothing more to say, is there?” asked the warder.

“Very good, Mr. Lee, I’m game. How do you propose to start?”

“Well, firstly, you must provide me with all the information you have at your disposal,” replied the detective, his eyes gleaming a little. “We must be absolutely thorough, and give attention to details.”

And for fully an hour Nelson Lee and Warder Braddon talked together earnestly and seriously, Nipper listening and throwing in a comment now and again. At last everything was completed, and Braddon lay back against the cushions and puffed enjoyably at one of Nelson Lee’s cigars.

“So for the next week or more I’m simply Mr. John Smith?” he asked, chuckling.

“Precisely. And I am Warder Braddon!” replied the detective grimly. “I am grateful to you for facilitating my plans so excellently. You will not suffer—and the cause of justice will be assisted immeasurably.”

“Amen!” murmured Nipper with a grin.

“This is no time for flippancy, young ‘un!” said Nelson Lee severely.

“Right-ho, warder! Keep your giddy hair on!” replied Nipper coolly.

“You’re not my guv’nor now, you know—you’re just a warder—just a common or garden fatheaded warder——”

“Eh?” ejaculated Braddon warmly.

“Oh! Beg pardon,” said Nipper hastily. “I forgot you were sitting there! But you’re plain Mr. Smith now, and as soon as we get to Exeter we’re going to hop out of this train and skip back to London.”

The trio were in the best of humours. Nelson Lee was highly pleased with the manner in which Braddon had fallen in with the plan. But there was grim work to be done in the immediate future—Nelson Lee was quite convinced of that.

He hadn’t the least notion what the league’s plans were, but he had acted promptly, taking full advantage of the transfer of Warder Braddon. He would now be upon the spot, ready for anything that might occur. And Nelson Lee was quite convinced that the league were making busy preparations for the rescue of Dr. Sims Jameson.

And at Exeter, Nipper and Mr. John Smith left the train, and Warder Thomas Braddon—second edition—continued his journey to Portmoor, there to take up his new duties.

CHAPTER IV.

Cyril Jepson’s Airship—The Masked Attackers—Stolen By Force!

MR. CYRIL JEPSON was a comparatively young gentleman of wealth who was possessed of remarkable inventive and mechanical genius.

He lived at Stalton Manor, about eight miles from Taunton, in Somerset. He was a married man, and led a steady and useful life. Just at present he had been making experiments, and had met with astonishing success.

His heart was in his work, and his enthusiasm was boundless. A month previously he had consummated the desire of years—he had finished building his airship. For Jepson's talents all leaned towards matters aeronautical.

Yet he had never gone in for heavier-than-air machines; his ideas were solely upon the dirigible airship type. Years before he had produced a self-propelled balloon, but it had wrecked itself, and nearly killed its inventor.

Jepson was by no means disheartened. He was, fortunately, immensely rich, and could well afford to indulge his hobby. And a second, and a third airship had been built and flown—and finally destroyed. But the fourth was really a wonderful craft, and had proved its sterling worth on many an occasion.

Even yet the inventor was not satisfied. He sold No. 4 to a small friendly power, and immediately commenced building his best and latest airship. This craft had been completed only a fortnight since.

And Jepson was nearly off his head with enthusiasm. For his latest product was one of the most wonderful aircraft that had ever soared through the clouds. It was fairly small, but it was simply a masterpiece of mechanical construction and sound principle. On its trial trip the airship had done wonders. It answered every control with the most perfect ease, and could be handled, practically, by a mere novice—so perfect was the balance and control.

It had one drawback; a big drawback, which Jepson was determined to remedy as soon as possible. Its speed in no way compared with the modern aeroplane. For, whereas an aeroplane can attain ninety miles an hour easily, Jepson's airship No. 5 was incapable of doing more than forty.

But this was not an inherent defect of construction. It was merely a matter of engine-power. A much more powerful engine was on order, and it would be delivered as soon as the makers had put it through its tests. It was, in fact, the engine which should have been fitted to the airship at the outset; the one now in use having been temporarily fitted as a makeshift. Its horse-power was much less than the airship was capable of carrying.

Therefore No. 5—as Jepson always called his new product—had never really been properly tested. Experts, both Government and civilian, had declared that the vessel would beat all records once the ordered engine was delivered. An American expert, in fact, had declared that No. 5 would "sure lick all darned creation!"

The present motor, although lacking in horse-power, had nevertheless served to demonstrate the airship's wonderful capabilities. Already the vessel had done many trips, and the Admiralty and the War Office were showing considerable interest. But they were not prepared to make any definite statement or offer until later on.

In the meantime, Cyril Jepson intended taking his airship on a long night flight from Somerset to London. He was absolutely confident that he could do the journey without a hitch, and was enthusiastic over the project. Three adventurous friends had elected to go with him on the flight—which, Jepson declared, would be made straight off without a single landing, and without any mishap. He had such unbounding confidence in the craft's capabilities that he looked upon the fairly long journey as a mere trifle.

He intended starting from Stalton—the airship-shed was within a mile of his residence—at about nine o'clock one Wednesday evening. The flight had been decided upon for that day for a week past, and all Jepson's employees had been busily preparing for several days.

The particular Wednesday night was about five days after Nelson Lee had gone to Portmoor in Warder Braddon's shoes. Stalton Manor was barely fifty miles from the great moorland prison; but Nelson Lee had not the slightest notion of the startling events, soon to occur, which would form a link between the two places.

The night was very dark, and the only clouds in the sky were light fleecy ones which gave no promise of rain. There was an absence of wind, too, which made the engineer-inventor smile with keen gratification.

He and his three friends, at eight-thirty, were making ready for departure. Nobody else was present, with the exception of two mechanics. The large field in which the shed was situated was devoid of a single sightseer.

This was not surprising. For, although Jepson's workmen had known that the airship would start for London that night, they had strict orders to breathe not a word. Jepson hated a crowd staring at him when he was starting on a flight.

Stalton Manor was situated quite to itself, five miles from a village. Had it been general knowledge that there was to be a flight that night, probably a good deal of folk would have gathered round the meadow. But as the flight was quite a secret, nobody was inclined to journey to the great shed on the off-chance. Besides, the airship had never flown at night before, and so nobody guessed a word of this affair.

Consequently, and very naturally, Jepson, his three friends, and the two mechanics, were absolutely alone. Outside the shed, the doors of which stood wide open, the night was dark, and the countryside deserted. Jepson's wife was in London, waiting to welcome him on his arrival. So nobody from the Manor was in the meadow to see the adventurers off. The servants Jepson never allowed near the shed.

The whole undertaking was a great secret.

"Not a soul dreams of this flight," Jepson was saying enthusiastically. "By Jove, I'm anxious to be off! I've got a feeling that to-night will be a night of triumph for me! My airship is going to prove itself the superior of any lighter-than-air machines which any country in the world has produced!"

"I'm sure of it, old man," agreed one of the others. "If I hadn't absolute confidence in your craft you wouldn't catch me sailing to London in her at night-time! But it's as safe in the cabin of this airship as in a railway train."

Cyril Jepson gazed up at the great bulk of No. 5 with pride and enthusiasm. His deep grey eyes were alight with the spirit of adventure. He cared nothing for any possible profits he would make out of his invention—but the knowledge that he was absolutely successful thrilled him, and made life worth living.

The airship was altogether of a novel design. The great gas envelope was a light, delicate blue in colour, and all the metal work and fittings were of highly polished aluminium. The car was of good size, and could accommodate six or eight men, in addition to petrol and oil supplies for five hundred miles. At the present moment the tanks were filled to their fullest capacity, and the engine was in perfect tune.

The aircraft was driven by two huge propellers of Jepson's own design, which gave the maximum of efficiency. They were built one on either side of the car; and the construction of the controlling apparatus was wonderfully contrived. The airship had proved to be the most easily controlled dirigible that had ever been built.

Without any delay No. 5 was gently taken from its shed and moored in the centre of the meadow outside, ready for instant departure. The engine, in fact, was already running slowly—to get it in smooth trim. The propellers were whirling round swishingly, but only at a slow degree of revolutions. The airship swung at its moorings a trifle restlessly.

The cabin was illuminated by little electric lights, and these gleamed comfortably. All round the night was perfectly dark, and no other light was to be seen.

"We shall get away in absolute secret," exclaimed Jepson with satisfaction. "I desire, if possible, to reach London——"

"Hands up—every man of you!"

The voice cut through the darkness keenly, grim and harsh. Cyril Jepson swung round with an ejaculation of amazement.

"Good heavens!" he gasped, in stupified tones.

For he was gazing directly upon the muzzles of two revolvers. Allowing his gaze to rise up he saw that the weapons were held by two men—two men in black cloaks, whose faces were entirely hidden by masks.

"Am—am I dreaming?" panted Jepson hoarsely.

"This is no dream!" rapped out the same harsh voice. "I warn you, Mr. Jepson, that if you move an inch from your present position you will not live a second longer! I may inform you that our weapons are not explosive ones, but perfectly noiseless. If you wish to live, I should advise you to obey my orders to the very letter. The same remarks apply to every other man present!"

There was a cool deliberateness about the masked man's speech that caused Jepson to turn deathly pale. Instinctively, he knew that the stranger was using no idle threats, and he resolved to be cautious. But one of his friends was excited and furious.

"What's the meaning of this?" he roared. "Who the thundering deuce are you? If this is a practical joke——"

"Joke!" interjected the other crisply. "Look round you—look to your sides and to your rear! There is no joke about it!"

Dazedly, Jepson and the five other startled men did as they were told. And then they made the astounding discovery that they were literally surrounded by other figures which were the exact replica of the man who spoke. There were fully a dozen of the masked men, but none spoke except the one with the harsh voice.

The thing was utterly astounding.

For such an occurrence to take place in quiet Somerset was almost like some fantasy of a disordered brain. And yet the affair was terribly real—monstrously grim. To shout for help was utterly useless, for there was no help within earshot. Moreover, a shout for assistance would probably have resulted in a tragedy, for it was obvious that these masked scoundrels were in earnest.

Cyril Jepson found his voice again, but it was husky, and filled with a dread which he hardly dare formulate.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded hoarsely. "Great Heaven above! You do not mean to touch my airship? You will not dare! You——"

"I have no time to explain to you!" interrupted the stranger. "I simply again warn you that any show of resistance will be fatal. So long as you remain inactive you will be unharmed. To your work, men!"

Immediately six of the cloaked figures stepped forward, each of them carrying a coil of rope, which they had produced from beneath their black clothing. Then, utterly unable to help themselves in the slightest degree, Cyril Jepson and his companions were bound hand and foot with astonishing quickness and dexterity.

Jepson himself had shown some signs of resistance, but the ropes were twined round him so rapidly, that his arms were pinioned to his side almost before he realised it. And his three friends and the two mechanics were treated in the same way simultaneously. The whole six were rendered helpless within a single minute.

Perhaps had those other masked men not been standing so close by with the grim-looking revolvers, the half-dozen would have made a desperate resistance. But, somehow, they inwardly realised that their attackers would hesitate at nothing should their orders be disobeyed.

Thus it came about that Jepson and his companions were lying in the airship shed, fuming with fury, while the airship itself was being stolen.

Stolen!

For that was the object of this unheard-of attack. Every one of those masked men was a member of the League of the Green Triangle, and this daring and audacious robbery—the most astounding robbery that had ever occurred—had been planned and prepared in every detail.

So cleverly was it carried out, in fact, that it had proved the simplest matter in the world. Once the prisoners were within the shed, the league men gathered together. One of them—the man who had spoken first—was evidently the leader.

"No time to waste!" he rapped out sharply. "You all know exactly what to do!"

Three of the men stepped forward and climbed nimbly into the car of the airship, and the man who had spoken followed. Each of those four was an experienced

and clever engineer. Two, indeed, had recently been aeroplane mechanics at Brooklands. They knew their work thoroughly, and Cyril Jepson's airship would prove quite capable of being handled by them.

For ten minutes they examined the machinery and controls. Meanwhile their confederates completed their work in the huge shed. Jepson was nearly foaming at the mouth with helpless fury. A calm and cool enough man usually, he now gave way to the most insane passion.

His beloved airship was being carried off—stolen by unknown strangers—before his very eyes! The situation was appallingly terrible. And it was so utterly bizarre and extraordinary, that Jepson was almost inclined to think that he was in the throes of a hideous nightmare.

In his rage he shouted wildly and with passionate appeal. His hoarse cries for help, however, were silenced almost as soon as they started. For a thick gag was bound tightly, and with no gentle hand, across his mouth, thus rendering him mute. But his eyes glittered with terrible fire.

His companions were subjected to exactly the same treatment. In a row they lay upon the floor of the shed, bound with cruel tightness, and gagged so effectually, that not the slightest sound could escape their lips.

Then the great shed was closed and locked, imprisoning them within. Possibly it would be nine or ten hours before they were released, and by that time the league would have accomplished its object with the stolen airship. Jepson's wife would become anxious by the morning, and inquiries would be instituted, and finally the helpless men would be found.

One thing was positive. Unaided, they could do nothing. And aid could not come to them for hours. They could not make a sound, and the shed was locked. A hundred people could have been outside, and the outrage would not have been suspected. The whole scheme was diabolically complete.

And what made them writhe with impotent rage was the sounds which came to their ears from outside. Could they have seen through the walls of the shed they would have witnessed the airship's departure.

The ropes were cast off, and the engine roared with musical sweetness. As the propellers gathered momentum they swished noisily, and Airship No. 5 commenced moving slowly across the meadow at a height of ten feet from the ground.

The man in the pilot's seat touched the elevating lever. On the instant the delicate elevating planes answered the control, and the nose of the aircraft turned skywards, and the great machine soared higher and higher with astonishing swiftness and grace.

Soon it was on a level keel at an altitude of a thousand feet. With its bows directed due south-west, the wonderfully efficient little airship sped away, a dim blot against the dull sky, the hum of the motor gradually becoming less and less, until it trailed away altogether.

Somewhere in the darkness Cyril Jepson's airship had disappeared. But where was it bound for? What was the league's object in stealing it?

Grim, scoundrelly work was afoot that night, and many other exciting and astounding adventures were to befall before daylight dispelled the shadows.

CHAPTER V.

In London—Douglas Clifford's Visitor—Urgent News.

THE love affairs of Douglas Clifford were beset with many overwhelming difficulties. Clifford was the young man who was allied with Nelson Lee in the latter's great crusade against the Green Triangle. Clifford, in point of fact, had supplied Nelson Lee with the information and unlimited capital which had started the famous detective on the track of Professor Zingrave and his fellow-criminals.

Clifford was known as John Merrick, for he was unable to use his own name. The league had killed Clifford, as they thought, and so Clifford, disguised and changed, had become the elderly Mr. Merrick.

But his affairs of the heart were not changed. He was head over heels in love—he admitted it frankly to himself now—with Vera Zingrave, the professor's step-daughter. At first he had tried to fight against it, to assure himself that such a thing was impossible, but in the end he surrendered.

And, after all, Vera was a delightful girl—innocent and pure, with a generous heart and infinitely loveable. She was in absolute ignorance of her father's villainy. Clifford was quite determined to tell her all some day. But at present she only knew vague facts concerning the young man's past life. He had never breathed a word about the League of the Green Triangle, but merely said that he was forced to wear a disguise because he lived in fear of a gang of scoundrels who menaced him.

Clifford intended to reveal the truth slowly. It would have been too much of a shock to tell the girl of her father's villainy straight off. So he would lead up to it by degrees, and when the bomb-shell finally burst, Vera would, in a measure, be prepared.

Clifford and Vera had a thorough understanding with one another, although not much had been spoken. Clifford had proclaimed his love to the girl; and she, to his joy, had not dismissed him as he had half feared she would. She had intimated that when the young man could resume his own identity, she would reveal her true feelings more openly than she permitted herself to at present.

To-day Clifford had taken advantage of an opportunity which had presented itself. As before stated, his love affairs were beset with many difficulties. It was imperative that the professor should know absolutely nothing of his daughter's understanding with the seemingly elderly Mr. John Merrick. So Clifford was very seldom able to meet the girl of his heart.

She had promised to say nothing to the professor, and Clifford, of course, could not dream of visiting Zingrave's house in Grosvenor Square. Certainly, Vera had much freedom of her own, and was a self-reliant girl, who had no fear of going about London unaccompanied. After all, nothing would be thought if she were seen in a restaurant or theatre with "Mr. Merrick."

And to-day Professor Zingrave had journeyed to Birmingham to deliver a scientific speech at the Institute of Science and Chemistry. For, scoundrel though he was, Zingrave was also one of the cleverest scientists in the world.

Vera, herself, had let Clifford know of her father's absence, and that fact alone gave the young man the keenest joy. For it proved to him that Vera was as anxious to see him as he was to see her. Not that he really wanted any further proof of her love; but a young man pierced by Cupid's arrow is rather a curious being, and it is impossible for him to be assured too often of his chosen girl's devotion.

Afternoon found Clifford and Vera in a cosy box at one of the West End theatres, enjoying a matinee performance. At least, that is what they should have been doing. Clifford's gaze, however, was very seldom upon the stage; it was directed mostly at his delightful companion's exquisitely beautiful and delicately modelled features. In the darkened theatre Vera looked simply ravishing in the soft light which reflected upwards from the stage.

"By Jove, how wonderfully pretty she is!" murmured Clifford to himself. "How long will it last? How long will it be before I can speak openly and straightforwardly?"

"Wasn't that fine?" asked Vera suddenly, turning to him, and referring to the acting. "Why, I don't believe you've been watching the stage at all!"

"How could I, when you're so close to me?" asked Clifford softly. "If you knew how wonderfully pretty you look——"

Vera blushed delightfully.

"That's the tenth time you've told me that this afternoon!" she smiled. "But we must really be formal with one another until—oh, there goes the curtain down!"

"By Jove! The play's not ended, is it?" asked Clifford blankly.

"You old silly! There's the third act to see yet," said Vera, looking into his eyes. "You haven't been attending at all!"

"No; I've been occupied in a much better way," replied Clifford lightly. "But what were you saying as the curtain went down? About being formal, I mean?"

Vera's eyes became grave.

"I was thinking how splendid it will be when you become yourself again, Douglas," she exclaimed quietly. "Until that time comes, it is really impossible for us to be more than formal friends. We must be brave, and hide our real emotions. Oh! How long do you think it will be before you get beyond the clutches of the mysterious gang which menaces you?"

Clifford pursed his lips.

"It is impossible for me to tell you, little girl," he said thoughtfully, pressing her hand with a soft grip. "But I have decided, at least, to satisfy your curiosity on one point. It is only right that you should know the danger from which I am in peril. Perhaps, when you know, you will understand more fully than you do now, why it is so imperative that I should remain as you now see me."

"You are going to tell me the identity of the gang?"

"Not exactly. I cannot tell you any identities," replied Clifford. "Some day I will even do that, but not at present. The gang which once had me in its power is one that is the terror of the whole country."

"You almost make me feel afraid!" exclaimed Vera, in a concerned little voice.

"Oh, you mustn't be afraid!" Clifford hastened to say. "I am in no danger now—I am in no danger so long as I remain Mr. John Merrick. Have you heard of the League of the Green Triangle?" he added abruptly.

Vera's eyes filled with sudden alarm.

"You—you do not mean——"

He nodded.

"Yes; it is the League of the Green Triangle that I fear," he replied quietly.

"Oh, but the Green Triangle is a terrible organisation!" exclaimed Vera quickly. "I have read lots about it, and the mysterious robberies it undertakes. Father has often expressed his amazement that such a dreadful society should be allowed to exist."

"By Jove!" murmured Clifford.

The grim humour of the situation was not lost upon him. Zingrave—the Chief of the League!—had expressed astonishment that the league should flourish! The irony of the thing was amazing in itself. But it provided positive proof that the scoundrelly professor had no intention of letting his daughter know of his dreadful secret. Vera was innocent—innocent of all villainy.

She looked into Clifford's eyes gravely, and the young man thrilled through and through as he read the concern in their deep brown depths.

"Are you fighting the league?" she inquired.

"Tooth and nail!" replied Clifford grimly. "Nelson Lee and myself—especially Lee—are devoting all our energies to wrecking the vile criminal band. But this is an absolute secret. Vera, I can trust you to keep it locked in your own heart?"

"You have no need to ask that," replied Vera simply. "Anything you tell me, Douglas, never even reaches the ears of my father. I have not breathed a word to him, and will never do so."

"I know I can trust you, little girl," said Clifford tenderly. "Yes, it is the Green Triangle that Lee and I have resolved to stamp out. During those five years of absence I was not travelling abroad, but incarcerated like a prisoner of the Middle Ages, by the league. I told you that not long ago. But you will understand more fully now the wonderful nature of my escape, for when the Green Triangle gets a man into its deadly power escape is almost impossible."

"Yes, I understand," replied Vera, in sweet, gentle tones. "Oh, I wish I could help you! I wish I could do something!"

"You!" interjected Clifford sharply. "Good heavens, it is no work for a beautiful, charming girl! We must be patient, and everything will be changed before so very long. Hallo, there goes the curtain up again!"

But neither Vera nor Clifford paid much attention to the remainder of the play. They were each thinking of one another, and Clifford was glad that he had made his revelation. There was no reason why Vera should not know of the campaign which he and Nelson Lee had embarked upon. It was the first step towards the final blow. Gradually Clifford would lead up to it, and when Vera was, at last, told the terrible truth of her stepfather, she would be in a measure prepared.

The rest of the afternoon seemed to slip by with really unkind rapidity. After the performance Clifford took Vera to a select little restaurant, and they had tea. Here, in fact, he enjoyed himself far better than he had done in the theatre. In the cosy restaurant, quite to themselves, the pair had had a delightful tête-à-tête tea.

In the early evening Vera had promised to call upon some friends, and so Clifford took her round in a taxi, and they parted. When their next meeting would be neither of them knew, but they were both resolved that it would be before so very long.

Clifford remained in the taxi, and drove round to his club—a quiet establishment, which was mostly patronised by elderly gentlemen. He remained there for an hour or two, and then decided to go home.

"Home" to Clifford was a luxurious little flat within easy reach of Gray's Inn Road. His household consisted merely of a valet—a man whom Nelson Lee had recommended, and who was absolutely trustworthy. The valet, of course, had no idea of his master's true identity. The flat was cleaned regularly by the porter's wife, and all Clifford's meals were sent in from a neighbouring restaurant.

To-night he was in a good humour, and felt quite prepared for the excellent dinner which would be served as soon as he arrived home.

As he mounted the stairs to his flat he was thinking, not of Vera now, but of Nelson Lee. All the detective's plans were known to Clifford, and he wondered how affairs were going at Portmoor, and whether the league were actually attempting to effect the rescue of Dr. Sims Jameson. Clifford was rather gloomy for being left out of the adventure; but the mood was only a momentary one. Nipper, too, he reflected, was kicking his heels in London. They were both waiting—waiting for Nelson Lee to send the word that their services were required.

"Here you are, sir!" exclaimed Foster, Clifford's valet, as the latter let himself in. "Five minutes ago a visitor came for you, and, as I said you'd be in at any moment, he's waiting in the dining-room."

"A visitor?" asked Clifford curiously. "What's his name, Foster?"

"Hale, sir, I think," replied the valet. "Mr. James Hale, the gentleman said."

"Oh! Quite so!" ejaculated Clifford sharply. "A friend of mine."

With quick strides Clifford paced along the passage, and entered the cosy little dining-room, in the grate of which a bright fire blazed. As Clifford entered a gentlemanly looking man, with almost white beard and hair, rose from his chair.

Clifford closed the door, and then faced his visitor.

"I didn't expect you, Hale," he said shortly. "Is it anything important?"

"Vital, sir!" exclaimed the other, a little huskily. "I've brought the most urgent news. It's so urgent that I thought I'd better come straight to you. I know Mr. Lee's out of London, so I thought you——"

"Exactly," interrupted Clifford. "Well, out with it, man!"

Clifford was rather startled by this visit. For "James Hale" was merely the pseudonym of Martin Caine, one of Nelson Lee's most faithful allies. Caine was a Controlling Agent of the Green Triangle, and was in a position to know many useful facts which would be of wonderful service to Nelson Lee. He had proved of inestimable use on more than one occasion, and, being heart and soul with the great detective in the campaign against the league—for Caine really loathed

crime—he was always eager to do everything possible for the good of the general cause.

“Well,” repeated Clifford sharply, “let’s hear your news! We’re quite alone, and there’s no fear of our conversation being overheard.”

Martin Caine nodded, but nevertheless lowered his voice to a mere whisper. He was quivering with excitement, and Clifford waited with eager expectation. He was sure that something of great importance was going to be revealed—something which demanded immediate attention and action.

And Douglas Clifford was perfectly right in his supposition.

CHAPTER VI.

Clifford Gets Busy—The Arrival at Exeter—The Rush Through the Night.

“I SUPPOSE you know all about it, sir?” began Martin Caine softly, stroking his white beard—which was, of course, false. “The business which has taken Mr. Lee to Portmoor, I mean?”

“Yes, Lee primed me up with all the facts,” replied Clifford. “He was convinced that the league intended helping Sims Jameson to escape, and he’s gone to the prison to keep watch and guard.”

“Mr. Lee was right,” said Caine grimly. “The league, in fact, are making the attempt this very night!”

“To-night?” ejaculated the young man.

“Yes, and the means they are employing will astound you,” went on the league’s agent. “I obtained my information from a man who will take part in the affair, so I know positively that my facts are reliable.”

“But Lee will frustrate any scheme——”

“He cannot—he will not be prepared for such amazing methods,” interrupted Caine quickly. “That is why I have come to you, Mr. Merrick. I thought, perhaps, you would be able to do something—although there is little time enough, in all conscience. If I had known sooner——”

Clifford snapped his fingers.

“Known what?” he asked. “Don’t keep me on tenterhooks, man!”

“You have heard of Mr. Cyril Jepson, sir?”

“Hang it all, what on earth has Jepson to do with it?” asked Clifford. “Of course, I’ve heard of him! Who hasn’t? He’s the inventor of a wonderful new airship—an airship which knocks all others into a cocked hat, if the reports are true!”

“Well, Jepson is seriously concerned in this business.”

“Good gracious! You don’t mean he belongs to the league?”

“Oh, no!” Martin Caine said quickly. “He’s a victim of the league. To-night his airship is to be raided—perhaps the raid has already occurred—and the aircraft stolen. A dozen of the league’s best men are told off for the work, and the whole thing is complete to the last detail. There will be no hitch!”

“But what in the world is the object of the theft?” demanded Clifford amazedly.

“You astound me, Hale! An airship? To steal such a thing is impossible!”

Caine clenched his fists.

“The league never attempts the impossible, sir,” he said grimly. “I know—absolutely know—that Jepson’s airship is to be taken from its shed by force. But this time the vessel is in the hands of the Green Triangle’s men.”

“But why?” asked Clifford. “Why? And what has this to do with Portmoor?”

“Everything!”

“How?”

"Because the league intends to use the airship to effect the escape of Jameson," replied Martin Caine deliberately. "In some way Jameson is to be carried off from the prison in the airship."

Clifford stared at his visitor, and breathed hard.

"By Jove, it's hard to believe!" he said tensely. "Yet it is possible!"

"Possible, sir," repeated Caine. "It is a fact!"

"Do you know the airship is to do the trick? Do you know what time the escape will occur?"

"At about two or three o'clock in the morning," replied Caine. "At the later hour, I believe. But exactly what the plans are I haven't the faintest notion. The rescue is to take place, though, and it will be successful unless something is done."

"Gee, you're right!" exclaimed Clifford, with a start. "Nelson Lee certainly suspects nothing of this extraordinary nature. He will be taken by surprise, and ——— He must be warned, man. He must be warned at once!"

"But how? No telegram will reach him until to-morrow, and then it will be too late. And telephoning is impossible, for even if you rang up Portmoor, Sillard himself would receive the call."

Clifford looked rather blank.

"Then what is to be done?" he asked.

"That's for you to decide, sir," replied Martin Caine quietly. "I've done the best I can, and now I leave the matter in your hands. I realised all along that the thing is pretty hopeless, but you might be able to warn Mr. Lee in some way."

"I must think," muttered Clifford tensely—"I must think!"

"Well, I'll be going, sir——"

"One moment. Let me get the facts clear in my head," interjected Clifford. "By this time an airship has been stolen by emissaries of the league, the airship is proceeding to Portmoor, and the rescue of Dr. Sims Jameson will be attempted at three o'clock in the morning?"

"That's it, exactly."

"Three o'clock? You are sure?"

"Well, I'm pretty certain that three o'clock is the planned hour," replied Caine. "I have no more idea than your fireirons have how Jameson will be rescued. I only know that he will be taken by the airship to a yacht which will be waiting out to sea off the coast. But Sillard is pretty sure to have a hand in the game, and it's bound to be a slap-bang affair—all-over-before-it's-commenced sort of thing. Mr. Lee has no idea of the airship raid, and will be totally unprepared for such daring methods."

A few minutes later Martin Caine had taken his departure. He had done all that lay within his power, and left the rest to Douglas Clifford. But what could the latter do? The evening was fairly advanced already; telephoning and telegraphing was impracticable, and a personal visit to Portmoor was out of the question.

But was it?

Clifford suddenly became greatly excited. Was it possible for him to reach Portmoor before three in the morning? If so; he could, once he arrived there, manage to warn Nelson Lee by hook or by crook.

"Oh, what's the good of getting wild ideas like this?" Clifford asked himself. "The last train for the station nearest Portmoor has left hours ago. There's no hope; I can do nothing. Deuce take the unkind fates! By Jove, Exeter—Exeter!"

He blundered across the room to a sideboard, fumbled frantically in a drawer, and finally unearthed a time-table. He soon found the information he required, and his eyes blazed with excitement.

"In three-quarters of an hour—a few minutes over!" he muttered tensely.

"A train leaves the London terminus in three-quarters of an hour from now,

and arrives at Exeter at one-thirty in the morning! By Jove, there's a chance! Exeter is no more than thirty or forty miles from Portmoor, and I might be able to hire a facing car. What's this, eh? What's this?"

His eye had caught an advertisement on the page opposite to the time-table of trains from London to Exeter. There were several advertisements of Exeter tradesmen, and one of them had been inserted by a big motor garage. The garage's telephone number was prominently displayed. Clifford shrewdly thought things out.

"I can get to Paddington in a quarter of an hour from here," he murmured quickly. "That leaves me half an hour. Well, there'll be no harm in trying, anyhow."

He threw the time-table down, walked across the room to a telephone, and picked up the receiver. In a few seconds the exchange put the usual query.

"One-seven-three-five Exeter!" said Clifford clearly. "Trunk call. Try and get me through without any loss of time."

"One-seven-three-five Exeter," repeated the exchange. "It's fairly late in the day, so I expect you'll get through quickly. I'll give you a ring."

"Thanks."

Clifford hung the receiver up, and then paced the room, rubbing his apparently grizzled hair thoughtfully. Then he nodded to himself.

"Yes, Nipper had better come along with me," he mentally decided. "If our project falls to the ground no harm will be done, and if we are successful the lad may be useful. Besides, it's only right that Nipper should be acquainted with the facts."

In a few moments he had got Nelson Lee's number in the Gray's Inn Road. Nipper answered the telephone himself, and recognised Clifford's voice immediately.

"Hallo! That you, Mr. Merrick?" he asked cheerily across the wires.

"Yes. Be at Paddington in half an hour from now, and await me against the main line departure platform," said Clifford briskly. "We're going on a journey together, young 'un. No time to explain."

"By Jupiter!" came an excited voice. "Is it anything to do with the guy——"

"I'll tell you everything when we meet," interrupted Clifford, in a crisp tone.

"Don't fail me, youngster. Paddington in half an hour, and wait for me."

"Good enough!" said Nipper promptly. "I'll be there. I scent adventure, and I'm on the track of it like a giddy sleuth-hound!"

As Clifford hung up the receiver and rose to his feet the door opened, and Foster appeared. Foster was valet, butler, and general handyman all rolled into one. He now carried a tray with several dishes upon it, which were practically hidden by glittering metal colours.

"Hallo! My dinner?" asked Clifford.

"Yes, sir."

"Right! Shove it on the table—don't trouble about formalities to-night," said Clifford briskly. "I'm off in twenty minutes, Foster, on urgent business. Fetch my heaviest overcoat and a thick travelling cap; then get a taxi in readiness outside."

Foster showed no sign of surprise. His master, in spite of his apparent sedate age, frequently shot off on mysterious errands at a moment's notice, and Foster was used to it.

In a few minutes Clifford was piling into the excellent dinner, and while he was engaged in this pleasant and necessary occupation—for he was really hungry—the telephone bell rang sharply.

"Scott, through already!" muttered Clifford. "We'll soon see."

He crossed over to the phone.

"Hallo! Who's that?"

"Exchange. You wanted Exeter, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"You're through. Exeter's waiting."

There was a considerable buzzing and humming, and then a faint and indistinct voice came to Clifford's ears. That voice was speaking at far-away Exeter, and Clifford strained his ears anxiously.

"Hallo! Are you the Modern Garage, Exeter?" he asked loudly.

"Yes. Who is that speaking, please?"

"My name is Merrick. I want you to have a powerful car at Exeter Station to meet the express from London which arrives at one-thirty."

"You want the one-thirty express met by one of our cars?" came the distant query.

"Yes—a racing-car, if you have one."

"Very good, sir. It will be there in readiness. Will it be required for a long journey?"

"Possibly. Have the car prepared for one, in any case," said Clifford. "Make no mistake about the time, and supply an absolutely reliable car. The matter is exceedingly urgent."

"Very good, sir."

A moment later Clifford went back to the table, and hurriedly finished his interrupted dinner. Everything was a brisk rush. With his mouth still full he bundled into his overcoat, and then remembered that he had better replenish his pocket-book. So he went to a desk, unlocked it, and took out a big wad of banknotes.

Meanwhile Foster had returned with the information that a taxi was waiting outside. With just twenty-three minutes to spare before the express left Paddington Douglas Clifford left his flat, and rushed away in the taxi to the great terminus.

The evening was still fairly young for the West End, and the motor-'bus and taxicab traffic was rather thick. More than once Clifford fairly danced up and down in his seat with impatience as his taxi was held up for a moment or two.

But the driver took advantage of clear spaces, and his vehicle fairly flew. There was a promise of double pay if he did the journey in fifteen minutes, and he was anxious to earn the money. As it happened he was just two minutes late, but Clifford was so pleased and relieved that he handed the man ten shillings, and did not trouble to wait for the change.

He had just five minutes before the express left. He simply flew into the booking-office, obtained the tickets, and then rushed to the main line departure platform. A sturdy little figure hurried to meet him.

"By gum, I thought you were going to miss the train!" ejaculated Nipper hurriedly. "We've only got about two ticks!"

"We don't want more," panted Clifford. "I'm here in time, and that's the main thing."

Clifford had purchased first-class tickets, and the pair easily obtained a compartment in a corridor coach to themselves. As the express slowly steamed out of the terminus Clifford lay back among the cushions, and breathed a sigh.

"What a rush!" he exclaimed a little hoarsely. "How long had you been waiting for me, Nipper?"

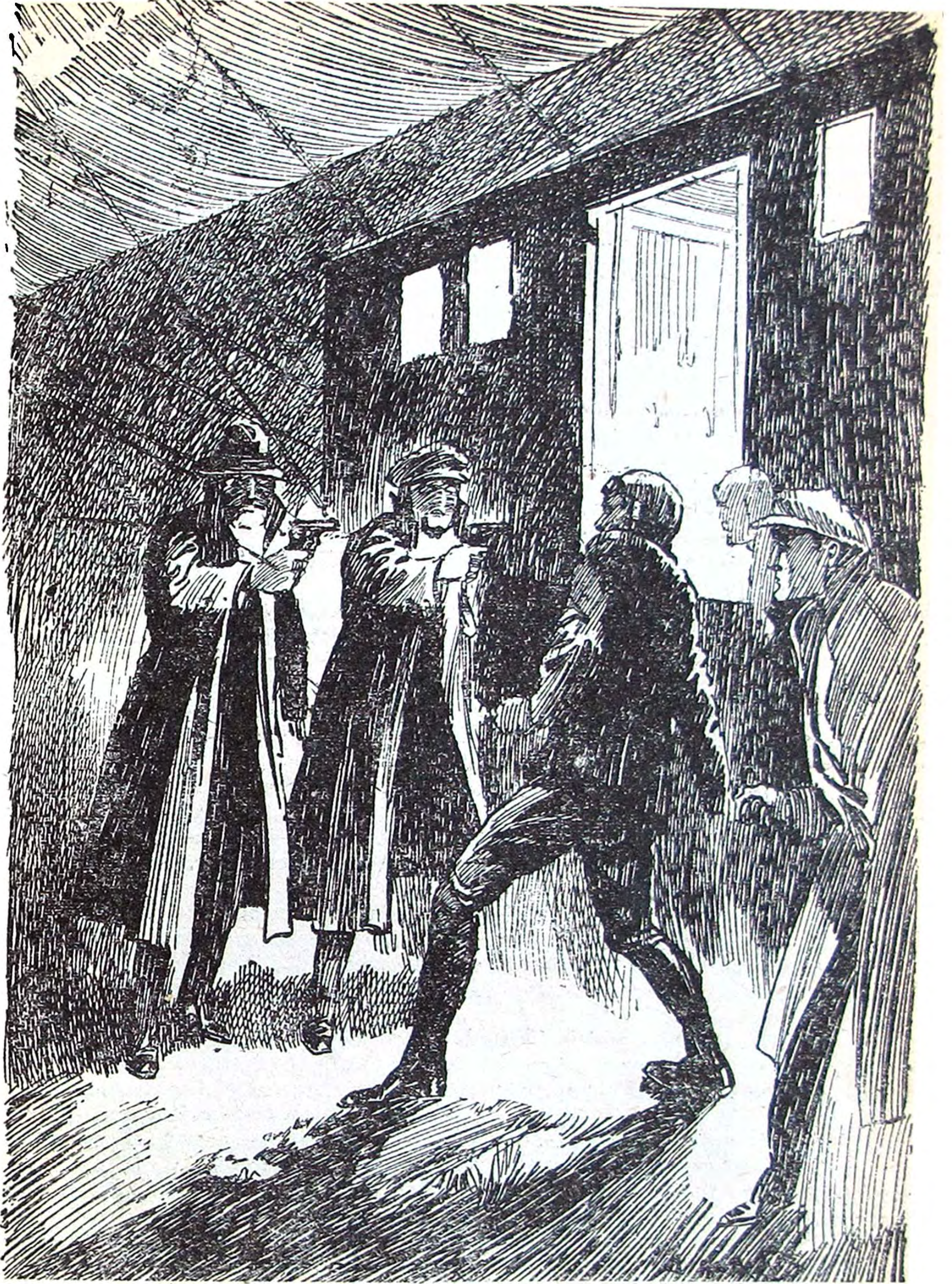
"About ten minutes," replied Nelson Lee's young assistant. "But what's the wheezo?" he added curiously. "What's the giddy idea of this sudden rush to the West of England? This train doesn't go near Portmoor. It travels via Exeter, Torquay, and Plymouth."

"Exeter is our destination, young 'un."

"But I'm blessed if I can see——"

Clifford lit a cigarette, and breathed freely.

"It's not necessary for you to see anything, my dear Nipper," he exclaimed calmly. "I'm now going to explain the reason for this journey, so you've only



"Hands up—every one of you!"

The voice cut through the darkness keenly, grim and harsh. Cyril Jepson swung round with an ejaculation of amazement. He was gazing directly upon the muzzles of two revolvers. (See page 15.)

got to listen. It may prove to be a fruitless quest, but to have remained in London after the information I received was quite impossible. Less than an hour ago, my lad, I had not the slightest idea that this adventure was to be undertaken."

In short sentences Clifford related to his young companion how Martin Cairns had called, and what the league's agent had said. Nipper listened with eyes that gleamed with excitement, and now and again he uttered exclamations of astonishment.

"If it's humanly possible, Lee has got to be warned of this new move on the league's part," concluded Douglas Clifford grimly. "By an extreme stroke of good fortune I managed to ring up a motor garage in Exeter, so when we arrive a powerful car will be waiting to take us straight to Portmoor. With luck we ought to arrive by two-thirty, at least."

Nipper nodded shrewdly.

"Even then we shall have all our work cut out," he remarked. "It'll be a bit of a job to get hold of Mr. Lee at that time of night, I expect. All sorts of difficulties may arise——"

"Well, there's no sense in meeting trouble half way," interjected Clifford. "At the present moment we don't know exactly what's going to happen. The whole affair's hidden in a haze of mystery. We shall have to wait and see, as a famous statesman once remarked."

"I jolly well hope our waiting won't be in vain!"

"We shall do our best, at all events," replied Clifford. "Did you have any meal before you left your master's rooms?"

"Rather!" assented Nipper. "I didn't have much time to waste, but I managed to wolf up a pretty decent feed. I've got some sandwiches in my pocket, too."

"Then the best thing we can do is to occupy the time we are travelling by having a sleep," said Clifford, throwing his cigarette-end down and stamping upon it. "After we reach Exeter we shall be faced by strenuous work, so it will do us no harm to have a nap now."

Accordingly the pair settled themselves for a snooze, and in five minutes they were both fast asleep, the express tearing along the steel track with a rhythmic roar. The train sped on through the night, and at one-fifteen both Nipper and Clifford were wide awake again, exceedingly fresh, and feeling ready for anything that might ensue.

Owing to a delay not far from London the train was ten minutes overdue when it finally steamed into Exeter Station. Without wasting a second Clifford and Nipper hurried out. The night was clear, fine, and still. Very few people were about, but outside the main entrance to the station stood a powerful two-seater racing motor-car.

It was the automobile which Clifford had ordered by 'phone, and a short transaction was carried out in a very few minutes with the manager of the garage who had personally brought the car to the station. A wad of banknotes passed into his hands. It was not the cost of the hire, but a substantial deposit, for Clifford had no intention of being driven to Portmoor by a third party. By handing over the deposit he was enabled to take charge of the car himself.

And at ten minutes to two exactly he and Nipper were seated side by side in the car, and it was roaring out of Exeter at high speed.

Clifford was looking grim and determined; and Nipper somewhat excited. The last lap of their long journey had commenced. Exactly what was going to happen in the immediate future was unknown to both of them. They did not trouble to exert their brains in forming theories. They both had precisely the same thought.

Would they arrive at Portmoor in time to warn Nelson Lee? Would they be successful in frustrating the designs of the Green Triangle?

It was a knotty problem.

CHAPTER VII.

At Portmoor—Sillard's Order—The Secret Telephone—An Amazing Plan.

NELSON LEE was off duty, and he was sitting in the warders' common-room at Portmoor. This was a fairly big, bare apartment, with dull, pink-washed walls, and a stiff-looking fireplace. In this a bright blaze exuded a comfortable warmth. Nelson Lee was sitting before the fire, thoughtfully smoking a pipe.

It was evening, and before long he would go on duty in a certain portion of the prison. The detective had been accepted at Portmoor as Warder Thomas Braddon without any suspicion being aroused. And for several days Nelson Lee had been performing the warder's work as though he had been engaged in the occupation for years.

He was watching and waiting. Strictly upon the alert, he spent every minute of his time, on duty and off—except when he was actually sleeping—on the keen look-out for any suspicious movements on Oscar Sillard's part.

But, so far, he had absolutely drawn blank. The usual routine of the prison had gone on with monotonous regularity. Sims Jameson was a convict like all the rest, with no privileges, sleeping and living in a bare cell—for he had not stayed in the infirmary long—and working by day in the quarries.

The famous crime investigator, in fact, was more than a little perplexed and worried. He was absolutely certain that the rescue of Dr. Sims Jameson was to be attempted. And he had expected to see some signs of preparation before this. Could it be possible that he was mistaken? Was he wasting his time and energies at Portmoor?

As it turned out, the time for action was very near at hand.

While Nelson Lee was musing before the fire, waiting to go on duty, the chief warder of Portmoor—a bluff, stern-looking man named Goodman—had been summoned to the governor's private office. Oscar Sillard was alone, and he got straight to the point without any preliminaries.

"You remember that Convict 131 attacked me in this office a few days ago, Goodman?" he asked.

"I'm not likely to forget it, sir," replied the chief warder grimly. "It's the first time that such an incident has occurred at Portmoor."

Sillard nodded.

"Well, it is my belief that No. 131 is not quite right in his head, and I am extremely interested in his case," he went on. "It seemed so utterly strange that he should come into my office and attack me. The doctor declares that he is perfectly sane, but can get nothing out of him. But I am curious to question the prisoner myself."

"No. 131 is in his cell at present——"

"I am aware of that," interjected Sillard curtly. "To tell the truth, Goodman, I have determined to make an attempt to make the fellow speak. Therefore, in a quarter of an hour's time you will bring him into my office here, and then leave him with me. A quiet talk with him will probably draw him out. The surroundings of this apartment, too, will have more effect upon him than the drab walls of his own cell. I am interested to see what result will follow from such an interview."

The chief warder lifted his eyebrows.

"Surely you do not suggest that the prisoner should be left with you, alone, sir?" he asked. "The man attacked you before, and it would not be safe."

"I have given my orders," said Oscar Sillard grimly.

"But I protest strongly, sir——"

"Tut, tut! Who is governor of this prison?" demanded Sillard sourly. "I can take care of myself, Goodman, but if it will ease your mind strict precautions

will be taken. Before you bring Convict 131 to me put him in log irons and handcuff him. I don't think there will be any fear of his showing fight then."

"Very good, sir."

The chief warder left with a rather puzzled frown. But there was nothing to fear now that Sillard had ordered the prisoner to be manacled. The proceeding was certainly unusual, but nothing to cause any comment.

Goodman entered the room in which Nelson Lee was sitting, and he still wore a frown. The detective looked up at him inquiringly.

"Anything wrong, sir?" he asked. "You look worried."

"No, Braddon, there's nothing wrong," replied the chief warder; "but the governor has got a curious notion into his head, and I don't exactly like the look of it. It seems to me that he's asking for trouble—just for the sake of satisfying his curiosity. But as the prisoner will be helpless, I don't think Mr. Sillard will be in much danger."

"The prisoner?" repeated Nelson Lee. "I don't quite catch on, sir."

The chief warder briefly told his companion what Sillard's orders had been. Goodman had taken rather a fancy to the new officer, and was already on friendly terms. As Nelson Lee heard what had passed in the governor's office his eyes gleamed with sudden triumph, and his jaw set grim and firm.

"At last!" he muttered. "Sillard has shown his hand! I was not mistaken."

"What's that?" asked Goodman. "Don't mumble, man!"

Nelson Lee had already decided exactly what he would do when the time for action came. He crossed over to the door, closed it, and then returned to Goodman's side. The chief warder was regarding his subordinate with a curious expression.

"Mr. Goodman, the time has come for me to be perfectly frank with you," said the detective quietly. "The information you have just given me is not only interesting, but exceedingly significant. I am not Thomas Braddon at all."

"What on earth——"

Nelson Lee slowly and deliberately removed the false moustache which he had deemed it advisable to wear. He had made no attempt to disguise himself as Braddon, but he had thought it wise to alter his own face somewhat, for his features were probably well known at Portmoor among the officials.

The chief warder stared at him in absolute amazement.

"By the thunder!" he gasped. "What's this? Who the deuce are you? A false moustache! Good gracious me, am I seeing aright?"

Nelson Lee smiled calmly.

"Don't you recognise me, Goodman?" he asked smoothly.

"Upon my soul, I seem to have seen your features somewhere!" ejaculated the chief warder, in an astounded tone. "But I'm hanged if I can place you!"

"I met you here about five years ago, before Oscar Sillard's time, and before you had risen to your present post," replied the detective calmly. "It was in connection with an escaped prisoner named Hill——"

"By George, I know now!" gasped the other. "You are Mr. Nelson Lee!"

"Precisely."

"But what in the world does it mean?"

"It means that I am at Portmoor on very important work," replied the detective grimly. "It is impossible for me to explain now, Goodman, for we have not the time at our disposal. But I will tell you everything later. For the present I will merely state that your respected governor is a black scoundrel, and that he is attempting to effect the escape of Convict 131—otherwise Dr. Sims Jameson. Until to-night I had received no sign; but Sillard's order to hold conversation with Jameson alone in his private office is extremely significant."

The chief warder fairly gaped with stupified astonishment.

"Sillard a scoundrel!" he ejaculated. "Impossible! I—I am amazed, Mr. Lee! I don't know what to think. I don't know——"

Nelson Lee laid his hand upon the other's arm.

"Please remain calm," he said evenly. "Much depends upon calm, quick action now. We must hear all that passes between Sillard and the prisoner. I have already made preparations, for I have had plenty of time at my disposal to get ready for any emergency. I have told you the absolute truth, and I now want your assistance."

"It is only too willingly yours, Mr. Lee," replied the chief warder. "I will endeavour to remain calm, as you request, but I shall find it difficult. This revelation is the most singular thing that has happened in the whole course of my experience. But the very fact that you are here at Portmoor is ample proof that something is very wrong. You may rely upon my rendering you all the help that lies within my power."

"Thank you. I want no better assurance," said Nelson Lee calmly. "And now pray hasten to No. 131's cell, and carry out Sillard's order. And under no circumstances must you give the slightest indication that the governor is under suspicion."

"Trust me, Mr. Lee."

"Good!" went on the detective briskly. "I will be waiting for you at the private gate leading to Sillard's office after you have delivered the prisoner into the governor's charge. I will then explain my plan of action."

The chief warder went off with his head in a whirl, but he managed to calm his thoughts, and to compose his expression by the time he marched Convict 131 into Oscar Sillard's private sanctum. Dr. Sims Jameson looked sullen and morose, but inwardly he was greatly excited at this unexpected turn of events.

Sillard looked up from his desk as the prisoner was led into the brilliantly-lighted apartment, and nodded approvingly as he noticed the manner in which No. 131 was manacled and secured.

"Leave the prisoner on the other side of my desk," exclaimed Sillard quietly. "You may return for him, Goodman, in twenty minutes' time. I am going to see what a little quiet conversation will do. You may go."

The chief warder retired without speaking. Had he known nothing of what Nelson Lee had told him he would never have entertained the slightest suspicions regarding this unusual interview. It was out of the ordinary, no doubt, but not unprecedented. Knowing all he did, however, the fact struck him at once that it was the easiest matter in the world for a convict to be helped to escape from the prison if the helper happened to be the governor himself. Nobody else in the whole building would know what passed between the pair except they themselves.

Goodman left the office and closed the door after him. As he did so Sillard got up, crossed to the door, and locked it. Then he drew together some heavy tapestry curtains across the doorway, which were provided to keep out the icy moorland winds. They also prevented any single word of what was passing within the room being overheard from outside. The window was already closed and heavily shuttered. No man on earth could have heard a voice speaking through those shutters, even though the tones were unusually loud. The two men, in fact, were absolutely and entirely alone, far out of earshot of the keenest hearing.

"Well?" demanded Dr. Sims Jameson, his eyes blazing. "What does this mean, Sillard? If you mean to effect my release, why have I been manacled——"

"Be sensible, Jameson," interrupted Oscar Sillard calmly. "You don't suppose you're going to be set free now, do you? I've had you brought here for the special purpose of putting you in possession of the league's plans."

"You are going to give me hope at last?"

"To-night you will be set free!"

Convict 131 quivered with intense excitement.

"How?" he demanded tensely. "How?"

Sillard handed his companion a cigar, and lit one himself before replying. There was an expression of calm enjoyment upon the governor's face. It pleased him

very much to see the obvious delight of Jameson. But he would have been very far from pleased could he have known that both Chief Warder Goodman and "Warder Braddon" were, at that moment, listening to every word that left his lips.

Yet how could it be?

The office was locked, and the heavy curtains hung closely over the door, excluding all sounds. And the shutters were tight in position, thus making assurance doubly sure. Not even a chink of light escaped into the night. How, then, could Nelson Lee and Goodman be listening to the conversation?

The explanation was absurdly simple, although it was practically impossible for Oscar Sillard to guess it.

Nelson Lee had been busy since his arrival at Portmoor, although the nature of his business had been known only to himself. Three nights before he had performed a little burglary. He had done it while the prison was still well awake—in the middle evening, in fact. Sillard had gone off in his motor-car to the town, and his office had been accordingly locked and deserted. Nelson Lee had seized his opportunity, and, unknown to a soul, had broken into the office via the window. This was a simple enough task for the detective, and had been quickly accomplished.

Once inside he had got really busy. Out of his bag he produced a little instrument, and this had been concealed behind the cornice-pole near the ceiling. It was quite invisible from below, although an inspection of the room would have revealed it. As it was only about one chance in a million that Sillard would start examining the rear of the cornice-pole, however, there was not much fear of the instrument being discovered.

It was nothing more nor less than the transmitter of a small private telephone. Almost invisible wires were then connected to the transmitter and tucked away close to the woodwork, the wires leading out into the open, and running down the wall to the ground. They were absolutely concealed by the thick ivy which grew upon the wall. And this ivy also concealed a small electric-battery and two receivers. Even in the broadest daylight no sign of the telephone was visible.

Thus the instrument was there, ready for any emergency, and quite unsuspected. The room could have been padded with cotton-wool throughout, but any conversation going on within could be easily overheard merely by placing one of the little receivers to the ear. It is a well-known fact that with small-house telephones the slightest sounds are transmitted, even though those sounds are made on the opposite side of the room to which the instrument is situated. The line is so short that a mere whisper sounds quite loudly in the receiver at the other end.

Therefore, as Sillard and Jameson spoke in quiet, ordinary tones, their voices carried to the transmitter, and were duly heard clearly and distinctly by means of the receivers outside.

Yet how could Sillard guess that the telephone existed? He had no more idea of its presence in his office than he had of the two men who were outside his shuttered window, keenly listening to his conversation with Convict 131.

Once outside the office, after leaving Jameson in the governor's charge, the chief warder had hurried to the little private gate, and had found Nelson Lee awaiting him. The detective merely requested Goodman to follow him. They quietly walked straight to Sillard's window, and halted there.

"My dear Mr. Lee, it is absolutely impossible for us to overhear a word," exclaimed the chief warder in a whisper. "The window is closed and shuttered——"

"S-sh-sh! Not so loud!" cautioned Nelson Lee, who had been fumbling in the ivy. "Place this to your ear, Goodman, and listen intently!"

The other took the little receiver.

"Good gracious! Is this a telephone?" he asked softly.

"Yes. I fitted it up a few nights ago, unknown to a soul," returned Nelson Lee. "But we must not talk—we must listen. In less than two minutes you will be convinced of Sillard's treacherous villainy."

They each placed a receiver to their ears. And, perfectly clearly, came the words of the men within the house. It sounded almost uncanny, so distinct did the conversation transmit itself through the short wires.

"The whole thing is arranged so perfectly, so minutely, that no hitch can possibly occur, my dear Jameson," were the first words which the chief warder heard. "By dawn you will be miles away from this place."

"Thank Heaven for that!" came Jameson's voice. "But how will my rescue be effected?"

The chief warder clicked his teeth. Already he knew that Nelson Lee had been speaking the truth. Goodman fairly trembled with intensity, and he had no time to ponder over the startling fact that Oscar Sillard was a scoundrel, and a traitor to his trusted position.

"Take this little case; inside is a needle," went on Sillard's even tones. "Be careful not to touch your skin with the point, for the slightest scratch causes instant unconsciousness. The point is coated with a tremendously powerful drug. Conceal it in your shoe—— Oh, but you're rather helpless. I'll tuck it away!"

"What is the good of this?" demanded Jameson. "I shall be searched——"

"Have no fear of that. I will accompany you back to your cell, and will see that you are locked in and left alone," went on Sillard. "Now listen carefully, Jameson, for everything will depend upon your own promptness and quickness of action. What you have to do is really very simple, and I do not see how you can make a mistake."

"Let me hear the plan."

"It is very easily accomplished. At three o'clock precisely—you will be able to tell the time by the chiming of the prison clock—you will suddenly make an outcry. Yell out that you are dying, and flop upon the floor and gasp."

"What in the name of thunder for?"

"To attract the night-warder," replied Sillard calmly. "The very instant the warder gets within your reach, just prick him with the point of the needle, and he will fall down senseless. This will be done instantly, for he will not suspect anything. You will then wait until five-past-three—the cell-door, of course, being open."

"Suppose other warders appear meanwhile?" asked Jameson bluntly.

"That is not likely. And if by chance another warder does appear treat him as you will treat the first. That needle is far more useful than a revolver, for it catches people entirely off their guard, and renders them helpless with one touch. Don't venture out of your cell, for at precisely five-past-three an explosion will occur."

"An explosion?" repeated Convict 131 curiously.

"That is what I said. An explosion above, near the great skylight," said Sillard. "The instant all is over—and that will be at the expiration of only a few seconds—rush out from your cell. You will find that the skylight is shattered, and a thick rope-ladder will be hanging down. Jump on to this and climb rapidly upwards."

"You amaze me, Sillard," came Jameson's tones to the ears of the listening men. "The scheme is certainly simple, though drastic, but what is the object of my climbing on to the roof?"

A laugh carried over the wires.

"I did not say that you were to climb on to the roof," replied the governor. "That rope-ladder will be let down by an airship, which will be hovering immediately overhead."

"An airship?" gasped the prisoner. "The thing is utterly impossible!"

"By no means. It is so minutely planned that success is assured. The night is windless, and an airship, remember, being lighter than the air through which it

travels, is capable of remaining still, hovering in one place. This particular craft will arrive over the prison noiselessly some little time before three, and will be ready for instant departure. As soon as you are seen clambering up the ladder the airship will rise, carrying you with it, and will speed swiftly away into the night ! ”

Nelson Lee nudged the chief warder, and the pair exchanged significant glances in the gloom. The plot which was being unfolded to them filled them with amazement, but the detective knew perfectly well that the scheme, daring though it was, could be carried out successfully if no steps were taken to frustrate it.

The League of the Green Triangle certainly did not do things by halves !

“ You are as good as released already,” went on Sillard’s voice. “ The whole thing is timed exactly to a second, and it will happen so swiftly, and with such confusing abruptness, that no doubts as to the ultimate result need be entertained.”

“ I—I am at a loss for words, Sillard ! ” ejaculated the prisoner.

“ Then pull yourself together ! ” said the governor sharply. “ If this affair goes wrong, you will only have yourself to blame. Now, take careful heed. I will just run over the chief points again. Goodman will be back here within five minutes, so there is no time to waste ! ”

Nelson Lee and the chief warder listened intently for several minutes longer. Then the detective dropped his receiver, and pulled at Goodman’s sleeve. The pair silently crept away, and came to a halt a little distance off.

“ A daring scheme—an amazingly audacious plot,” said Nelson Lee quietly. “ But it will fail, Goodman, thanks to our being forewarned. I think you will agree with me now that Mr. Oscar Sillard is hardly the man to hold a position as Governor of one of His Majesty’s Convict Prisons ! ”

“ I—I can only repeat No. 131’s sentence,” exclaimed Goodman huskily. “ I am utterly at a loss for words, Mr. Lee ! ”

And the great detective was not in the least astonished at that statement. For he, himself, accustomed as he was to startling surprises, was forced to admit that this present dramatic turn of events was something singularly astounding.

But he thanked the impulses which had prompted him to install the secret telephone. For it was, in actual truth, to result in the complete downfall of the league’s carefully laid plot, and to bring about the end of another Governing Member of the League of the Green Triangle.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Call for Help—The Explosion—Carried Into Space—A Dreadful Doom !

THE night warder paced along the even row of cells with quiet tread. The great hall was quiet and still. The whole prison, in fact, was sleeping.

Several hours had passed since that extraordinary conversation between convict and governor in the latter’s private sanctum. At the conclusion of it, Sillard had accompanied Jameson back to his cell, and had seen him locked in for the night. Not a soul at Portmoor had the slightest idea that anything was wrong—except the chief warder and Nelson Lee.

And these two even would have been in absolute ignorance of the plot, but for the detective’s keen foresight in installing the little telephone apparatus.

The night warder had the large hall to himself. It was situated in the very centre of the prison buildings. Above, the whole roof was nothing but a wide skylight, made of wooden beams and thousands of panes of glass. There were no side-windows in the great hall, for it was surrounded completely with little cubicles, or cells, where the convicts spent their indoor life.

There were galleries of these cells, with iron balconies running right round the hall. It was the night warder's duty to pace round, strictly upon the alert, and to open any cell should a prisoner cause any commotion.

The night warder on this occasion was not the usual man. The customary routine, in fact, had been altered by the chief warder, and the man on night duty was the new official, Warder Braddon—in other words, Nelson Lee.

Nelson Lee had a grim object in taking the night warder's place. Apparently the hall and the adjoining rooms and passages were deserted, for the relief warder would not put in an appearance before four o'clock in the morning. The rest of the prison, officials and prisoners, were supposed to be asleep.

But in an unused cell on the lower floor the chief warder was sitting, waiting for the astounding events which would come to pass at three o'clock. As Nelson Lee paced up and down, he was thinking deeply.

How was the skylight to be wrecked? Sillard had spoken of an explosion, but the detective had no idea how the explosion was to be brought about. As a matter of fact, the explanation was quite simple, although the detective did not guess it.

At three separate points in the framework of the skylight powerful explosive bombs had been placed. Electric wires led from them to a box-room some short distance away, which overlooked the skylight. A member of the Green Triangle—he was one of the kitchen staff—had his strict orders. At five past three, precisely, he was to press a button, and thereby complete an electric circuit through the three bombs.

These would immediately explode, and the force would be such that the whole structure of glass and woodwork would be absolutely shattered. Comparatively, the skylight was a very weak point in the building, and the explosion would certainly cause no damage to anything else. But with the gaping hole in the roof the league's object would be accomplished.

Nelson Lee, however, was in ignorance of these plans, and he was therefore puzzled. But presently his thoughts reverted to another subject, for it was no good racking his brain for an explanation which was not within his power to fathom. The skylight was certainly going to be shattered—that was a positive fact.

The detective glanced at the clock at the end of the hall, and saw that the time was close upon three. The hour for action was nearly at hand. Precisely what would happen during the next ten minutes or so, the famous crime investigator could form no guess. Certain it was, however, that the league's plans would not materialise as they anticipated.

Clearly and distinctly the prison clock boomed out the hour of three.

"Ah!" murmured the detective. "I must steel myself!"

A sudden, stifled cry came from one of the cells, and Nelson Lee smiled a little grimly to himself. Dr. Sims Jameson was carrying out his part of the programme.

"Help! I—I'm fainting! Help!"

Nelson Lee dashed to the cell door, unlocked it, and passed inside. The light was fairly dim, but he made out the form of Convict 131 lying full-length upon the floor and wriggling convulsively, as though in a fit. Had Nelson Lee not been on his guard, he would certainly have bent over the prostrate man. Then a mere touch of the needle which Jameson held in his hand would have caused instant insensibility.

But Nelson Lee was forewarned.

And forewarned is forearmed. The detective did not hesitate a second. He bent down and made a simultaneous grab at both Jameson's wrists, and held them as though in a vice. The movement was so unexpected that the degraded specialist was in no measure prepared for it. He had intended taking the warder by surprise, and the warder had turned the tables.

"Curse you!" snarled Jameson, realising with a flood of panic that events were not going so smoothly as he had fondly imagined. "Let go of my wrists, you hound!"

Nelson Lee chuckled grimly.

"So that you will be able to use the deadly needle you hold in your hand, eh?" he exclaimed calmly. "No, Dr. Sims Jameson; I have no wish to be rendered insensible. This fine plot of yours and Sillard's is doomed to failure!"

Jameson uttered a choking cry.

"You fiend!" he gasped. "By the powers, I'll——"

He ceased speaking, for his breath was coming in sharp pants as he struggled. But he was like a baby in the iron grip of the muscular detective. Nelson Lee was well acquainted with the Japanese form of wrestling, and he gave his opponent's wrists a sudden twist, which elicited a cry of agony. There was a faint metallic tinkle upon the stone floor.

"Now we are on more equal terms, my friend!" said Nelson Lee harshly. "I don't think you will get far away from Portmoor——"

The rest of the detective's sentence was drowned by a sudden, shattering explosion. It was like the report of a dozen guns fired at the same moment, and the whole building quivered.

Crash! Crash!

From outside the cell-door came a wild confusion of sounds. While the report of the explosion was still ringing in his ears, Nelson Lee heard the thunderous clatter of falling woodwork and glass. At the very door of the cell a beam thudded down and almost blocked the exit.

Then came silence—utter, absolute silence.

But it was only for a few seconds. For then the prisoners in their cells set up a clamour, and there was much shouting. What happened next took place in less than a minute, long before any of the sleeping warders could scramble into their clothes and appear upon the scene.

Oscar Sillard, wildly excited and with his heart beating furiously, cautiously entered the great hall. His feet crunched on shattered and powdered glass, and the air was filled with thick dust. But, in spite of the litter which gave the hall an appearance of absolute ruin, Sillard uttered an involuntary exclamation of satisfaction.

For, upon looking up, he saw that the whole skylight had utterly vanished. A few jagged beams round the edges projected from the stone building, but the skylight itself was no more. For the whole extent of the roof an expanse of star-spangled sky met Sillard's gaze.

And even as he watched, he thought he saw a dull mass against the stars. But it was difficult to see clearly, for the dust was almost blinding him. Then something shot down into the hall, and, with a start, the governor saw that it was a thick rope-ladder. The airship men, at least, had been prompt in carrying out their part of the programme. The ladder was in position only a few seconds after the explosion.

Sillard looked down anxiously. He was quite alone and almost in darkness.

"Where is Jameson?" he muttered to himself anxiously. "The fool—the fool! Did he come out before the explosion occurred? Has he killed himself?"

But a faint voice came gaspingly from one of the cells.

"Help! For Heaven's sake, Sillard, come to my rescue!" cried Jameson's voice in hoarse appeal. "I am being overpowered!"

Sillard set his teeth and dashed forward. In an instant he realised that Jameson had blundered somewhere, and that the whole scheme was likely to come to nought. The governor forgot everything in the dire urgency of the situation. Unless he acted on the second, it would be too late.

He dashed forward and entered Jameson's cell. His wits were sharpened by the necessity of the moment, and, without a pause, he fell upon Nelson Lee before

the latter could be prepared for the onslaught and twisted him half-round. Then Sillard's fist crashed fully into Nelson Lee's face with all the desperate man's strength.

The detective fell back upon the stone floor, momentarily dazed.

"The ladder!" grated Sillard harshly. "The ladder's waiting, Jameson!"

The convict staggered out of the cell and dashed wildly across the wreckage. It was a wonder he did not trip, but desperation made his feet sure, and he gripped the ladder and commenced climbing up swiftly. Sillard had followed, and the governor's mind was in a furious whirl. As he paused irresolutely, looking at the escaping man, Nelson Lee burst out of the cell with a great cry.

"Goodman!" he roared. "Where the deuce are you, man? Have Sillard placed under arrest before he has time to get away!"

But the chief warder was nowhere to be seen; Nelson Lee and Sillard were in the wrecked hall, absolutely alone. True enough, warders were hurrying to the spot from all parts of the building, but at this precise second they had not arrived. The whole dramatic adventure had occupied an amazingly short period of time.

The chief warder should have been upon the spot, and he would have been, but for an unfortunate circumstance. All prison-cells are provided with spring locks, and Goodman had been waiting in a disused cell for the moment to arrive when action was necessary. But, as chance would have it, one of the falling masses of woodwork had thundered against the cell-door, and had snapped it to, thus imprisoning the chief warder.

Nelson Lee and Sillard were alone!

Help was coming swiftly from all quarters, but that fact did not alter the situation. In one flash, Oscar Sillard realised that his career at Portmoor was over. A night warder had actually been knocked over by him while he assisted the escape of the prisoner. That piece of evidence alone was enough to convict Sillard.

So he took the chance which offered itself without pausing to consider.

"By Heaven, I'm not captured yet!" he snarled furiously.

And he made a rush for the wildly vibrating rope-ladder—the vibration being caused by Jameson's progress upwards. Sillard grasped the ladder and climbed up with astonishing agility.

"By James!" muttered Nelson Lee. "The man's not going to slip through my fingers before my very eyes!"

Without a thought of the after consequences, without a thought save that both the members of the Governing Circle were escaping, in spite of all, he hurried forward in pursuit, and also gripped the rope ladder. It was his intention to whip his revolver out and threaten to shoot the escaping man, unless he instantly descended.

But a startling thing happened.

As he grasped the rope ladder, it suddenly tightened in his grip, and the next second he was swung off his feet.

What had occurred was simple. The men in the airship had orders to ascend the instant Jameson appeared above the gaping hole in the roof; therefore the pilot of the aircraft, upon sighting the convict, had performed the manoeuvre promptly. He had no idea that Sillard was climbing up the ladder lower down.

Nelson Lee found himself six feet from the floor before he realised what had occurred. Even as he decided to drop to safety, the rope gave an extra tug, and he was swung swiftly another ten feet high.

To drop now would mean a broken limb—possibly death. So the detective gripped the ladder with his other hand and hung on grimly. Fate had cast the die now, and there was no drawing back.

But Nelson Lee realised with bitter certainty that his fate was almost certainly sealed. All his plans had gone wrong, and therefore he must make the best of the situation, appalling as it was.

His position was a terrible one. One minute after he had first grasped the ladder he found himself in the open air, two hundred feet from the ground, hanging on to life merely by the grip of his fingers. Overhead he could see the airship distinctly outlined against the sky. The rope ladder was tremendously long, and the dirigible seemed almost small in the sky.

A dull roar filled the air as the engines were put at full speed. Rapidly the airship rose higher and higher, travelling forward at the same time. The wind cut into Nelson Lee's hands like razor blades, and it was only with the utmost difficulty that he managed to retain his grip.

But at last he managed to rest his feet upon one of the lower rungs, and thus his perilous position was somewhat eased.

He saw that both Jameson and Sillard had reached the top of the ladder, and were now in the car. Their escape had been effected successfully, in spite of all. It was a grim, bitter thought.

And what could he do? He was absolutely at the mercy of his foes, for they might cut the rope ladder adrift at any moment, and send him crashing to the ground, now nearly a thousand feet below!

In all conscience, Nelson Lee's position was a desperate one. He gave up hope completely, but nevertheless clung on to his precious hold with all the strength he could muster. But he knew only too well that very soon he would be compelled to drop. His hands were already blue with cold, for the air at that height was freezing. The wind shrieked through the rungs of the ladder with a wild, triumphant note.

The detective's teeth were set tightly together. He swore that he would not drop to certain death until his hands refused to grip any longer. And he knew that the end would come before very long. The position was none of his own making; he would never have ascended the ladder deliberately. But circumstances had compelled him to cling on, once he felt himself away from Mother Earth.

The airship was speeding across country steadily. There was a slight headwind, and so it was only making about twenty-five miles an hour. But to Nelson Lee it seemed as though he was cutting through the air with lightning-like swiftness.

He wondered why the men in the aircraft took no action; he wondered why they let him remain clinging to the ladder. But, in reality, the airship's crew had no idea that he was there at all. Sillard had been unaware that Nelson Lee followed him, and both he and Jameson were too exhausted to say much when they were finally drawn into the airship's car. Everything beneath the airship was dark and misty, and although a member of the crew gazed down on several occasions, he did not see the figure tightly gripping the extremity of the rope ladder.

On through the night the great air vessel sped. It was a wonderful craft, and flew with superb steadiness. Its object was the open sea, at no very great distance ahead. A vessel was lying at a certain spot from the coast, waiting to take Dr. Sims Jameson aboard. Then he would be taken to a foreign country. The league's plans were wonderfully complete, and even now it seemed as though they were to be successful.

Nelson Lee, sick at heart, knew that there was practically nothing but death awaiting him. Yet he clung to his hold in sheer desperation, chilled to the very marrow. Presently he noticed, in a dull kind of way, that the airship was flying at a lower altitude, for the tree-tops below him seemed quite near. Evidently the vessel was feeling the effect of the air currents which came inland from the sea.

The sea, indeed, was now quite close. Almost before the detective realised it, he was over the water. Gazing down, he saw, dimly, the beach with waves breaking upon it. He looked up and around, and then suddenly he grew rigid.

"I'll do it!" he muttered huskily between his chilled lips. "It's a chance in a thousand, but death is not absolutely certain. With luck I may escape."

The airship was now a considerable distance out to sea, and it was here obviously a little hampered by the wind. Quite abruptly the ship dived downwards, hit by a sudden gust, and Nelson Lee felt a horrible sinking sensation within him. The surface of the water appeared to be rushing up to meet him.

But the next moment the downward plunge of the aircraft was arrested, and it immediately commenced climbing once more. Nelson Lee seized his opportunity. The sea was no more than twenty feet below him.

Suddenly he released his grip, and plunged swiftly downwards. With a dull splash he hit the water and cleaved into the depths. The sea, cold as it was, struck the detective as being almost warm after the icy chill of the upper air.

He rose to the surface, spluttering and bruised, and gazed round him. The airship was soaring away, and not a light showed in any direction. Nelson Lee's position was, apparently, in no way bettered.

It seemed that nothing awaited him but death by drowning!

CHAPTER IX.

Clifford and Nipper On the Track—The Seaplane—The Storm—Conclusion.

JUST struck three, Nipper!" ejaculated Douglas Clifford crisply. "By Jove, we may be in time, after all!"

"I jolly well hope so!" said Nipper, with fervent emphasis.

The pair had just clambered out of the racing-car, which stood throbbing and pulsating a short distance from the main entrance of Portmoor Convict Prison. Although Clifford had had ample time to reach Portmoor well before three, he had lost his way upon the moor, and had lost a clear twenty minutes. Now, finally reaching their destination, Clifford and Nipper found that three o'clock had already struck.

And now that they had arrived, they hardly knew how to act. The prison was dark and grim, and it would probably be some time before they could gain admittance.

Nipper, keen-witted, instantly thought of the airship which Martin Caine had spoken of, and he looked up into the sky sharply.

Then a hoarse cry escaped his lips.

"By gum, look there!" he roared excitedly. "The blessed airship's hovering right over the prison!"

Clifford gazed up, startled. And he, too, could see the dull patch against the night sky.

"Good gracious, I fear we are too late, Nipper!" he ejaculated. "Come, we will dash in——"

But his words were cut short by a deafening explosion which suddenly sounded from the centre of the building, and a bright flash lit up the lower part of the hovering airship for a brief second. The vessel shook a trifle, and swayed, but the shock of the explosion had expended itself mostly downwards.

"What was that?" gasped Nipper. "Oh, there's the merry dickens going on inside the prison!"

The pair paused, looking upwards at the spot where the flash of light had appeared. And then Nipper suddenly observed a faint, almost indistinct line which led downwards from the airship. The lad whipped out a pair of night-glasses, and rapidly focused them.

"A rope ladder!" he exclaimed excitedly. "So that's the wheeze, eh? The roof's been busted in, and Jameson is to climb up that ladder and be whisked away before the warders have rubbed the sleep out of their eyes!"

"What a daring scheme!" said Clifford almost admiringly. "The airship is then to make straight for the coast, as Caine intimated to me, and place its convict passenger upon a waiting yacht. By Jove, we must get busy, young 'un!"

But before the pair could even make an attempt to get busy, the form of Dr. Sims Jameson was observed climbing swiftly up the ladder towards the airship's car. And while the startled pair watched with bated breath, the airship suddenly arose, and then two more figures were brought into view—one of them climbing laboriously upwards, and the other clinging on to the ladder by his hands alone!

"By the deuce!" rapped out Clifford. "A whole collection of them!"

"Yes, and I believe the one at the bottom is the guv'nor!" gasped Nipper. "It's impossible to see in this dim light, but I wouldn't mind betting my best Sunday boots to a brass pin that I'm right! It's just like the guv'nor to do a fat-headed thing like that!"

"Come, Nipper, you're wrong there," protested Clifford. "Mr. Lee is not in the habit of behaving in a fat-headed way."

"But you don't understand what I mean," said Nipper quickly. "Things have evidently gone wrong, and the guv'nor gripped hold of the ladder in a desperate attempt to prevent the rotter escaping!"

"That's neither here nor there," said Clifford briskly. "If we remain here we can do absolutely nothing; it is useless us rushing into the prison now. We must follow the airship."

"That's easier said than done, sir. If we only had an acroplane——"

Clifford suddenly gave a roar.

"An acroplane!" he gasped, quivering with excitement. "There's a chance in a thousand that we may be able to do a bit of good after all! The sea is not far from here, and I remember that at Rosscastle a new naval seaplane station has been opened. It is a sheltered bay, and an ideal spot for waterplanes. I was speaking to one of the air officers connected with the station only a fortnight ago. Rosscastle, Nipper, is not fifteen miles from this spot!"

"But—but——"

"No time to waste here!" rapped out Clifford curtly. "We're going to get aboard the car again and dash to Rosscastle with all speed. The airship has gone straight towards the coast, and it's travelling fairly slow, owing to the headwind. Our car can do sixty at a pinch, and we'll outdistance the scoundrels easily. It's a desperate chance, Nipper, but we'll take it!"

A minute later they were both aboard the car, and Clifford crouched behind the steering-wheel and sent the racer forward like a hound from the leash. Across the dull moorland road the car went like a streak in the night. Clifford had all his attention upon the road ahead, but Nipper kept his eyes directed towards the heavens.

And, away to the south, he could see the airship at a considerable height flying steadily in the same direction as the car. But the automobile was out-stripping it rapidly, for Clifford was sending it along the straight track of road at fully fifty-five miles an hour.

The speed was simply appalling, and Nipper was compelled to cling to his seat like grim death. The exhaust roared out a triumphant song, and both the occupants of the car were thrilled through and through with the excitement of the race.

"We've done 'em!" roared Nipper at the top of his voice, close to Clifford's ear. "The airship's right behind, and following in this same direction. If Rosscastle is straight ahead, they'll pass almost directly over the seaplane station!"

"Gad! That's good hearing!" shouted Clifford. "If we can only get one of the seaplanes out, we'll have a really exciting time before the dawn breaks!"

"By gum! Don't you call this exciting?"

"Eh?" roared Clifford. "I can't hear—— Whoa! You young ass, don't talk to me again, or you'll have us both taking express tickets for the next world! That was a jolly near shave that time!"

The car, in fact, had nearly run into the ditch, for even the slightest movement of Clifford's hand might mean disaster at that terrific speed. Nipper wisely kept quiet, for he had no wish to undertake the journey which Clifford mentioned.

Nipper had travelled by motor-car on countless occasions, but never in all his existence could he remember a more exciting ride than this. Not only was the ride in itself a hair-raising adventure, but there were tremendous issues at stake.

A few miles further on Clifford was compelled to slow down in order to read a sign-post. Then the racing car tore onwards again, straight for Rosseastle. The moor was left behind now, and they were in wooded and hilly country. But, at last, the village was reached, and Clifford steered the car straight for the beach.

He didn't know where the seaplane station was situated, but he trusted to luck. And as the car came to a jerky standstill upon the rough causeway near the beach with hot tyres and smoking engine, Clifford gave a husky shout.

"That's the place!" he roared, pointing to a huge wooden building in the distance. "I know an aeroplane hangar when I see one. The man I was speaking to said that the pilots lived in the houses provided adjoining the hangars. Let's hope that one of the blighters is at home!"

They dashed along the beach to the building, and, sure enough, it proved to be the seaplane station. There were two big sheds, and close by a neat little wooden building, which was obviously the air officer's quarters.

Without a second's hesitation, Nipper and Clifford thudded furiously and wildly upon the door. They set up such a terrible din, in fact, that in less than a minute a somewhat scared face appeared before them. The owner of the face was, in fact, a young lieutenant—one of the pilots connected with the station.

"What the dickens is up?" he asked furiously.

Clifford pushed his way into the building. Then, in brisk short sentences, he rapidly told the startled lieutenant what had occurred. The officer, whose name was Stewart, listened with open-mouthed amazement, and was more than half inclined to treat the whole yarn as a madman's tale. But at last Clifford's eloquence won the day, and Lieutenant Stewart realised that it was up to him to take a hand in the game.

He was an adventurous youngster, and didn't give himself time to consider details.

The night was calm, the sea was smooth, and the crack tractor-seaplane of the station was in perfect tune for a long flight. It had, in fact, been prepared for a long trial flight at dawn, so if the lieutenant started out now he would not be so very much in advance of his time.

Besides, this pursuit of a stolen airship appealed to him. Only delaying a moment to put on a thick overcoat—he had already been half dressed—and a pair of warm boots, he yelled to two mechanics to come and help, and then they all ran to the largest of the two hangars.

The mechanics and Stewart soon had the seaplane afloat. It was a big machine, capable of carrying four or five if necessary, and was in readiness for instant departure. The lieutenant remarked, rather ruefully, that the glass was falling somewhat, and looked at the sky doubtfully. But the stars were shining, and a half-moon shed a weak light upon the sea.

Precisely twelve minutes after Stewart had decided to help, the seaplane's engine roared out its shattering tune, and the machine sped along the water and rose into the cold air. Both Nipper and Clifford were aboard, and they were keeping their eyes open and on the alert.

Clifford was feeling intensely pleased; and really he had acted in a splendidly prompt manner. He had been tremendously smart over the whole business, and there was a bare possibility that success would crown his efforts.

But he was anxious—tremendously anxious. Would the airship, triumphantly carrying Sims Jameson away, escape? The seaplane was capable of doing seventy-five miles an hour, over double that of the airship. And as the latter was bound to strike the coast somewhere not far away, it seemed likely that the project would be successful. Sooner or later the airship would be sighted.

As it happened, Nipper spotted the aircraft almost at once.

"There she is!" he yelled madly. "Look! Just coming over from the land!"

"By Jupiter!" muttered Clifford. "The young 'un's right!"

Away in the distance, fairly low down over the sea, the stolen airship could be seen making away from the coast. It had struck the sea about four miles north of Rosscastle, and its occupants were completely unaware of the other aircraft so close at hand.

Yet the escape from Portmoor was not such a complete success as Sillard supposed. Nemesis was soon to show a grim hand. But at present those on board the waterplane watched the other craft with keen interest.

Lieutenant Stewart had spotted his quarry almost at the same second as Nipper, and the seaplane, which had been making for the open water, swung round in a glorious bank and sped off in pursuit of the enemy.

"We're overhauling the beggars rapidly!" shouted Nipper exultantly. "When we fly round the gas-bag they'll realise that the best course will be to——"

"What was that?" rapped out Clifford suddenly.

"What was which?" asked Nipper, who had faintly heard the question.

"Didn't you see?" roared Douglas Clifford. "Something dropped from the end of the rope-ladder into the sea! By Jove, it was a man!"

"The guv'nor, perhaps!" gasped Nipper, his eyes becoming grave.

"It is impossible to say. We must, at least, descend——"

Without finishing his sentence, Clifford bent over the pilot and yelled in his ear. Stewart nodded calmly, and immediately dipped the nose of the seaplane downwards. He too had observed something fall into the sea, and he knew that to "land" upon the water was a simple enough task. The airship was travelling so comparatively slowly that the delay would not alter the ultimate result of the chase.

Almost at the spot where the "something" had dropped into the water the 'plane skimmed down and touched the surface. A few moments later it was heaving gently to and fro with the motion of the sea, its engine popping away in spasms as Stewart kept switching on and off. He had no intention of stopping the motor altogether.

The moonlight was not very bright, but it served to show the head of a man swimming slowly towards the machine; and very soon the swimmer grasped the struts of the floats and drew himself out of the water.

"The guv'nor!" roared Nipper delightedly. "Oh, sir, what——"

"I'm hanged if it isn't, Nipper!" exclaimed the soaking figure faintly. "Wonders will never cease! I left you in London, and here you are, with Clifford—by all that's miraculous—rescuing me from a watery grave!"

He drew himself up into the body of the vessel, and then the lieutenant let the engine "out" again, and the rush through the air recommenced. The dirigible was still faintly visible in the distance ahead, and it would be only a matter of minutes to overhaul it.

The rescue of Nelson Lee amazed Stewart, but he was too busy to think much about it. The young officer was greatly excited, and the lust of the chase was in his brain.

To tell the truth, Nelson Lee had seen the seaplane before he released his hold of the ladder. He had been prepared to drop into the sea—as that was the lesser of all the evils which beset him—but had then seen the acroplane overhead, rapidly

overhauling the big lighter-than-air machine. This had finally decided the detective, and he dropped swiftly to apparent doom.

As a matter of fact, he was not in any actual danger at all, except, perhaps, in the event of his striking the sea in such a way that he was rendered unconscious. That unfortunate thing, however, did not happen; and, in due course, he was clinging to the stays of the 'plane, between Nipper and Clifford—cold, wet and exhausted, but hugely delighted with Clifford for having done such good work.

The young pilot turned his head round.

"Don't like look of things ahead!" he bellowed. "Jolly unhealthy!"

His three companions gazed intently ahead, and as they did so a brilliant little flash of light cut through the sky. It was lightning! It was little to be wondered at that Stewart described the weather as "unhealthy."

So a storm was brewing! This, then, was the cause of the rapid falling of the glass. Nelson Lee looked rather anxious. He could see, straight in the distance ahead, a pitch-black cloud. Perhaps there was thunder, but it could not be heard owing to the roar of the engine.

"There'll be wind in a minute!" shouted the lieutenant-pilot. "Cling tight to your places, and leave the rest to me! 'Fraid we shall have to scoot back home!"

The sudden storm caused Nelson Lee and Clifford to become anxious. Was Fate to intervene in the league's favour? Was the stolen airship to get clear away, after all? But even if it did, Nelson Lee reflected, Clifford's efforts had not been for naught, for, undoubtedly, the seaplane had saved the detective's life.

"Gum! That was a flash!" exclaimed Nipper, in an awed voice.

At the same moment something seemed to strike the aircraft a sharp, staggering blow. It reared up and shook in every joint. Then, all in a second, the seaplane was in the midst of the storm. The wind was fearful, and the machine rocked dangerously, and seemed likely to collapse at any moment.

But Lieutenant Stewart proved himself to be a magnificent pilot. He handled his mount perfectly, and absolutely forced it to face the wind and to keep an even keel.

The lightning played brilliantly. Below, the sea was blotted completely out. Rain descended in stinging torrents, and almost blinded the party. Nipper had his gaze fixed dead ahead, trying to catch a glimpse of the airship. If the seaplane was having a rough time, what must the frail dirigible be having?

"I can't see her——" began Nipper.

Then another flash of lightning blazed out, but it did not touch the aeroplane. It was about half a mile ahead—a rich, electric blue, and indescribably vivid. And another flash followed, this time a yellow, lurid flash which lit up the whole sky.

"Great Scott!" roared Nipper excitedly. "Did you see? The airship——"

"Yes; it was the airship!" ejaculated Nelson Lee sharply. "Good heavens, the vessel was in the thick of that electric discharge! The gas-bag has exploded!"

"Exploded!" gasped Clifford, a hand seeming to grip his heart.

"There is no doubt upon the question," Nelson Lee went on quickly. "Every man aboard that craft has been blown to atoms—Sillard, Jameson, and the whole crew! Good heavens above! What a fearful end to the adventure!"

Clifford was pale. He knew, without thinking a second longer, that the detective was right. The airship had exploded; the dirigible was no more; its occupants were now mere lifeless pieces!

Heaven itself had punished the scoundrels for their wrong-doing. And, incidentally, another governing member of the League of the Green Triangle had gone to his doom. Nemesis had overtaken him and his companions with appalling and unexpected swiftness and force.

Sims Jameson had escaped from Portmoor, but for what? To go to his death! His passion for freedom had resulted in the direst consequences for himself, and for those who assisted him.

Rocking perilously, the seaplane fought the storm. Its occupants were grim now, realising that they too would probably finish this adventure in the eternal sleep. Slowly but surely the wind and rain beat the gallant 'plane down, and at last, unable to fight longer, the elements won the battle.

The seaplane struck the water, rebounded for a second, and then settled down hopelessly, unable to rise. Half wrecked, she floated at the mercy of the storm.

By a stroke of good fortune the party were picked up two hours later by a cargo steamer bound for Plymouth. There was nothing extraordinary in this, for the dawn revealed the half-floating seaplane and its drowned crew. Steamers passed in those waters continuously.

But it was marvellous luck that the 'plane did not sink. Indeed, she would have done but for the fact that her floats were almost all intact. Had they been punctured in the crashing contact with the sea, the machine would have disappeared beneath the surface, never to be seen again.

At Plymouth the whole party were compelled to remain, with terrific colds, in bed for several days, but in the end they were none the worse for their exciting and terrible adventure.

And thus ended another case against the Green Triangle. And this time, although Nelson Lee had done wonders, the chief credit lay with Douglas Clifford. It was solely owing to his brisk and prompt action that Nelson Lee's life was saved. The airship probably would have gone to its doom just the same.

The net result of the great scheme was terrible to the league, and to Zingrave. Sims Jameson had now left this world for ever, and another valuable member of the Governing Circle had gone with him.

The league, in spite of all its prosperity, was suffering greatly from Nelson Lee's grim campaign.

THE END.

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IN POLAR SEAS.

A Romance of Adventure in the Frozen North.

BY

FENTON ASH,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After a good meal the two chums go for a stroll. Nearing the sea-shore they are surprised to hear voices in the distance. Thinking they are mistaken, however, the chums make their way back to the camp, and are surprised by large numbers of ancient-looking men, dressed in the armour of the Vikings of old. The strangers appear hostile, and Hugh losing his temper, challenges one of the leaders to a duel. (Now read on.)

A Free Fight—Arrayed in Armour.

"**P**ERHAPS," resumed Osth, "perhaps I may grant thee thy wish, and then perhaps"—with a laugh—"thou mayest be sorry for having challenged him."

"Wilt thou give me that chance, O chief?" cried Hugh eagerly.

"We will see. But first ye must all yield up the weapons ye have taken from the hands of my people."

Hugh glanced at his chum, and they conferred together in a whisper, and as a result the arms were silently handed over.

"Now," continued Osth, "I must know what manner of men ye claim to be. My nobles cannot fight with thralls or serfs."

"Thralls!" repeated Hugh scornfully. "Who talks of thralls? Know, O chief, that we are neither thralls nor serfs, but free men; and I and my friend," pointing to Ruxton, "claim to be the equals of any of those who surround thee."

"H'm. And those others with thee?"

"They are our followers—our servitors."

"So! Now we know how we stand. Still, at any other time, it would be my duty to send ye to work in our mines, whatever your rank may be in your own land. Such is our usage in the case of all strangers who intrude themselves in our country. But just now it so happens"—and here Osth spoke with some hesitation, and glanced doubtfully round at the frowning faces and flashing eyes of his people—"it so happens, I say, that in the case of men of strength and courage, able to use sword and spear, methinks we could perhaps make some better use of them. Eh, friends? What say ye?" And again the speaker glanced round, evidently in doubt as to the reception this suggestion might meet with.

So far as Hugh and Ruxton were concerned it need not be said that they were ready to welcome such a proposal with gladness. It was exactly what they had been hoping for—what they had hinted at to Rudlaff.

But Osth's own people received it by no means cordially. They were enraged at the rough treatment some of their number had already received at the hands of the strangers. For this they were bent on taking their revenge, either on the spot, or by condemning the offenders to be bound and carried off to the mines.

So Osth's tentative suggestion seemed likely to be rejected. Cries hostile to the strangers rent the air.

"To the mines with them!" "Let them be whipped for their insolence!" "They are nithings!" "Hand them over to us; we will punish them in our own way!" Such was the burden of the shouts that were heard.

Things certainly looked black for them; and their fate hung in the balance. Osth was evidently wavering; it was pretty clear that, whatever his own judgment might advise, he hesitated to act against the wishes of his nobles.

Just then there stepped forward the young officer called Kern, the one with whom Hugh had fought. He intimated that he had something to say on the subject, whereupon Osth called for silence; and after a while succeeded in obtaining it.

"Well, my worthy Kern, what hast thou to say?" he demanded.

"This, O chief! I had to-day some experience of this stranger's fighting, and I can answer for it that, whatever or whoever he may be, he is certainly a sturdy swordsman. He did disarm me—I am chagrined to have to make the admission, but it is true—and I am perplexed in my mind about it. I have been asking myself whether it was that I was careless or over-confident, or whether it might be that, coming from a strange land and having learned in a different school, he may have been taught some tricks that at a time like this it might profit us to know. For this reason, O chief, I ask that, whatever thou doest with him afterwards—whether he be sent to the mines or not—thou shouldst order that he shall first fight with me again. If I prevail, so much the better; but I shall have avenged myself, and I shall be satisfied."

"And if thou prevailest not, good Kern?" Osth asked, with a grim laugh.

"Then thou wilt see that there is some very good reason for it."

"Humph! By Odin! Thy proposal pleases me! After what thou hast said I must see for myself what sort of fighter this stranger is."

"There is one more request I wish to make, my lord!"

"Say on."

"It is that he may be given arms and armour the same as mine, so that wo

meet on equal terms. By his behaviour to me to-day at the time of his success over me—though I felt too sore just then to pay heed to it—I judge him to be of gentle birth, a perfect knight, and quite worthy to wear armour similar to my own.”

“Thou speakest well, Kern,” returned Ostli, after a moment’s reflection. “It is a good plan—but it does not go far enough, and methinks I have a better. There are four of these people who seem to be lusty fighters. Garb them as thou sayest, according to their rank, and we will choose other three to join with thee against them. Then shall we see the mettle they are made of.”

There were murmurs and mutterings of dissent and dissatisfaction among the nobles at this decision; and some of the dissentients jeered at the young officer and called him a “nithing” for his pains. But others—some of his own friends in particular, and many of the older men present—applauded him. So as there were evidently too many against them to resist further, the objectors sullenly acquiesced.

Kern and Rudlaff signed to the strangers to follow, and led them towards a wall of rock that towered up into the air some few hundred yards away. Here they entered a cavern, which was evidently one of those Melka had referred to as having been appropriated as the regular dwelling-places of these people.

The friends looked round in surprise, for they found themselves in what had all the appearance of a beautifully-built stone wall, well lighted with hanging lamps, and fitted up very much as though it had been the main hall of some ancient castle.

The rocky sides had been elaborately carved and sculptured, and in some places pictures or frescoes had been painted on them in masterly style. These represented, usually, scenes of war or hunting, and had all the appearance of being the work of men long past dead and gone; though the colouring was still vivid and well preserved.

There were many passages and galleries leading from the great hall in various directions, and, choosing one of these, their conductors ushered them into another chamber of considerable extent, which they saw at once was a kind of armoury. Here the officers called for “thralls,” and forthwith half a dozen serving-men rushed forward obsequiously to attend their orders.

These men were dressed in very rough attire, and wore metal collars round their necks.

Rudlaff saw Hugh and his chum glance at these collars, and laughed coarsely.

“That is the sort of badge ye will be wearing soon if Ostli sends thee to the mines,” he said. “And once we put that badge on a man’s neck it is there for life. It is never taken off.”

Neither of the two to whom this was said could repress a slight shudder at the ideas the words suggested. Kern, who had also noted their glance, turned the subject.

“Well, well; that is on the knees of the gods,” said he. “It concerns the future. And we have other matters to think of just now. It is our part, sirs, to fit you with armour. Do ye wish to choose for yourselves, or will ye rest content with what we shall consider best for the occasion?”

“Oh, we’ll leave it to you, sir,” laughed Hugh. “The fact is,” he said to Ruxton in English, “I know no more about such things than the man in the moon. The nearest approach to anything of the kind I ever donned was the ridiculous padding worn in the famous students’ duels at Heidelberg. And I don’t suppose you know much more—eh?”

“Not I,” Val answered. “They’ll have to buckle the things on me them-

selves. If I were to attempt it myself I expect I should put them on hind-part-before—or some such foolishness."

However, as it turned out, Kern was a young man who did not do things of this sort by halves. Having himself proposed that they should be on an equality with himself in the matter of armour and weapons, he conscientiously carried it out to the best of his ability. One of his difficulties was to find suits of armour large enough—and he had to hunt through their stores till he discovered a couple which had belonged to two bygone warriors who had been looked upon almost as giants.

The final result was, however, that in little more than half an hour the chums were transformed from ragged, unkempt vagabonds into knights in glistening armour—and a very fine and gallant show they then made.

The two sailors were also fitted out after the fashion of the rank and file, and the change was proportionately successful in improving their appearance.

Cable looked admiringly at Mike, and Mike grinned appreciatively at Cable.

"Sure, ye looks a both av a bhoys now, Bob darlint," he chuckled. "Phwat a sinsation we'd make in these things if we wore thim at the Lord Mayor's Show in London Town!"

"I'd rayther a good honest cutlass than this old-fashioned blade though," Bob declared, a little doubtfully. "An' these contraptions"—indicating the wing-like attachments to his helmet—"doan't seem t' ballast proper like. Don't ye think, now, a feather on the top would set it off better than them things at the sides?"

"Sure, it's a very discontinued ye are, Bob. Ye must lave sich ornimints as feathers t' yer betthers. It's kid gloves an' a powder-puff ye'll be whantin' next."

Kern, too, announced his approval when he had finished:

"'Tis well, O stranger," he said to Hugh. "Thou doest credit to my handiwork. And I shall feel that in vanquishing thee I shall have to do with one worthy of my steel."

"Of a truth," returned Hugh, "thou hast shown thyself a most honourable foeman. I would that we could be friends instead of enemies. I like not the idea of fighting one who has behaved towards me as thou hast."

But these words, instead of pleasing the young Viking, had an opposite effect.

"What!" he cried, coldly and sternly. "Is it possible that thou dost shrink from the combat? Art thou, then, but a nithing churl, after all?"

"Enough said!" returned Hugh, with quiet dignity. "We will resume this talk after our fight is finished. I am now ready as soon as it pleases thee."

"And who, jarl, is to be my partner in this tournament?" Ruxton asked of Rudlaff. "Is it thou?"

"I know not, O stranger," was the answer. "But I am quite ready to try a bout with thee if thou dost so desire—and if our chief will permit. And now, since ye are all prepared, follow me."

As they were marching out of the armoury, Hugh and Ruxton managed to regain possession of their revolvers, which they had temporarily given into the charge of their Eskimo followers. The latter were also carrying the two rifles, which, being enclosed in thick leather cases, had fortunately attracted little notice. Only once had there been any reference to them—Rudlaff had asked what they were, and had been informed that they were fishing-rods used by the strangers' "thralls."

The Eskimos themselves were contemptuously left to wear their own attire, their leaders declaring that they were merely serving-men and not fighters.

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"I wonder, then, that you do not compel them to wear iron collars as our thralls do," was the Viking's comment; and with that he dismissed the matter as not worth further attention.

A little later the whole party stood once more before Osth, and there a fresh surprise waited them.

The return of Hugh and Ruxton and their little band caused something in the nature of a sensation. And well it might, considering the difference in the appearance of the leaders and their two principal henchmen.

They had left the place literally in rags and tatters, looking but the veriest vagabonds. They had returned "in armour clad," four splendid, stalwart figures, making such a gallant show as to draw involuntary expressions of surprise and approval even from the assembled Vikings.

The two leaders, in particular, attracted the gaze of all present, and muffled cries of astonishment arose here and there from men who recognised the armour which they were wearing.

"By Thor! See what they have on?" "That armour belonged to Hyborga and Sigurd, our most celebrated warriors." "Surely it cannot be!" "No one has worn those suits for hundreds of years!" "How can this thing be? They did not look big enough when they first came before us!" "One would have thought they must have grown during the last half-hour!"

Such were a few of the wondering comments which went the round. Some of the spectators, indeed, could scarcely believe their own eyes, and argued that these men must be absolutely new arrivals, and that the ones they had seen, who had gone away looking so disreputable, had not yet returned.

Osth himself was obviously as much surprised as his followers. One could see him looking at the two chums, and then at some of the most stalwart of those by whom he was surrounded. He was evidently comparing them, and he was fain to make the grudging admission in his own mind that these strangers were two of the tallest and finest specimens of manhood there.

As to the two who had already come in contact with them and tasted a little of their prowess—those known as Hertseg the Fighter and Berdrok the Fierce—these things only served to excite still further their ill-humour, and increase their spleen against the strangers.

It would never do, from their point of view, to allow these upstart intruders to make themselves popular in this way, so they began to sneer and gibe.

"By Odin's twelve companions!" quoth Osth. "They make a gallant-looking pair!"

"Tush! It's looks and nothing else, I'll wager," sneered Hertseg. "Kern hath overdone the thing. He hath decked them out in borrowed plumes he had no right to lend to such men. Thou wilt see presently that it is the armour that makes the show, not the men inside it!"

"Of a truth, yes, thou art right, Hertseg!" cried Berdrok. "Make them prove their strength, Osth, ere we trouble to fight with them! I'll wager they cannot perform some of the feats that I and Hertseg and others here have accomplished."

"We will try them," said Osth, with his grim, mocking smile. "Choose ye the tasks, and let us see what they can do."

So the intended duel with Kern was postponed till later; and meanwhile the two friends were invited to show their prowess in other ways.

One of these was something similar to the feat of swordsmanship we know as "Cleaving the Turk's Head." Wooden blocks, about the size of men's heads, were brought in, and Hertseg and Berdrok each cut through one with his sword.

Hugh and Ruxton each did the same.

"But all this is child's play," cried Hugh at last. "In my country one sees these things done at every small gathering where such sports are held. Have ye not something that will really tax our powers and prove whether we be men of real strength?"

"We'll try thy strength presently in a form thou wilt not care about," jeered Hertseg. "Thou art but an empty boaster——"

"Pish! It is not seemly in one who calls himself a warrior to keep vaunting and threatening in that way," returned Hugh contemptuously. "Give me something to bind these things with"—and he kicked a couple of the wooden blocks towards the sailors. "Here! One of you tie a couple together."

"Shure, an' it's a foine sinse av fun ye have, Mистер Hugh," exclaimed Mike, who at once "tumbled" to the idea. "Show 'em phwat ye can do."

Cable meantime had produced a piece of cord from somewhere, and with it he tied two of the blocks together.

"Now," said Hugh to Hertseg and Berdrok, "now, you two boasters, will you cut through the two of them at one stroke?"

"No! Nor canst thou, sirrah," cried Hertseg.

"We shall see," muttered Hugh. He took his sword in both hands, and poised it high in the air for two or three seconds. Then there was a loud "whiz," and a half-circle of gleaming light, as the blade whirled through the air. So sudden and marvellously quick was the blow that few there actually saw it. But all heard the sound as it crashed through the blocks. It had cut clean through the two!

There were loud exclamations of astonishment at this from the spectators, and a few even called out "Skoal—skoat!" which was their equivalent for "Bravo!" or "Hurrah!"

"Canst match that, Hertseg?" Osth asked.

"We will see," said the Fighter, through his teeth. "I doubt not there is some trick in it?"

Hertseg muttered something—doubtless some Scandinavian oath—and ordered two blocks to be bound together in the same way. Then he raised his sword with a great flourish, poised it in the air even longer than Hugh had done, made a mighty slash—and missed the blocks altogether. His foot had slipped at the critical moment, and over he went.

There was, of course, a titter, and the valiant Fighter began to grow wrathful.

He repeated the effort, and this time hit the top block all right, cutting clean through it; but his sword lodged in the second one.

Again he tried it, and so did Berdrok; but they both failed.

And then, in similar fashion, Hugh cut through two bars of iron instead of one, and the Vikings tried it and failed. Then he showed them two or three feats of his own, and challenged the strongest there to perform them, and they all failed ignominiously.

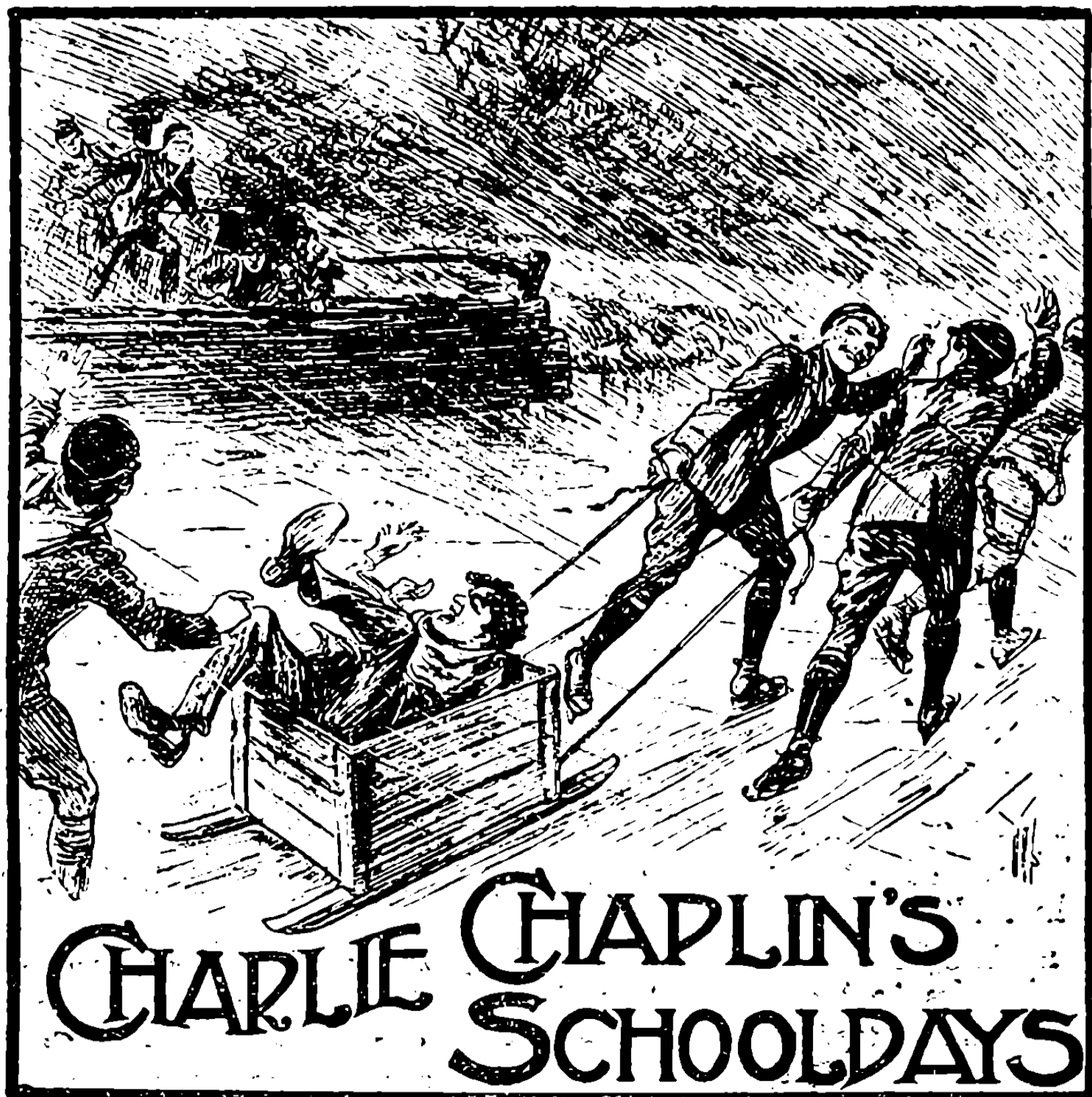
By this time the two who had thrust themselves the most forward—Hertseg and Berdrok—were seething with rage and spite.

"Canst thou wrestle?" Hertseg asked suddenly, during a pause.

"I am ready to wrestle with thee, or anyone thou pleasest," returned Hugh.

(To be concluded shortly.)

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