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Week ending
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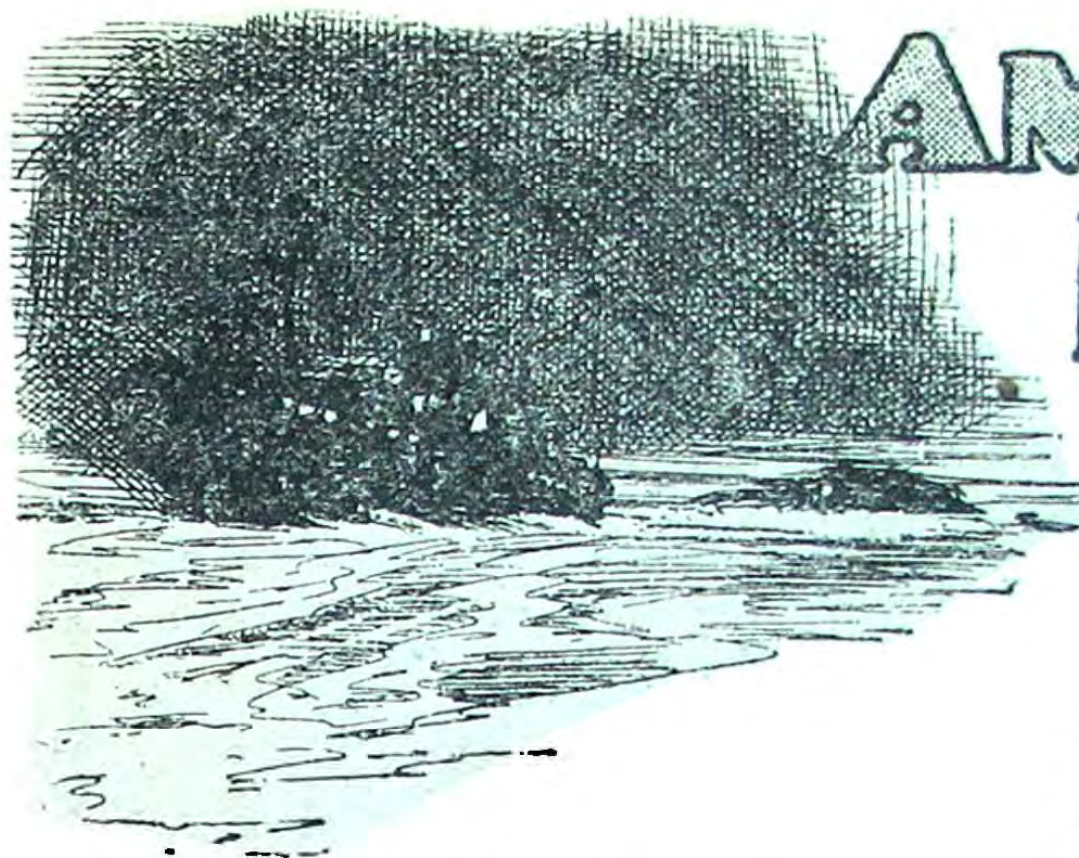
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"The Three Millionaires," "The Prison Breakers," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

The £200,000 Daylight Robbery—Nelson Lee Arrives—The Steel Door.

A MAN in a dark-blue uniform pushed open the great plate-glass door of Messrs. Henson's palatial jewellery establishment in Oxford Street, and looked round him with a keen, anxious glance.

The great shop was occupied by three customers and several smartly dressed assistants at the moment. One of the latter looked inquiringly at the newcomer, and approached him.

"I want to see the manager at once," said the man in the uniform sharply.

"I am sorry, but the manager is engaged in his private office——"

"My business is of such urgency that I must see the manager without a second's delay," interjected the other curtly. "The matter is of the utmost gravity."

"My dear sir, I'm afraid you will have to wait," said the assistant suavely.

"The manager is closeted with a famous customer——"

"Famous or not, it makes no difference," said the uniformed individual roughly. "If it were the King of England I would be just as insistent. Good heavens, while you are acting the fool here this whole building is in danger. If you do not inform the manager this very instant I will find my way to him myself!"

The assistant looked somewhat startled.

"If you will tell me the nature——"

"Confound it all!" rapped out the other angrily. "Go at once—at once!"

The customers, by this time, were rather interested in the little altercation. The man in uniform was evidently in an extremely agitated condition, and his business appeared to brook of no delay. The assistant, after another moment's hesitation, turned on his heel and disappeared through a glass-topped door at the rear of the shop.

The stranger paced up and down the shop with knitted brows, biting the finger-nails of his right hand with obvious anxiety. And almost every second he looked up at the glass-topped door, and then out into Oxford Street.

The emporium of Messrs. Henson, Ltd., was one of the most magnificent in

the West End. They were one of the biggest firms in the jewellery trade in London. Branch shops were scattered over the suburbs and the provinces; but in Oxford Street, their chief establishment, they always displayed a most lavish assortment of precious stones and gold. The stock of this shop alone was worth a fortune.

The three customers passed out, and the man in the blue uniform saw the commissionaire hailing a taxi for them. Meanwhile, the assistants within the shop regarded the stranger with curious looks.

The glass-topped door opened, and a big, heavily-built man emerged with a frown upon his brow. He was scrupulously dressed, and was the very embodiment of comfortable prosperity. He jammed a pince-nez upon his nose, and stared at the uniformed man.

"Well, sir," he exclaimed sharply, "I am the manager."

"I have come to warn you——"

"One moment. Who are you?"

"I am a Water Board inspector, and this infernal delay may cost you dearly," said the other, with grim emphasis. "There is not a moment to waste if you wish to avert a disaster!"

"Good gracious!" ejaculated the manager, startled. "I fail to understand!"

"A big water main has burst immediately beneath your cellars, and it is impossible to cut the supply off owing to an unexpected complication," said the Water Board inspector rapidly. "A gas main has been affected, and serious complications may arise at any second. I have been told off to warn you that the danger is considerable."

"But—but——"

"If you have a strong-room or a safe in the cellars, you had better take immediate steps to have any valuables removed," went on the other grimly. "As the gas main is in grave peril of being involved at any moment a dangerous explosion may occur!"

The manager turned pale.

"I must ring up the fire-brigade——"

"I should advise you to waste no time over that, sir," interposed the inspector. "No fire as yet has broken out, and no explosion has occurred. Possibly the men who are working their hardest to avert the disaster will be successful. If you are responsible for any valuable property in the cellars you had better have it removed at once."

"Dear me! This is most unsettling!"

The manager did some quick thinking. There was utterly no reason why he should doubt this man's word, for the fellow would absolutely have no object in propounding a deliberate lie. The question of robbery never presented itself to the manager, and even had it done so he would have dismissed it instantly.

How could the stranger possibly hope to gain by telling such a story? Single-handed he could do nothing, and it was obvious that he had no confederates. Besides, it was early afternoon, and the street just outside was crowded with people and hurrying vehicles. In the event of an attempted robbery assistance would have been at hand within a minute.

But the manager never even thought of such a thing. He accepted the Water Board inspector's statements without a second thought; there was absolutely no reason why he should not. And Mr. Atherton—for that was the manager's name—had another and a very important matter upon his mind.

Only that morning a valuable consignment of diamonds and jewellery had been deposited in the strong-room below—a consignment worth every penny

of £200,000. In a way, Mr. Atherton was responsible for the goods, and he was naturally consumed with anxiety.

Wild ideas filled his brain like a flood. Suppose the gas main burst? Suppose there was a terrible explosion beneath the cellars? The great safe would probably be wrecked, and its contents at the mercy of the fire which would result! And Mr. Atherton knew that a gas fire, once started, was a stupendous job to extinguish.

At the very least, it would only be precaution to remove the diamonds and jewellery to a place which was not in danger of being affected by the threatened explosion. These thoughts had flashed through the manager's mind in a few seconds, and he rapidly came to a decision. And that decision was to act promptly—to open the safe and remove the valuables.

Under the circumstances there was nothing else to be done. To ignore the warning which had been given him would be madness. Mr. Atherton realised now why the inspector had been so insistent.

His decision was the only one he could have come to. There was nothing whatever to cause the slightest suspicion. Being the manager of a great jewellery establishment he was naturally always on the alert for possible attempts at robbery.

It was essentially a time for rapid action.

"I am obliged to you for this visit," exclaimed Mr. Atherton briskly. "I will take immediate steps to assure the safety of my stock below, inspector."

"It will be wise to remove any valuable property as far from the cellar as possible," remarked the other grimly. "If you will permit me, I will accompany you below to make a brief examination of the cellar's construction."

"Certainly; only I shall be too busy to give you my personal attention."

"I only wish to take a cursory look round, sir."

The manager turned to the glass-topped door again, and beckoned to two of his assistants. Then the quartette passed through the doorway, Mr. Atherton leading with quick strides, and walked down a wide passage.

Again the manager had not thought twice about allowing the inspector to descend to the cellar. The visit was merely in connection with the matter on which he had called. Mr. Atherton was an astute man, and a shrewd man, but it was not possible for him to guard against that which was to follow in a very few minutes.

It was so amazing, so utterly unprecedented, that no man on earth would have been prepared for it.

Looked at in cold clearness, what was there in this man's visit to arouse suspicion? Even if the whole thing was a hoax the fellow, alone, could do absolutely nothing. In addition to the manager and his two assistants there were other employees in the shop, and it was essential to pass through the shop in order to reach the street, for there was no back entrance. And there was only one entrance to the cellar. So if the stranger succeeded, by a miracle, in overpowering his three companions, his escape was completely impossible.

But Mr. Atherton was too anxious regarding the diamonds in the safe to waste time over such useless thoughts.

The cellar was reached by a straight flight of stone stairs, with a heavy door at the top, and a heavier door below. As the manager commenced to descend the stairs he touched a switch which turned on the electric light in the vault. Then the four men quickly passed down.

The cellar was a small apartment, absolutely square, with dull, brick walls and a stone floor. One of the walls was entirely filled in with the great door of the strong-room—a massive, gigantic safe. It was absolutely burglar-

proof, and was fitted with a combination lock of the latest pattern. Mr. Atherton, however, was uncertain as to what effect a serious gas explosion would have upon the safe. It was only common precaution to remove the contents until all danger of a disaster had passed.

The safe was, of course, fireproof and waterproof, but an explosion was a different matter. Although a massive thing, the safe was not one of the wonderful scientific marvels which were installed in the big banks. It was a good safe, and one which had never suffered from burglary or fire. But it was not an ideal state of things to put it to the test with £200,000 worth of diamonds and jewellery inside it.

Mr. Atherton at once proceeded to open the massive door of the safe, and while he was engaged in this task his two assistants listened to the orders he rattled out as to the disposal of the valuable goods.

The inspector, meanwhile, gazed round the little vault with a keen, searching glance. Then he suddenly dropped full-length upon the floor, and placed his ear to the cold stonework. When he arose, after a few moments, there was a grim expression upon his face.

"You'd better hurry, sir," he said to Mr. Atherton. "It's my opinion—and I'm an experienced man in these things—that you haven't much time at your disposal!"

"Why, how can you tell?"

"There are distinct indications that the trouble below is getting out of hand," replied the inspector shortly. "To tell the truth, it's none too safe down here."

Mr. Atherton set his teeth.

"Safe or not, I'm going to remove the diamonds from this strong-room!" he declared.

As he spoke the heavy door swung open and revealed another inner door. As this was being unlocked the inspector stepped over the cellar to the opening leading up to the passage above. The door was open, and it was fitted with a huge spring lock, the key of which was in the manager's pocket.

The inspector gently closed the door, and there was a soft click—unheard by the three men over by the safe. Yet that click announced the fact that the occupants of the cellar were shut securely in, and that no help could arrive from outside—for the key was on Mr. Atherton's bunch. The only way now to enter the cellar from without was to force the door.

But what was the object of the move? How could one man hope to accomplish anything against three?

The amazing sequel was soon to happen.

Mr. Atherton entered the huge safe, and commenced opening the many drawers which confronted him. Then he half turned, and beckoned to his two assistants, and they went to his side. The trio were now in a little group, and in the confined steel safe.

"By thunder, now's my chance!" muttered the stranger.

He whipped from beneath his loose-fitting coat a curious looking article which, without pausing a second, he proceeded to pull over his head, having first removed the neat uniform cap.

It was, in fact, a respirator.

In one movement he made the thing absolutely secure, and his appearance was extremely bizarre in the strange headgear. He thrust his hand into a side-pocket and pulled from it a glittering, polished brass instrument which had the appearance of a syringe. All these actions he performed with wonderful swiftness; yet, at the same time, they were done with absolute coolness and grim deliberation.

Mr. Atherton happened to glance over the shoulder of one of his two companions; and the manager of Henson's uttered a short gasp as he

caught sight of the weird-looking figure in the cellar beyond the safe door.

"Good heavens! What in the world——" he began amazedly.

But even as he spoke the stranger gave three quick strides which took him to the very door of the strong-room. Then, without uttering a sound, he levelled the instrument in his hands and pushed a kind of pump which projected from the brass-work.

There was a low hiss, and instantly a yellowish-green vapour poured into the safe. In one second, before either of the three men could move an inch, the greenish gas filled the whole tiny confined apartment.

Mr. Atherton opened his mouth as if to speak, and his two assistants had half turned upon hearing the manager's amazed ejaculation. What happened next was so swift and sudden that there was something appallingly horrible about it.

The trio, unable to utter a sound save for a few gasping pants, simply collapsed to the floor. There they lay, one upon the other, in a heap.

In less than five seconds they had been rendered totally unconscious. In fact, they were gassed!

The man with the respirator uttered a short chuckle inside his curious headgear. He himself was not affected in the slightest, and he thrust the brass instrument back in his pocket. His eyes gleamed with triumph behind the little windows of the respirator. The whole plan had materialised without a hitch.

The great safe, containing a fortune, was opened and at his mercy!

But what could he do alone? How was his position in any way improved? Even supposing he gained possession of the diamonds and jewellery, how was he to make his exit?

The events which happened immediately afterwards indicated plainly that this was no hurried burglary—no wild escapade of a daring cracksman. It was, on the contrary, a wonderfully planned and still more wonderfully executed robbery in broad daylight.

Weeks must have been spent in preparing for this hour; but those weeks had been spent well. At the critical moment of the actual burglary everything was prepared so perfectly that the affair was carried out smoothly and methodically.

The man in the blue uniform stepped over to his victims and regarded them keenly for a moment. Then he nodded to himself.

"Safe for a couple of hours, at least," he thought grimly. "No fear of them causing any trouble. It's all plane sailing now!"

He stood listening intently for a few moments, but only the dull, almost inaudible din of the Oxford Street traffic reached his ears. The assistants in the shop overhead suspected nothing.

He stepped across to one of the walls—the wall opposite the safe—and rapped upon it sharply four times with a steel spanner. Then he waited, keenly upon the alert. And in a few seconds, quite clearly, came two answering raps, astonishingly distinct.

What could it mean?

The respirator-clad man moved away from the wall hurriedly, entered the safe, and stood near the unconscious men. The safe door was pulled half to. Then he waited; and, after a pause——

Crash! Boom—oom!

There was a sudden roar of an explosion. It was not a very serious explosion, but it sounded terrific in the confines of the little cellar. The walls shook, the floor quivered, and the air became filled with dust.

The man in the blue uniform emerged from the safe, and gazed through the atmosphere at the opposite wall. A gaping rent had appeared in the

brickwork, about three feet wide by five feet high. And the floor of the cellar was strewn with rubbish.

What had happened was simple. A small explosive bomb had been placed on the other side of the wall, and the latter had been penetrated in one second. In this job it was speed that counted for everything. There was no need for secrecy now.

Out of the darkness and dust of the jagged hole came three figures—three exceedingly curious-looking figures. Each was attired in a blue serge suit, and each wore a respirator, similar to their confederate already within the cellar. To see their faces was impossible, for the respirators were excellent masks.

Not a word was spoken; indeed, it was not possible to speak under the circumstances. The "Water Board inspector" indicated the safe with a wave of his hand. With calm deliberateness the burglars dragged away the forms of the manager and his two clerks, and placed them against the side wall.

Then the safe was entered, and drawer after drawer opened. Their contents were transferred to leather handbags which the men carried. But hardly had they commenced their nefarious task when there was a sound of footsteps outside the door leading to the shop. Two or three people were descending the stone steps, and then a loud hammering sounded upon the heavy door, accompanied by excited shouts.

But the burglars took absolutely no notice. They went on with their task coolly and methodically. The banging continued, and the shouts grew more excited than ever. Minute after minute passed, and then there came a lull.

Voices could still be heard, and it was obvious that great excitement prevailed among Henson's employees. But the men in the cellar were unmoved and calm. They worked on grimly and as swiftly as possible. But their task was not proving so easy as they had anticipated. For the two hundred thousand pounds' worth of diamonds and jewellery was not lying just inside the safe, ready to be snatched up. The valuables were, as a matter of fact, divided into many portions, and packed carefully into a number of separate drawers and compartments.

It was some little time before the last drawer was started upon. By now the cellar was almost clear of dust, and the gas which had so effectively rendered the manager and his assistants harmless was now so dispersed that the air was quite breathable.

But the four men did not remove their respirators. And they took care that not the slightest clue should be left. They all wore thick rubber gloves, and their very feet were covered in felt slippers so that no recognisable tracks would be left.

As the last drawer was being emptied a terrific banging again sounded upon the communicating door, and it quivered and shook under the force of the onslaught. Indeed, it was obvious that in less than a minute the lock, strong as it was, would give way.

Yet the burglars merely looked at one another rather grimly and hastened somewhat. How were they going to escape? If they left it until the last moment a chase would surely be all in favour of the pursuers. Clad in their respirators it was impossible that the jewel thieves could escape.

But there was a very good reason for the quartette's cool indifference.

The man in the uniform gave a glance at the door, and saw that it was on the point of breaking down. He made a quick sign to his companions. The drawer at that moment had been emptied, and the entire consignment of valuable property was transferred into the thieves' bags.

The four men left the safe and moved quickly across to the gaping hole in the wall, and even as the foremost man plunged into the darkness the

staircase door splintered and crashed open. Two well-known figures were revealed in the wrecked doorway—and each held revolvers.

The two men were Nelson Lee, the famous detective, and Detective-inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard.

Nelson Lee took in the situation in a glance.

“We may still be in time!” he shouted. “This way, Lennard!”

With the inspector hard upon his heels, Nelson Lee dashed across the cellar, and plunged into the irregular hole—extracting from his pocket, at the same time, an electric torch, and switching it on.

He caught a glimpse of two figures ahead, clad in their respirators, and utterly unrecognisable. Then, even as he was making a spurt forward, there was a sudden crash, and the great detective pulled himself to a halt with an exclamation of startled, baffled amazement.

Right before him a solid steel door had crashed to. His electric light gleamed upon the dull metal work, and the thing looked absolutely immovable. In that one second Nelson Lee knew that this audacious burglary was to be a complete success—that the thieves would get away without leaving a clue!

There was absolutely no arguing with a door made of solid steel!

CHAPTER II.

The Sign of the Triangle—No Clue—A Grim Coincidence.

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR LENNARD, who was close behind Nelson Lee, gave the latter a push as he came to a halt. In the dimness of the tunnel he had not yet seen the steel door which barred the way.

“Go on, man!” he shouted huskily. “What on earth have you stopped for? We are right on the heels of the thieves——”

“My dear Lennard, I’m not a magician,” exclaimed Nelson Lee coolly. “I don’t happen to have the power to melt through solid doors! Just look at this!”

The Scotland Yard man pushed beside Nelson Lee, and gazed at the steel doors in sheer stupefaction.

“Seems to be a pretty tough proposition, eh?” went on Nelson Lee evenly. “It’s no good getting excited, my dear fellow. We’d better look the facts in the face. The gang who did this job did it thoroughly. They’ve made their escape absolutely certain, for this door will take hours to demolish; and meanwhile the birds are taking cover.”

Detective-inspector Lennard simply gaped.

“But, good heavens above,” he gasped astoundedly, “this—this is appalling, Lee! We actually saw the jewel thieves escaping! What can we do?”

Nelson Lee laughed between his set teeth.

“We can do nothing,” he replied. “At least, nothing that will help us to get on the track of the burglars. This affair has been planned for months, and we may as well resign ourselves to the fact that the gang haven’t left much for us to act upon. By the time this steel door’s forced the thieves will have vanished into thin air—diamonds, jewellery and all! I doubt if you’ll ever get a smell of them, Lennard!”

The Yard man swore with fluent ease.

“But can’t we set men on the watch outside——”

“On the watch?” interjected Nelson Lee. “Where can the men be stationed? We don’t know what this steel door conceals. Obviously there is a tunnel behind it; but where it leads to we sha’n’t know until we

make a personal investigation. Upon my soul, I can almost find admiration for the man who planned this extraordinary robbery!"

The detective flashed his light up and down, but there was not much to see. The steel door was situated about twelve feet up the short tunnel which led from the jeweller's cellar. The walls of the tunnel were rough and uneven. But there was no other outlet save the one that the steel door barred. A mere glance at the latter was sufficient for Nelson Lee to know that hours of work would have to be spent before further investigation was possible.

The dodge was one of the cleverest the famous detective had ever encountered. And it was so exceedingly simple that it was almost impossible that a hitch could have occurred.

Nelson Lee and Lennard returned to the cellar for a consultation, and both of them noticed a queer, catchy sensation in the air. Their throats were somewhat affected.

"Remains of some drug hanging about the atmosphere," commented Nelson Lee sharply. "No doubt the manager and his two assistants were bowled over by some kind of spray or other. Appearances certainly point to it."

Mr. Atherton and the other victims showed no sign of coming round, but they were soon conveyed upstairs, and a doctor who had been 'phoned for declared that there was no danger. In due course the trio would come to themselves and be little the worse for their exciting adventure.

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee and Detective-inspector Lennard were below in the cellar. The Scotland Yard man was looking decidedly glum. In broad daylight, in the very busiest part of the afternoon, £200,000 worth of property had been stolen from one of London's biggest diamond merchants. And, so far as Lennard could see, there was absolutely no hope of bringing the scoundrels to justice.

He realised now that even if he and Nelson Lee had burst the door open sooner the burglars would have escaped just as easily. They had, in fact, had the audacity to wait until the door had actually splintered from its hinges. Knowing that their escape was certain, and that pursuit was impossible, there was excellent reason for the thieves' methodical coolness.

Lennard and Nelson Lee had arrived at Messrs. Henson's at practically the same minute. One of the shop assistants, startled and amazed by the dull explosion in the vault, and the locked door, had instantly rung up Scotland Yard, and then, as an afterthought, Nelson Lee. The famous crime investigator happened to be at home, so he had hastened round with all speed.

And now, in the brick-strewn cellar, he and the inspector regarded the damage with grim expressions. They knew all about the "Water Board inspector" dodge, and guessed how completely the manager had been tricked.

"Cleared right out!" grunted Lennard angrily, as he examined the strong-room. "Not a penn'orth of stuff left! By jiminy, I'd like to know who did the job——"

He broke off suddenly, and let out a whoop.

"Great Scott!" he gasped excitedly. "Lee! Look here, man!"

Nelson Lee had not examined the safe so far; indeed, he felt that it would be useless his doing so, for Lennard was busy there. The detective was frowning over the jagged hole in the wall, but he turned swiftly now.

"What's up?" he asked curiously.

"Look at this!" roared the inspector. "It was in a locked drawer!"

He flourished a square piece of cardboard before Nelson Lee's eyes. It was

about four inches square and perfectly white. Right in the centre, on both sides, was printed in brilliant ink—a green triangle!

Nelson Lee's teeth clicked as he saw the sinister sign.

"By James!" he exclaimed tensely. "So this is the work of the League of the Green Triangle! I more than half had a suspicion that the league were connected with this clever business, Lennard. It's absolutely in their line!"

Up till this moment the celebrated criminologist had been more or less indifferent, regarding the affair as one that Scotland Yard could deal with effectively. But now his whole attitude changed. His eyes became keen and alert, and his jaw, always firm, set with grim determination.

For Nelson Lee had set himself out to fight the infamous Green Triangle tooth and nail. Already Professor Cyrus Zingrave and his scoundrelly—but highly respected—associates had felt the lash of the whip. For Nelson Lee was in possession of facts which gave him tremendous advantages over his enemies. He knew many of the league's secrets, and had the assistance of willing helpers—one of them actually a league member.

So now, upon learning that this burglary was one of the league's coups, Nelson Lee very naturally felt his interest increase a thousandfold. In a second he decided that Scotland Yard should not be the only investigators in the affair. On the contrary, he, himself, would devote his time and energies on a double purpose—firstly, to recover the stolen property, and secondly, to drive yet another nail into the league's coffin.

Even if Messrs. Henson's decided that his services were not required, he would pursue his own course just the same. For the burglary had provided—or would almost certainly provide—an opportunity for him to strike another blow.

"The Green Triangle—eh?" Detective-inspector Lennard exclaimed. "I wish to Heaven I could lay my hands on the ringleaders of that gang!"

"I'm afraid the league's one too many for Scotland Yard, my dear fellow," replied Nelson Lee evenly. "You've been baffled for a good many years now, and this present affair certainly offers no opening for you. I don't mind betting a level fiver that you'll draw absolutely blank!"

Lennard nodded gloomily.

"Afraid you're right!" he grunted, in a dismal voice. "I've tried my hands at a few cases in which that rotten Green Triangle figured, but I've never done anything yet! Come to that, no other man at the Yard has done anything, either. The same remarks apply to you, Lee."

"The Green Triangle is the greatest enigma of modern crimes," replied the detective quietly.

But he smiled quietly to himself at the same moment. For although he and one or two of his helpers knew the league's secrets, Scotland Yard itself was in utter ignorance of them. It will thus be readily understood that the great detective possessed huge advantages which the official detective force totally lacked.

"This puts a different complexion on the case," went on Lennard. "Now that we know that the job was done by the Green Triangle, we know there's precious little hope of recovering the stuff or nabbing the burglars. There won't be a trace!"

"But the league must get rid of the property."

"Yes; but they'll take mighty good care to leave no traces," said the inspector. "My dear man, we've had experience of the Green Triangle before! Every big burglary of recent years—huge affairs like this, I mean—has been the work of the league. And not a sniff of the swag has ever come to Scotland Yard. How the deuce its got rid of is a mystery, but it

certainly never turns up again in the form in which it was stolen! Hang it all, this'll mean another outburst in the infernal newspapers!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Another attack on our excellent Criminal Investigation Department—eh?" he said.

"I'm sick of them!" growled Lennard. "The newspapers are always sneering—always making a lot of publicity about the inefficiency of the police, and rot like that! How the thundering deuce can we fight against an organisation like the Green Triangle when they do their work in this style? There's not a ghost of a clue!"

And the inspector paced up and down, and furiously gnawed his moustache.

"What do you make of this wall?" he asked abruptly, jerking his head towards the jagged hole and the short tunnel beyond. "Any chance of a clue there?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"As I said before, Lennard, I'm afraid you'll draw a blank," he replied. "By this time the diamonds, burglars and all, have vanished into thin air. That steel door is a pretty problem to face. While we're hanging about here, unable to see what is beyond the door, the league's men are quietly making themselves scarce. The whole affair was evidently planned weeks ago."

"Especially to lift the contents of the safe?"

"Undoubtedly! Probably, however, the league made everything ready, and then waited until there was a tremendous haul in the strong-room. The idea of the Water Board man rushing in with his yarn of a burst main was merely a simple ruse to have the safe opened without any trouble. The whole thing, in fact, is absurdly simple."

"That's the worst of it!" snapped Lennard. "It's so confoundedly childish that no suspicion was aroused; and while we're stuck here like dummies, the brutes are laughing at us. Oh, I feel like chucking the whole detective job up!"

Nelson Lee could hardly help feeling a little sorry for the inspector. The situation was certainly intensely exasperating.

But a diversion occurred a few moments afterwards, for three locksmiths arrived, armed with efficient tools, and the work of forcing the steel door commenced. The chairman of Henson's put in an appearance, too. He was worried and anxious, and greatly upset by the robbery.

It was not until after two solid hours of hard work that the door showed signs of giving way. It was built right across the tunnel, and the very uprights to which it was fixed were of steel. Three-quarters of an hour later—at about five o'clock—the great door was open, and the manner in which the burglars had made their escape was made clear.

But the long delay, of course, had been fatal.

Nelson Lee and Detective-inspector Lennard explored the tunnel beyond the door and, as they had anticipated, discovered absolutely nothing of any value. The tunnel had been bored right through the earth, and in places it was so narrow that it was difficult to walk.

There had been no cellars of any sort adjoining Messrs. Henson's establishment; at least, none at the rear, for the tunnel led right beneath the yard at the back, and under the back premises of a small shop which was situated in a little lane which ran parallel with Oxford Street.

The shop was a tobacconist's, and it was closed and deserted. When Nelson Lee and Lennard reached the end of the tunnel they found themselves in the cellars of the shop, and knew perfectly well that they would find the place empty.

The shop merely occupied the ground floor: the upper floors were offices. The shop had been let as a tobacconist's about two months before to a Mr Samuel Robson—an assumed name, of course. Robson had always locked the shop up at nights, and his customers had been few. The police knew nothing about him, and there was not the slightest clue as to where he had come from or where he had gone to.

Nelson Lee was struck by the amazing cleverness of the scheme.

The thieves had actually robbed the jewellers and had walked out unsuspected and at their ease while the police were kicking their heels behind the steel door. The method by which the league men had departed was obvious.

One by one they had left the tobacconist's shop, carrying handbags containing the booty. Who could possibly suspect them? The police might even have seen them leaving the shop, and would have been none the wiser.

Apparently they were just customers, leaving the shop after having made a purchase. They had left, perhaps, at intervals of five or ten minutes, and had then gone various ways, to finally disappear among the millions of London.

As nobody had suspected the shop, and as no watch had been set, there was no witness to say what had become of them. Robson himself, the proprietor of the shop, had been known to wear a thick beard and moustache. This was probably a disguise, and with it removed, to trace him would be impossible.

The shop itself, although ransacked through, offered not the slightest clue. The whole business, in fact, was perfectly carried out, and the thieves and the stolen property had vanished into thin air.

The police were helpless. There was not a single line of inquiry to follow up. While the shop was being searched by the gloomy Lennard, Nelson Lee went off to his room in Gray's Inn Road. As a matter of fact, the detective wanted his tea. He knew it was useless remaining upon the scene of the crime any longer.

During tea, the famous detective related the events of the afternoon to Nipper, his young and trusty assistant, who was hugely interested when he knew that the affair had been one of the league's undertakings.

"My hat!" remarked Nipper, when he had heard all. "It was a pretty complete dodge, guv'nor! I don't see how the police can get on the trail."

"Neither do I, young 'un. But we may," said Nelson Lee calmly.

"Have you got a clue, sir?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"Oh, no! Don't be in a hurry, my boy. But we are in a very different position to the official police. To them the Green Triangle is an unfathomable mystery. We, however, know a lot. We know that Professor Zingrave is the chief of the league, and we know the famous men who constitute the Governing Circle of the league. A very careful look round may put us on the right track."

"H'm!" grunted Nipper. "The league don't leave many tracks, sir."

"You overlook one important point," said Nelson Lee quietly. "The most important, the most significant point of all! The police know nothing of the Green Triangle, and the controllers of the Green Triangle imagine themselves to be absolutely unsuspected. They have not the faintest suspicion that you and I—and Douglas Clifford—are in possession of the league's most cherished secrets."

"Well, sir?"

"Well, Nipper, it is quite obvious that the proceeds of this afternoon's robbery will be handed over to the Governing Circle," went on the detective, calmly ramming home his points. "And a Governing Member will be entrusted with the work of disposing of the diamonds. They are of such value that no ordinary working member would be trusted with the task."

"I don't quite see——"

"Wait, young 'un. The Governing Members of the league are all highly respected and famous men. Their movements are never questioned. The police would never dream of connecting any one of them with a jewel robbery. Therefore, the Governing Member who is entrusted with the stolen property will go about his task of disposing of it in the most open manner. The police, being ignorant of the amazing truth, will suspect nothing. We, however, are in a position to make deductions."

Nipper nodded thoughtfully as he stirred his tea.

"I think I see the point now, guv'nor," he said. "If Sir Roger Hogarth, for instance, were to travel to Amsterdam to-morrow, Scotland Yard wouldn't care tuppence. But we should jolly soon suspect that he'd gone to Holland to dispose of the diamonds."

"Precisely," said Nelson Lee. "You have grasped the significance of my argument. Sir Roger is a Governing Member of the league, but only we know it. Accordingly, if he indeed journeyed to Amsterdam, we should instantly guess things."

"You hope to get on the track, then, by taking careful note of the movements of the members of the Governing Circle, sir?"

Nelson Lee crossed his legs, and lit a cigar lazily.

"I am convinced that sooner or later we shall hit the trail," he replied. "Probably a line of inquiry will present itself sooner than we expect."

And the great detective was right.

A few minutes later Mrs. Jones, the housekeeper, entered with an evening paper. Nelson Lee was sitting before the fire now, and he read the account of the daring robbery in Oxford Street with interest. Nipper looked over his master's shoulder.

"The paper stars the affair up, sir," he remarked.

"With excellent reason, Nipper. The robbery is an amazing one. The police, you observe, have kept discreetly silent. They have merely stated that they are following up several clues, and that there is great hope of an arrest very shortly. H'm! My friend Lennard would be glad if this reference to clues were correct. As a matter of fact, Scotland Yard is utterly at a loose end."

The detective allowed his gaze to wander across the page. And his attention suddenly became riveted upon a small paragraph in the right-hand corner. It concerned Sir Gordon Hyde, the famous astronomer—who, as Nelson Lee knew, was a Governing Member of the League of the Green Triangle. Naturally, the detective was interested.

The paragraph was only short, and merely stated that Sir Gordon would be leaving London on the following morning in his own private yacht for his wonderful observatory which was situated on Solar Island—a tiny islet off the west coast of Scotland.

"So Sir Gordon is off to his observatory," mused Nelson Lee aloud. "By James, I wonder—I wonder!"

"You wonder what, sir?"

Nelson Lee pursed his lips.

"Is it possible that the arguments I expounded to you a few minutes ago are already proving their soundness?" he asked, stroking his chin. "I have long had suspicions concerning Solar Island, Nipper. The place is a tiny isle containing nothing but Sir Gordon's famous observatory, and Hyde owns it absolutely. Moreover, he never allows visitors to go to the island under any consideration, except on extremely rare occasions, and when specially invited. It would indeed be curious if Sir Gordon proved to be the man who——. But let me think. The last big jewel robbery the league brought

off was at a famous diamond merchant's in Hatton Garden. I seem to remember something connected with that affair which has singular significance when regarded in conjunction with this present robbery."

The detective rose to his feet, and opened the doors of a big cupboard. Before him was a huge file of newspapers. For ten minutes Nelson Lee was busy, and then he called Nipper over to his side. Nipper could see that his master's eyes were gleaming with satisfaction.

"What is it, guv'nor?"

"Look for yourself, my lad," replied Nelson Lee evenly. "Here is a report of the big jewel robbery in Hatton Garden—a robbery which is, to this day, a baffling mystery to the police. And here, in the following day's newspaper, is a tiny paragraph stating that Sir Gordon Hyde was leaving at once by his private yacht for Solar Island."

Nipper whistled.

"My hat, sir, that looks jolly queer!" he remarked.

"The significance of the parallel cannot be exaggerated," said the great detective, putting the old newspapers back, and taking a cigar from the box on the mantelpiece. "I am convinced, Nipper, that we are already hot on the track of another adventure."

"You think, then, that Sir Gordon Hyde is conveying the stolen jewels——"

Nelson Lee interrupted the lad with a wave of his hand.

"Never mind thinking, young 'un," he said briskly. "Thinking will do no good in a case like this. It's action that's wanted; and you and I, this very night, are going to embark upon a little expedition of investigation to the London Docks."

Nipper's eyes danced.

"Good biz!" he exclaimed heartily. "I'm game for any old thing, guv'nor!"

CHAPTER III.

Some Interesting Information—Nelson Lee's Discovery—In a Tight Corner.

PITCHY darkness, fog, and drizzle.

The night turned out to be disgustingly wretched. The atmospheric conditions had been quite bad enough in the vicinity of Gray's Inn Road; but by the river, at the London Docks, the fog was thick and miserable. Always a place of drabness by night, the docks were now certainly a locality to keep away from.

A figure, almost indistinguishable from the dull warehouses which formed a background, leaned against a low wall, and now and again a dull glow showed that the man was smoking a pipe. He was dressed in seafaring clothes, rather shabby, and he wore a close-clipped beard.

Needless to say, he was none other than Nelson Lee. Nipper was not with him, the lad having gone off on a little tour of inquiry on his own.

The detective was not in any way displeased with the weather, in spite of its disagreeable inclemency. It was not actually raining, but the fog had resolved itself into a kind of very fine drizzle, and the air was thick and heavy.

Nelson Lee was not very satisfied with his investigations. Right before him the bulk of Sir Gordon Hyde's steam yacht loomed up dimly in the gloom. The Seagull was not a very large boat, but it was a luxurious one, and spick and span from bows to stern.

At present no sign of life could be seen aboard. Nelson Lee knew, as a

matter of fact, that the entire crew and officers were on shore—save, perhaps, for an engineer or two below, for steam was up. The decks, however, were empty and deserted with the exception of a single watchman on the bridge.

Nelson Lee's inquiries had so far been fruitless. He only knew that Sir Gordon was to come aboard in the morning, and that the Seagull would then be taken in hand by a tug and piloted out into the open river. He could gain no information whatever regarding the yacht's cargo. It seemed, in fact, as though the vessel contained no cargo.

This was not very surprising, for the Seagull was a pleasure ship. As Nelson Lee leaned against the wall and puffed at his pipe he gazed along the quay and watched a busy scene some distance away through the gloomy fog. A ship was being unloaded, and the flares and the electric lights, revealing the hurrying dockers, formed a picture of life and activity.

And as Nelson Lee watched a man came along the quay, and paused opposite the gangway of the Seagull. The detective detached himself from the wall, and lounged up to the stranger.

"Sailin' to-morrow, ain't she, mate?" he asked affably.

The other stared at his questioner in the gloom.

"Yes, I reckon she's off to Scotland in the morning," he said, pulling out a pipe. "Give us a match, old pal. Thanks! Smart boat, that," he added, lighting his pipe and handing the matches back. "One of the smartest little vessels I've ever come across."

"Know anything about her?" asked Nelson Lee casually.

"Not much, except that she belongs to some big pot," replied the other—"some cranky fool, I guess. A bloke who messes about with telescopes, gazin' at the stars. Blamed rot, I call it! Waste of good, honest money, matey. You an' I could do with a bit that that ijt spends on his tomfoolery!"

"Ay, right enough," agreed the detective. "I dessay he's rich."

"Rich! I'll bet he's worth thousands," said the stranger, who was inclined to be talkative. "Not more'n two hours since I gave a hand cartin' some cases aboard. The officer who got me on to the job said the contents o' them cases was worth hundreds an' hundreds o' quids!"

Nelson Lee felt his heart beating a trifle more quickly. But he gave absolutely no sign that he was seeking information. On the contrary, he knocked his pipe out and yawned noisily.

"Rotten night!" he remarked. "My pal's keepin' me waitin' a fair time. Oh, so some cases was took aboard the Seagull two hours ago—eh? Seein' as they was so valuable, mebbe you was curious to know what was in 'em?"

"Well, I asked, come to that. Seems as though a lot of lenses an' things connected with the telescopes at the rich bloke's observatory is being shipped there. By thunder! You oughter seen them boxes, mate. Made o' solid wood, an' bound round wi' steel bands, an' locked as secure as if they'd bin full o' diamonds."

Nelson Lee smiled grimly in the fog.

"Well, them lenses for telescopes are worth a pile o' money," he said. "I suppose you took 'em into the yacht off a van?"

"No, they came in a big motor-car," replied the man. "I done some odd jobs for the Seagull afore, you see, and as I was standin' by the officer got me to lend a hand carryin' the boxes aboard. Darned shame, I call it, spendin' all that money on fool things to look at the moon and the stars! Well, good-night, old pal!"

"Good-night, mate!"

The man passed on, slouching heavily, and puffing at his pipe. In a few moments he was swallowed up in the mist and drizzle. Nelson Lee stared after him in the darkness, and drew a deep breath.

"By James, what a piece of luck!" he murmured exultantly. "After making all sorts of fruitless inquiries, a total stranger—a rough dock labourer—comes along and presents me, utterly unasked-for, with the most valuable piece of information!"

He filled his pipe slowly, and paced up and down the quay.

"Two hours ago—that is, about eight o'clock," he mused—"several iron-bound cases went aboard the Seagull. Presumably they contained stuff connected with Sir Gordon's observatory, but I have shrewd suspicions to the contrary. Scott! I am convinced that my guess was correct!"

The great detective was elated. He was practically certain, in fact, that those iron-bound boxes had contained not lenses, etc., but the proceeds of the burglary at Messrs. Henson's, Ltd., of Oxford Street, and probably the proceeds of several other minor burglaries into the bargain.

Without a doubt, he was hot on the right track.

While Scotland Yard and the police of the whole country were frantically endeavouring to find a clue, he had located the stolen property less than nine hours after it had been looted. What was more simple? The jewels and diamonds had been handed over to one of the league's controlling agents, and the latter had immediately packed it in the locked cases and sent it by motor-car to the waiting yacht.

While Nelson Lee was thinking deeply over the interesting information, a slight form, dressed in shabby clothing, loomed up through the mist. He came close, and uttered a disconsolate grunt.

"No go, guv'nor," he said. "Haven't learned a thing!"

"Never mind, my lad. I have been more successful."

"By gum! What's happened, sir?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"Two hours ago several steel-bound boxes were taken aboard the Seagull," replied Nelson Lee grimly. "I learned this from a man who helped to carry them aboard. Steel-bound boxes, securely locked, young 'un. Does that not strike you as significant?"

"You—you think the stolen——"

"Hush! Not so loud, Nipper!" cautioned Nelson Lee. "Yes, I am pretty sure that we are on the trail of Messrs. Henson's property; and, what's more, I am going to make an attempt to find out for certain!"

"What's the wheeze, sir?"

"It will entail a slight risk, my boy, but I'm prepared for that. I'm going to slip aboard the Seagull, and do my best to find those interesting cases!"

"But—but you'll be copped!" gasped Nipper.

"Nonsense! The yacht is practically deserted, and will remain so all night. I shall have the run of the whole boat if I go cautiously. It is essential that I should be quite sure of my facts before we go any further. I must know the truth."

"Shall I come with you, guv'nor?"

"No. You'll wait for me on the quay here," replied Nelson Lee softly.

"Don't let yourself be seen, and keep a careful watch. I don't suppose I shall be more than half an hour at the most."

"But you'll be spotted going across the gangway——"

"My good Nipper, there are other means of getting aboard," interjected Nelson Lee quietly. "You may be sure that I shall exercise the most stringent precautions."

Without giving Nipper time to speak further, the detective slipped off into the darkness and drizzle. Very shortly he was almost out of sight of the Seagull, having walked a fair distance along the quay. He knew very well that he could have walked boldly on to the yacht without much fear of being seen or questioned. But such a course would have been necessarily

risky—and Nelson Lee wanted to take as few chances as possible. He already had a plan in mind, and he proceeded to carry it out without loss of time. The Seagull, at present, was quite deserted, and so it was a good opportunity for his investigations.

But the detective was in no way blind to the risks he would run. The Seagull belonged to the League of the Green Triangle, and every man of the crew was probably a member of the infamous organisation. If the detective were caught prowling aboard he would certainly find himself in the hottest of hot water. Indeed, if he were captured and his real identity disclosed, his life would pay the forfeit.

The league's vengeance was swift and sudden.

Having no wish to end his earthly existence with undue abruptness, Nelson Lee accordingly set about a little plan of his own which would enable him to accomplish his object with a fair degree of safety.

He had already observed, about two hundred yards from the Seagull, a couple of small boats tethered to some steps which led down from the quay. The place was deserted and pitchy dark. The fog, moreover, made it extremely difficult to see for any distance.

The detective's movements were not observed by a soul as he quietly stepped into one of the boats, cast off the painter, and pushed away from the quay.

Using one of the oars with such skill that no noise was made, he let the boat slip through the water until it passed the bows of the Seagull, some distance out in the dock. The mist was so thick that he was quite invisible from the yacht's deck.

Gradually the little boat edged nearer and nearer to the yacht's star-board side—the side farthest from the quay. Not a light showed in any of the portholes, and several of them were standing open.

At last the detective manœuvred the boat right alongside the Seagull. A rope hung down from the deck, and he grasped it and tugged at it with all his strength. It was securely fastened, and he wasted no time in swinging himself clear of the boat.

With the agility of a monkey the detective scrambled up the rope until his head and shoulders were level with an open porthole. Less than a minute later he was standing in a little cabin, listening intently and absolutely upon the alert.

The boat had drifted away, but Nelson Lee had expected that, for he had not tethered it. Had it been spotted from above it would have been certain evidence that someone had boarded the yacht. And there would be plenty of ways of getting off the Seagull when the time came.

He stood in the cabin listening. But the whole vessel was silent and still, and he ventured, after a few moments, to press the button of his electric torch. He then saw that the cabin was a small one, and that it had evidently been used as a kind of store-room, for it was untidy and littered about with rubbish.

Switching the light off he grasped the handle of the door and pulled it. The door opened silently, and the next second he found himself in a corridor which was dimly lighted at the further end by a single electric lamp.

Without further ado he commenced his search. In his right hand coat-pocket an automatic was ready for instant use if required.

The various cabins he examined proved barren of result, and he was not surprised. The steel-bound boxes would probably be in one of the vessel's holds, or in a store-room in the bowels of the ship. The detective regretted, now, that he had not inquired of the dock labourer as to where the cases had been stored.

Half an hour passed; and during this time Nelson Lee was not troubled

in the least by interruptions. Indeed, it seemed as though he had the vessel to himself. Most of the passages were in darkness, particularly down below aft of the engine-room. At the expiration of the half-hour he was still unsuccessful, but he stood before a strong metal door, which was bolted and locked.

"Might as well try my luck," he murmured.

He softly shot the bolts back, and then produced a bunch of assorted skeleton keys. After several futile attempts he at last felt the lock slip back, and the door swung open. The lock was a kind of latch, and could only be opened from outside.

Nelson Lee slipped into the dark apartment, and the light from his torch suddenly pierced through the blackness. He saw that he was in a big hold, and that the only door was the one by which he had entered—save for a great covering in the roof, which was securely battened down.

But the detective only gave one glance at his surroundings. His attention was fixed upon some objects which were neatly piled upon the floor. With the exception of these, the hold was empty.

They were boxes—boxes bound with iron!

"Located at last!" murmured Nelson Lee softly. "I shall know the truth within ten minutes!"

He propped his torch against one of the cases, and then set about opening another without hesitation. The box was about the size of a sugar-case, and was made of solid oak, with thick metal bindings. The lid was hinged, and was provided with two great padlocks. These were expensive articles, and of a patent design, which defied all ordinary methods of being forced.

The ten minutes lengthened into fifteen; and twenty minutes had finally slipped by before the two padlocks were unfastened. Nelson Lee was a past-master in the art, and he succeeded where many experts burglars would have failed.

A sigh escaped his lips as the lid rose in his hand. The case was packed carefully, and the first things the detective removed were, indeed, articles connected with Sir Gordon Hyde's observatory.

"By Jove, am I wrong after all?" thought Nelson Lee. "I would have staked my life that——"

He broke off with a little gasp of exultation. A hurried examination, and then he replaced the articles he had removed, and closed the lid again. When he stood up his eyes were gleaming with satisfaction.

He had seen enough! In that case were diamond rings, pendants, and various other valuable articles of jewellery. And if this particular box contained these things, it followed as a matter of course that the others were similarly packed. The £200,000 worth of stolen property—and probably other stuff—was there before him.

His theory was proven correct.

Sir Gordon Hyde was the Governing Member who had been allotted the task of disposing of the loot. But why was it being taken to Solar Island? Was the island a kind of treasure-house for the league?

"There is more in this than meets the eye!" mused the detective. "I am convinced that a visit to Solar Island would be something of a surprise. By James, I shall make it my business to go to the island——"

His musings were suddenly rudely interrupted. From overhead, dull and indistinct, came various sounds. The tramping of feet, the shouting of orders, and the hoarse hoot of the yacht's syren.

Nelson Lee was startled.

"What is happening so suddenly?" he asked himself. "The vessel does not sail until the morning, and yet—— I must steal away without a second's loss of time, or my position will become a deadly trap!"

He switched off his light, and stepped over to the door. But as he was about to enter the passage, distinct voices came to his ears, and the clatter of boots on an iron ladder. Men were descending! His retreat was cut off!

Even as the detective dodged back there was a sudden flood of light, and he knew that the electric lamps had been switched on in the corridor. His heart was beating rather wildly, for if the men saw the door ajar they would naturally become suspicious—and then discovery would only be a matter of seconds.

He dare not close the door, for by so doing he would entrap himself. From within there was absolutely no way of getting at the lock. It had been comparatively easy to enter; but it would be impossible to escape.

What happened next was totally unexpected.

Nelson Lee was almost certain of being discovered, and his right fist closed firmly on the butt of his revolver. The footsteps halted exactly outside the iron door, and a curse floated in.

"By thunder! Who in the name of Hades left this door open?" exclaimed a harsh voice, with several choice embellishments which need not be recorded here. "If the skipper saw this he'd go blue with fury!"

The door opened a little, and Nelson Lee caught a glimpse of a coarse face peering in. But the man had no suspicion that anything was wrong, for he uttered a grunt, and slammed the door with a crash. Then there were two thuds as the outside bolts were thrust home, followed by the sound of dully retreating footsteps.

Nelson Lee leaned against the wall and drew his breath in with a sharp hiss.

He was in no way thunderstruck by what had happened; his wits were not dulled in the least. And he knew, instantly, how absolutely hopeless his position was.

"Trapped! Those enterprising gentlemen who were here a moment ago have no idea of the actual service they have rendered Sir Gordon Hyde!" he murmured grimly. "Escape for me is absolutely impossible—I'm not fool enough to think otherwise! The door's both locked and bolted on the outside, and there's no more chance of my escaping from this hold than a rabbit has that's cornered in its burrow!"

But the great detective was quite cool. Indeed, he knew only too well that any display of emotion would not help him in the least. Sooner or later he would be discovered. He could either wait until he were found, or he could hammer upon the door and attract attention. But it was just the same either way.

His presence aboard the Seagull would ultimately be made known, and then——

Well, then, he would be in the hands of the League of the Green Triangle. And Nelson Lee needed no other knowledge than that to cause his jaw to set tight and his face to become pale and drawn.



CHAPTER IV.

Nipper Gets a Shock—A Desperate Ruse—The Seagull Sails.

"**W**ISH the gov'nor would show his blessed face!" grunted Nipper anxiously. "He knows I'm kicking my heels out here, and yet he's messing about aboard that boat, taking his time as though I didn't exist! Looks almost as though he's completely forgotten little me!" The lad was stamping about the quay restlessly, glancing continuously

towards the dim bulk of the Seagull. Nearly an hour had passed since Nelson Lee had parted from Nipper, and no sign of him had been seen since.

The yacht was quiet and still, save for a lazy wisp of smoke which rose into the fog-laden air from the funnel. Nobody had passed over the gangway on to the vessel, and nobody had left it.

This particular portion of the docks, in fact, was utterly deserted. Farther along the quay there was bustle and life, but the mist subdued it, and the noise of the cranes and winches, and the clatter of feet, seemed only like a ghostly echo to Nipper.

He was alone—quite alone—anxiously awaiting the return of his master.

And Nelson Lee didn't come.

The time hung heavily. It seemed to Nipper that hours and hours had passed. And as the minutes sped away, the lad became more and more perturbed in mind. He found himself imagining all manner of alarming things.

Suppose the detective had been surprised in his investigations? Suppose there were several members of the Green Triangle aboard the yacht? Suppose they had captured Nelson Lee, and were even now deciding what his fate would be? Suppose—

"Oh, what's the good of supposing!" muttered Nipper sharply, giving himself a vigorous shake. "You're getting into a state of nerves, Nipper, you ass! Pull yourself together, and don't act the giddy goat!"

And, having thus admonished himself, he tried to make himself believe that he was easier in mind. He practically succeeded in convincing himself that there was nothing to worry about.

But he worried all the same. Try as he would, he couldn't help feeling that something had gone wrong. He strained his eyes towards the yacht, and out over the murky waters of the dock.

"Oh, why doesn't the gov'nor come?" he growled impatiently. "I'm fed up with this!"

But the lad's attention was diverted a few moments later. And his anxiety, instead of growing less, became a thousandfold more intense.

For voices came to his ears, and then he observed several men walking quickly in his direction. Two or three of them were dressed in smart officer's uniform, and they all halted just against the Seagull's gangway. Nipper, in the gloom, crouched back, and watched with interest.

"I can't help your troubles, Simpson!" exclaimed a voice sharply. "Orders are orders, and Sir Gordon hasn't failed to make his instructions clear. The Seagull sails as soon as possible—as soon as a puffing, stinking tug can take her in tow to the open river!"

"But look here, captain!" protested another voice. "I've arranged——"

"Hang what you've arranged!" snapped the other. "Arrangements can't always be carried out. Instead of sailing to-morrow morning we're sailing to-night. That clear? Because, if it isn't, you'd better dust your brain-box a bit so that it will be clear!"

"The crew are all over the show——"

A curse floated to Nipper's ears.

"Who's skipper of this boat, you or I?" exclaimed the first voice. "I've received my orders, and now I'm going to have my orders carried out. You're second officer, and the sooner you get busy the better. You know where the men are located; rush round and get 'em aboard as soon as you can."

"What's the idea of this blamed rush?" demanded the second officer. "What's happened to cause the boss to leave London to-night?"

"I don't know any more than you do!" snapped the captain. "I only

know that Sir Gordon Hyde will be along here in less than half-an-hour, and that the Seagull will warp out of dock with to-night's tide."

And the figures dispersed, most of them going aboard the yacht. Two others hurried off, growling—presumably to gather together the rest of the Seagull's crew. In less than three minutes there were considerable signs of life aboard the vessel. Lights gleamed in the port-holes, and there was much bustle on the deck.

Nipper stood quite still, watching, his face pale.

The Seagull was sailing at once! The original plans had been cancelled, and Sir Gordon Hyde had given orders to put to sea without delay! Only too well did Nipper realise what all this would probably mean.

Nelson Lee had not returned, so there was only one thing to conclude. The detective was still aboard the yacht! Believing himself to be absolutely free from interruption he had taken his time over his investigations. And now the Seagull was alive with bustle and briskness.

"The guv'nor's in a hole—he's trapped!" thought Nipper, with keen anxiety. "He's down below decks, and by this time he's heard the preparations for departure. Ten to one he's lying low, not daring to show his face!"

And suppose Nelson Lee did show his face? He would be caught red-handed, and detained aboard. This was no ordinary vessel. It belonged to the League of the Green Triangle, and every man of the crew was probably a member of the League. If Nelson Lee were discovered he would not be hustled off the boat.

He would, on the contrary, be instantly suspected as a spy. And the League men would take good care that he did not escape. They would throw him into a cabin, bound and gagged, and helpless—ready to be dealt with as soon as the open sea was reached.

Thus ran Nipper's heated thoughts.

Even taking it for granted that his master was not discovered, he would certainly be compelled to remain on board; for to attempt to steal off would lead to certain discovery. And he would be on board when the Seagull sailed!

"The guv'nor'll be carted off!" thought Nipper, in alarm. "Carted off right in the heart of a wasps' nest! Oh, my goodness, what a rotten state of affairs! We never dreamed of this development!"

The sudden decision to sail to-night, in fact, had ruined everything. Nipper's shrewd mind worked swiftly and evenly. He knew that his master would be aware of the turn of events by this time. And if he succeeded in escaping he would appear before so very long. In half-an-hour the thing would be decided. If, at the end of half-an-hour, Nelson Lee did not turn up, Nipper would conclude that the worst had happened.

The lad waited impatiently, anxiously. The minutes sped by, and the Seagull became more and more alive. The crew went aboard, and all the busy preparations for the ship's departure were in full swing.

Presently a motor-van arrived some little distance off, on the roadway. And three big travelling trunks were carried from it, and deposited on the quay close to where Nipper was standing, in a dim and gloomy patch. Apparently—indeed, obviously—the trunks were destined to be carted aboard the yacht before so very long. They would probably have been taken straight aboard but for the fact that the crew were too busy on other matters at the moment.

There was plenty of life and light now. But of Nelson Lee there was not the slightest sign. Since the moment he had parted from Nipper he had disappeared utterly. The half-hour passed, and the situation remained unchanged—except that the Seagull was almost ready to warp out of dock.

Without a doubt something had happened to the detective. Nipper was sure of that. And he felt sure, moreover, that Nelson Lee was on board the yacht, either a prisoner, or unable to move from a place of concealment.

The lad felt horribly helpless and impotent.

"I can't do a thing!" he muttered, walking along the quay restlessly. "I've simply got to wait here—and watch. And when the yacht slips out of dock, I shall know that the gov'nor is somewhere on board!"

Nipper nearly wept with alarm.

"I can't let him go!" he told himself fiercely. "If he sails in the Seagull I shall never set eyes on him again—I'm sure of that! This boat belongs to the league, and when they find that they've got Nelson Lee in their power, they—— Oh, if I could only manage to get aboard!"

Nipper clenched his fists convulsively. If he could only manage to get on board! He didn't even ponder over the risk—he didn't think of the danger. He only wanted to be with his beloved master. What mattered it if he shared the same dangers as his master? Besides, if he could get on the Seagull he might be able to help——

"Oh, it's no good!" murmured Nipper bitterly, interrupting his own frantic thoughts. "The gov'nor's been and done it, and I can't lift a finger to pull him out of the hole. I've never felt so absolutely rotten in my life!"

Savagely, he kicked against one of the travelling trunks, which were close beside him. At the moment not another soul was near by. Nipper looked at the trunks with a fierce expression.

"You'll be taken across the gangway before so very long!" he muttered. "Oh, why ain't I a giddy magician? Why can't I turn myself into a travelling trunk, and——"

The lad broke off with a short, tense gasp.

"The trunks!" he panted to himself, his eyes glittering. "If I could only open one of 'em and nip inside! There's nobody about—I could do it in five minutes! Oh, but it's too hopeless; I should be spotted doing the trick!"

Nevertheless, the idea had taken complete hold of him.

He did not waste a moment in coming to a decision. He knew only too well that hesitation would be fatal. Nelson Lee had always taught him to make up his mind swiftly and to act promptly. Half the battle was over by doing that; whereas hesitation only magnified the risks and made the task all the more difficult.

The lad was desperate, and he acted on the spur of the moment. Just then he felt that he would be perfectly willing to do the most mad thing if it would result in his getting aboard the Seagull.

By now he was absolutely sure that Nelson Lee had met with a mishap. And Nipper's only desire was to be on board the yacht when it sailed. Even if he were made a prisoner, also, it would be better than being left behind. He would, at least, only share his master's perils.

One swift glance round showed Nipper that he was unobserved. He and the trunks were about halfway between two electric standards, and the gloom was added to by the shadow of a huge pile of bales close by. The fog, moreover, although a little less dense, obscured his movements.

He saw at once that one of the trunks was of a larger size than the others, and that it was not fitted with outside straps. Only an extra strong lock secured it. But, like his master, Nipper had picked many a lock in his time. And the lock of an ordinary travelling trunk was not likely to prove of much difficulty.

The lad took from his pocket a piece of wire, and a tiny pair of pliers. A little manipulation, and then he inserted the piece of wire in the keyhole,

and turned and twisted it about. In a surprisingly short space of time there was a soft click, and the lid of the trunk lifted in Nipper's hands.

The contents, he saw at a glance, consisted of clothing and rugs and blankets. Probably it was the property of one of the ship's officers. Not that the question of ownership troubled Nipper. He proceeded at once to remove the blankets, etc., and to pitch them round behind the pile of bales, out of sight.

He worked with frantic haste; until, at last, the trunk was empty save for a layer of clothing at the bottom. Seeing that the trunk's contents were entirely innocent, Nipper was in no way surprised that it had been merely locked, and not secured in any other way.

"Now for it!" muttered the lad breathlessly. "My hat, I hope I sha'n't suffocate in these tight quarters!"

Even as he stepped into the trunk he saw three men approaching the spot, and knew that he had acted only in the very nick of time. Hesitation would, indeed, have been fatal.

The lid descended swiftly, and a soft click told Nipper that the spring lock had snapped into place. From outside it was impossible to tell that anything had happened to the trunk, for it was fastened as securely as ever, and its original contents were hidden from view.

"Locked in, by gum!" muttered Nipper, who found that he was able to sit down in the trunk with his knees hunched up somewhat. "Never mind, if the worst comes to the worst, I can hack my way out with a penknife!"

His main object had been achieved successfully, however. He was inside the trunk, and in a few minutes he felt himself being carried along.

What followed was rather confused. Nipper was jolted about, bruised, and nearly suffocated. He guessed, however, that the trunk had been deposited in one of the ship's holds, for soon after he felt himself at rest, he heard hammerings and thuddings as the hatch was being battened down.

Only ten minutes had elapsed since Nipper had climbed into the trunk. But by now he was nearly smothered. He gasped painfully, and realised that he had deliberately placed himself in a tight fix.

But the first thing to do was to bore airholes, or he would die of suffocation. Accordingly he took from his pocket a huge claspknife, which had several other useful implements combined. One of these was a little auger, and a very few minutes later eight or nine holes had been bored in a little clump, and Nipper, by placing his mouth close to them, was able to breathe air that was comparatively sweet and fresh.

"Well, I'm not dead yet," muttered the youngster. "I'm aboard the yacht, and goodness knows what'll happen in the near future! But sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof—as the jolly old poet says."

And thus it came about that when the Seagull finally slid down the Thames under her own steam, she carried aboard her two passengers whose presence was so far totally unknown.

Nipper by this time had got quite fed-up with the trunk, and had with much difficulty succeeded in bursting the lock by heaving his back against the lid. He found himself—as he had suspected—in one of the yacht's holds, with nothing for companionship but utter darkness and various bales and trunks.

The situation was really remarkable.

Nipper was not exactly sure that Nelson Lee was aboard, but he had his suspicions. And Nelson Lee had no idea whatever that his young assistant had ventured upon such a hazardous project.

Nelson Lee's presence aboard the yacht was more or less accidental; he had been imprisoned by a mere stroke of ill-luck. But Nipper had taken the step deliberately, solely because he was anxious about his master.

The great detective was in one hold and his assistant in another, almost the length of the ship separating them. What was to be the end of the amazing situation?

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CHAPTER V.

Sir Gordon's Threat—Amazement Isle—Nelson Lee's Doom!

SIR GORDON HYDE sat in his cabin aboard the Seagull and puffed rather jerkily at a cigar. The sunlight streamed in at the porthole, for the yacht had been under steam for close upon twelve hours. It was now nearly noon of the day following the departure. The fogs and mists were left behind, and a clear sky and a sparkling blue sea were to be seen through the cabin's window.

The famous amateur astronomer was a distinguished-looking man—tall, clean-shaven, and upright. His hair was inclined to be a little grey, and gold-rimmed pince-nez rested upon the bridge of his nose.

"I suppose everything will be all right," he murmured to himself, with a frown. "I am thankful that the stuff from Henson's was brought aboard last night in good time. The departure of the yacht so hurriedly caused no comment, I'm sure. The movements of such a famous man as myself are of no interest to anybody with the exception of scientific journals and institutions."

The baronet smiled rather grimly to himself. He had been worried about the premature sailing of the Seagull. He hated any departure from a settled plan, and it generally upset him for many hours, for he was methodical to a degree.

But he realised that it had been necessary—indeed, imperative—for the Seagull to set sail for Solar Island without any delay. For the league had received a wireless message from the island to the effect that a disturbance had been caused owing to a quarrel between some of Sir Gordon's men, and that serious trouble would result unless the baronet himself appeared upon the scene.

Under the circumstances the Seagull had left London without loss of time, and it was owing to this premature departure that Nelson Lee and Nipper were on board, although, so far, their presence had not been discovered.

Sir Gordon was feeling a little more composed as he left the cabin and strolled out on deck. But his composure was soon to receive a rude shock.

He beckoned to Simpson, the second officer.

"I think you superintended the storing away of the cases of optical instruments and lenses which came aboard yesterday afternoon?" asked Sir Gordon.

"Yes, sir. There were seven cases altogether."

"Quite right. Where were they put?"

"In the aft hold, sir," replied the second officer. "I, myself, personally saw the hatches battered down, and everything made secure."

"There is a door leading into the hold from one of the lower decks," went on the baronet. "What about that door?"

"It was locked and bolted on the outside."

"You are sure of this?" asked Hyde sharply.

"Positive, sir!"

"Then perhaps you'll kindly explain to me why that door was found open last night by one of the crew? The man reported it to me this morning, and I naturally wish to receive an explanation. What have you to say, Simpson?"

The second officer was considerably startled.

"The report is false, sir!" he exclaimed quickly. "I know that the door was secure. In fact, I locked and bolted the door with my own hands. The bolts may have been shot back, but the lock could not possibly have been tampered with."

"I'm not saying that it has been tampered with," said Sir Gordon testily. "I simply suggest that you were careless in securing the door."

"I deny that, sir, absolutely!"

The baronet pursed his lips, and then turned on his heel.

"Follow me," he said curtly. "We will go down, and then you can show me exactly how you fastened the door. Maybe there is a defect somewhere. You have always proved yourself to be trustworthy, Simpson, and I don't like to think otherwise."

Sir Gordon was in no way perturbed. The knowledge that the door had been found open had rather startled him at first, but there was no cause for suspicion. The cases of "lenses, etc.," were safe enough, so it merely seemed as though the officer in charge of the job had been careless. Not for a second had Hyde dreamed of the police or a detective tracking the stolen jewellery and diamonds to his yacht. He had been absolutely immune from suspicion for so many years that he regarded all detectives—official and otherwise—with the utmost contempt.

The two men descended into the bowels of the ship, and the steel door was soon reached. Simpson, the second officer, pointed to it confidently.

"That's exactly how I left it last evening, sir!" he declared.

"Pull the bolts back, and see if the lock is secure."

This was done, but the door was as firm as ever. The big latch-lock held it tight.

"The man who reported to you must have been dreaming, sir," said Simpson. "Perhaps he found the bolts shot back—anybody could have done that—but the door was certainly not open. I'll stake my life on that!"

"H'm! I'll have to talk to the fellow again," said Hyde. "Well, open the door. We may as well look inside now we're here. You've got the key, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir. I'll unlock the door."

The second officer produced a key, and a moment later the door swung open and revealed a black gap. But this was soon altered, for Simpson placed his hand on a switch out in the passage and the hold was immediately flooded with light.

"Nothing wrong here," said Sir Gordon, striding in. "The cases are all intact——"

Then he staggered back with a hoarse gasp.

"Who—— What—— Good heavens, who in the name of thunder is this?" he roared furiously. "What are you doing here?"

There was ample cause for the baronet's amazement. For calmly sitting upon one of the iron-bound cases was a man, dressed in rather shabby seafaring clothes with a greasy peak cap. His chin was covered with a close-cut beard, and a pipe was sticking in the corner of his mouth.

"Guess I sailed in this boat by mistake!" he exclaimed calmly, puffing a cloud of smoke into the air. "I can't see who you are, boss, because my eyes are dazzled by the electric light. But I'm glad you've come—I'm hungry and thirsty."

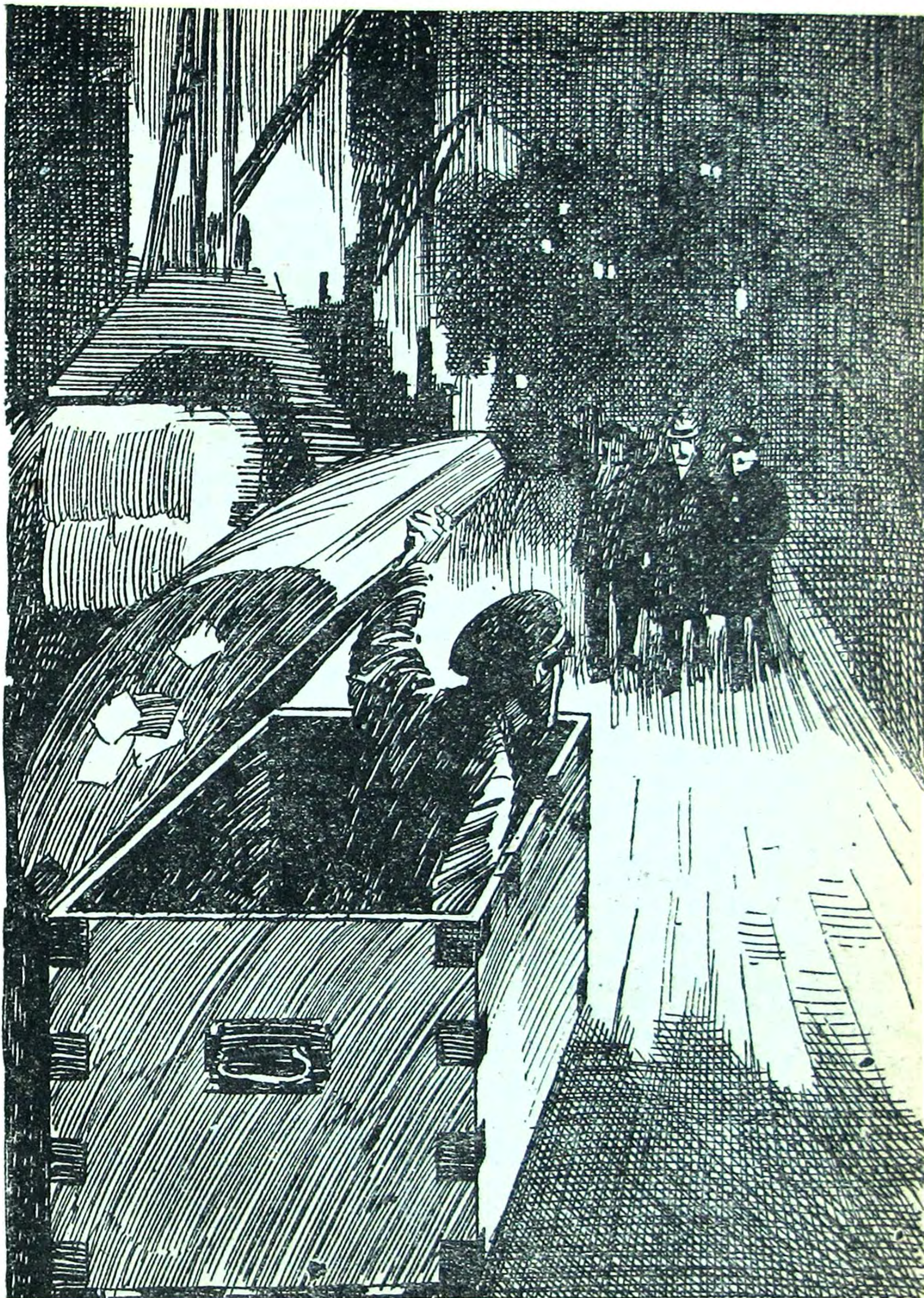
Sir Gordon's eyes fairly goggled.

"Who—who is this?" he roared.

"I've never set eyes on him before, sir!" gasped the bewildered Simpson.

"He's not a member of the crew."

"Not a member of the crew!" repeated Hyde sharply. "Good gracious.



"Now for it!" muttered Nipper breathlessly. "My hat, I hope I sha'n't suffocate in these tight quarters!"

Even as he stepped into the trunk he saw three men approaching the spot, and knew that he had acted only in the very nick of time. (See page 22.)

this is deadly serious, Simpson. This man's a stranger and he's here—here among the consignment of——”

“And, by heaven, one of the cases is open!” shouted the second officer excitedly.

Sir Gordon's teeth snapped together as he followed the direction of Simpson's pointed hand.

“Off with you, Simpson!” he grated harshly. “Fetch two men here and bring irons with you. This man's going to be thrust into handcuffs and have his legs chained together before ten minutes have passed!”

The second officer rushed off with his face a little pale. The baronet, meanwhile, whipped a revolver from his pocket and pointed it straight at the heart of the stranger. The latter merely smiled and nodded.

“There's really no necessity to flourish that thing, Sir Gordon,” he said quietly. “I've got one of my own, as a matter of fact, and I'll warrant I could use it quicker than you could use yours!”

“You—you infernal scoundrel!”

Nelson Lee laughed gently.

“Strange words from such a man as you!” he remarked, in soft tones. “But I assure you, Sir Gordon, I have no intention of attempting an attack. I guess I'm not a fool. I know when the odds are against me. If I killed you right now, I should be captured just the same in the end.”

The baronet caught his breath in sharply. As a matter of fact, he was intensely alarmed. What was this man? What did his presence mean? It was plain, too, that he had already examined the iron-bound cases. Therefore, he knew that they contained not telescope lenses and apparatus, but the proceeds of a big robbery.

While Hyde was still thinking quickly and feverishly, Simpson returned with two members of the crew.

“Handcuff the man!” ordered Sir Gordon curtly. “After you've done that bring him straight to my cabin. I mean to get the truth from him, or he'll suffer the consequences!”

Nelson Lee submitted quietly. He allowed himself to be manacled hand and foot. Of what use would it be resisting? He was in the very heart of a number of his deadliest enemies, and it would have been madness to make a fight for it. By far the better course was to quietly submit, and, indeed, to affect a manner which would throw his captors off their guard.

The detective knew only too well that if Hyde discovered his real identity his life wouldn't be worth a snap of the fingers.

In a very short while Nelson Lee found himself in Sir Gordon's cabin—handcuffed and helpless, alone with the Governing Member. He was in the lions' den with a vengeance. Not only was his companion an enemy, but every other man aboard the *Seagull* belonged to the league. They were picked men all. Not ordinary working members, but trusted and faithful servants of the Green Triangle.

“Now,” said Sir Gordon sharply, “who are you, and how did you get on board this yacht? You'd better make straightforward answers——”

“Don't hurry yourself, boss,” interjected Nelson Lee. “I came aboard last night, when the boat was deserted. Thought I might be able to get a job, but I couldn't see anybody. Well, I went down below, and while I was in that hold some fool came along and shut the door on me.”

Sir Gordon laughed harshly.

“A fine story!” he exclaimed. “I believe you are an accursed spy. How you managed to get aboard is a mystery, and somebody will have to pay for it! Who are you? By Jove, I believe you're disguised—I believe you're a police-detective!”

The baronet stepped forward and peered closely into his companion's face,

who was standing with the sunlight shining full upon him. That brilliant beam was too bright to conceal the signs of make-up, and Sir Gordon uttered a sharp exclamation.

The next moment Nelson Lee's false beard was off, and his bushy eyebrows followed suit.

"As I thought!" grated Hyde. "I've seen you before, now that your face is revealed. It's familiar, too — By heavens, you're Nelson Lee—Nelson Lee, the private detective!"

The famous crime investigator laughed softly.

"Your deductive powers are marvellous, Sir Gordon," he said mockingly.

The other clenched his fists, and then his eyes gleamed with fierce satisfaction. Nelson Lee had fallen into the hands of the league! It was almost too good to be true. But there was no mistake about it.

"I have heard a good deal concerning you, Mr. Nelson Lee," exclaimed Sir Gordon steadily. "I always regarded you with contempt; I always considered myself absolutely secure both from the police and from you. I offer you my apologies!" he added sneeringly. "I really had no notion that you were so clever!"

"You flatter me!" exclaimed Nelson Lee coolly.

"Enough of this!" snarled Sir Gordon, with a cruel curl of his lips. "This is no time for bandying words. I realise that you have been more of a danger than I ever suspected. You located the stolen diamonds and jewellery with wonderful rapidity—so quickly, in fact, that I am sure you know a great deal more than is good for my health. Well, you have finally cast the die now."

"You are going to drop me overboard—eh?" said the detective quietly.

The other laughed cruelly.

"It is well that you are prepared—that you have already guessed what your fate will be," he exclaimed. "It is useless my affecting pretence with you, so I will not attempt to. Perhaps you even know who this yacht belongs to?"

"You mean the league?" said Nelson Lee, with perfect equanimity. "My dear sir, I have known that you were a member of the Green Triangle for months past. Why should I attempt to make you think otherwise?"

"By the powers!"

"If the powers were just, the present situation would be reversed," said the detective grimly. "It is you who should be in handcuffs, not I! But Fate has been unkind, and as soon as I found myself trapped in that hold I knew that hope was dead for me. As you have observed, however, I am not the man to snivel. I accept the situation calmly."

Sir Gordon took a deep breath.

"I admire you!" he said bluntly. "If you were a member of the league you'd be one of the cleverest of the lot of us. But as you're fighting against the league you'll have to be obliterated. It's a hard word——"

"Murder is harder!" interjected the detective.

Sir Gordon started slightly. He certainly did not like the word which Nelson Lee had just uttered, and the latter's coolness somewhat unnerved him, and it had the effect of working him into a fury which was scarcely warranted.

"Curse you for the interfering hound you are!" he snarled. "But you have made a false move at last, and now you are in the league's power. Do not imagine for a moment that you'll ever escape. At the present moment you are surrounded by members of the Green Triangle—and at the place where this boat is bound for there are men who are all league members. You are on the way, in fact, to one of the league's greatest strongholds!"

"Well, to tell the truth, I suspected as much," said Nelson Lee, as coolly

as though he were talking to a client in his consulting-room. "I always had an idea that Solar Island was not entirely given over to the study of the stars. But I fully expect I shall never set eyes upon your interesting observatory, Sir Gordon. By the time you arrive there my destination will possibly be some rocky spot upon the bed of the Irish Sea!"

"By heavens, this bravado won't help you!" said Sir Gordon, maddened more than ever by Lee's even tones. "What a fool you are to imagine for a moment that you could fight such a complete organisation as the League of the Green Triangle. You have not the slightest conception of the league's vast and powerful arms. Solar Island is one of them, and before you die I will show you something that will bring to you a fuller understanding. Before you die you shall realise how absolutely futile it is to fight against the league!"

Five minutes later Nelson Lee found himself in a stuffy cabin, still handcuffed. He was provided with food and drink, but as for attempting to escape he knew such a thing was impossible. Not only was one man stationed in the cabin with him, but two more were outside the door—and the very porthole had been clamped over with its iron shutter.

Nelson Lee took it rather as a compliment that Sir Gordon was taking so many precautions. But it was a compliment that was not exactly pleasing. The detective had much to think about—much to ponder over with bitter thoughts and feelings.

He wondered what Nipper was doing—and certainly had not the slightest idea that his faithful young assistant was, in reality, very close at hand. If Nelson Lee had only known it, Fate was merely playing a trick upon him. It was leading him to believe that all hope was dead; whereas, in real truth, he was merely going forward apace to an ultimate triumph.

The voyage to Solar Island was now absolutely barren of incidents. Nelson Lee did not see Sir Gordon any more until the yacht had actually anchored off the island. The journey had not occupied a great deal of time, for the yacht was a fast one.

It was broad daylight, and as Nelson Lee was escorted down the gangway into the shore-boat he gazed over the strip of water to the island which lay before him.

It was only a tiny islet, rocky and bare. Gaunt cliffs arose from the sea, and treacherous rocks thrust themselves out of the water like black fangs. The island appeared to slope upwards from all shores, and upon the very summit stood a white-painted building of curious design. It was, in fact, Sir Gordon Hyde's famous observatory. Many well-known astronomers had visited Solar Island, and the observatory had been described in detail in more than one monthly magazine.

But nobody guessed that Solar Island held a grim secret. Outwardly, there was absolutely nothing to show that it contained more than the observatory; but Nelson Lee was convinced that even he would be surprised at what Sir Gordon would disclose. Although fully aware that escape was impossible, and that he would soon be done to death, he nevertheless felt intensely curious.

Once ashore he was taken straight to the observatory, and left in charge of Simpson and another man while Sir Gordon apparently went off to settle the disturbance, word of which had reached him in London. The baronet was gone for fully two hours, and when he returned he was looking exceedingly grim.

"Leave the prisoner to me now, Simpson," he said sharply. "You may call it a fad of mine, but it is my intention to open the eyes of this dunder-head before he finally has them closed. You have your orders, and you know what to do, and where to go at nightfall."

"Everything will be settled, sir," said the second officer of the *Seagull*. "Before another dawn breaks Mr. Nelson Lee will be in a place that nobody on earth will ever discover!"

The detective did not turn a hair; but his blood boiled within him that fellow human beings—fellow-countrymen, actually—could be so utterly callous. Their many years of crime had turned their hearts to stone, and had bereft them of every instinct of manhood.

Led by two men, Nelson Lee was forced to follow Sir Gordon. Exactly where he went he did not know, for very soon a pitch-dark passage was entered somewhere at the rear of the observatory. Doors opened and closed, and he passed down several flights of stone steps. But at last a light gleamed ahead, and then suddenly Nelson Lee found himself surveying an amazing scene of activity.

He was standing inside the doorway of a large room, the roof of which simply blazed down electric light in suffused rays. Beyond, an opening led into another apartment. Men were working at benches and at lathes, and they all turned their heads to see who the newcomers were. The whole scene was one of surprising activity, and reminded Nelson Lee of a great workshop he had once visited in Sheffield.

"By James!" he murmured softly. "I think I understand!"

Sir Gordon's lip curled.

"I will make you understand even still more!" he said grimly. "All this is the result of my planning—it is my scheme from beginning to end. I have sole control over this department of the league, and it is one of the most smoothly running departments of the whole organisation. You are wondering—eh? You are perplexed as to what these men are doing, and why these workshops exist?"

"On the contrary, I have already formed a shrewd guess," replied Nelson Lee; "and, in spite of my feelings of natural indignation, I cannot help being somewhat inclined to admiration. I freely admit that I never suspected the league was so completely provided with its own factories. I now understand why the booty from Messrs. Henson's has been conveyed here—I now understand why it is that jewellery which has been stolen by the league has never made its appearance again."

"It never makes its appearance again in its original form, certainly," agreed the scoundrelly baronet. "But every diamond, every ring which comes into the league's hands, is sold to the public in a new form."

Right through the workshops Nelson Lee was conducted, the gloating Sir Gordon by his side the whole time. And the full significance of the place was gradually made apparent to the detective. Here jewellery of all descriptions was remodelled. Gold was melted down, and new articles were made. Diamonds, rubies, and other precious stones were re-cut and re-set. By the time the stolen property was finished with it was absolutely unrecognisable.

It was then dispatched to a large jeweller's in the Strand—a firm Nelson Lee had often heard referred to as one of the straightest and most honourable firms in the trade. Yet it really belonged to the league, and a great bulk of its stock was nothing more or less than the remodelled jewellery which had been stolen from other houses.

The whole plan was so amazingly complete that even Nelson Lee was filled with astonishment. Not a breath of suspicion could possibly arise. It had been one of the greatest problems of Scotland Yard to discover where the property stolen by the league went to, and how it was disposed of. The detective understood now. Not only was this plan absolutely secure—for the jewellery never even left the league's hands—but it also left absolutely

no loophole for Scotland Yard. The police could never track the stuff because once stolen it disappeared for ever.

And all this remodelling, all this recutting of diamonds went on at Solar Island, the seemingly quiet observatory home of Sir Gordon Hyde! It was so extraordinary and bizarre that Nelson Lee could scarcely believe the evidence of his own eyes. The island was indeed a maze of wonder—a place of stupendous surprises.

Nelson Lee would have loved to bring the whole island to wreck and ruin, and thus deprive the league of one of its most paying enterprises; but he realised that it was not to be. He was here as a prisoner, condemned to death. With bitter thoughts he knew that he would cease to exist, and that Solar Island would flourish more profitably than ever.

Indeed, without any bombast, the famous detective was only too sure that his death would be the league's greatest triumph. Without his brain working against the Green Triangle, the latter would flourish and increase and become more of a menace than ever to fair Britain.

It was a terrible end to the great campaign.

But what could Nelson Lee do to alter his position? He was handcuffed, and he was guarded by captors. Moreover, the whole island contained nobody but members of the league. Even if he made a run for it, the attempt would be futile and foolish. It would, in fact, be an admission of despair and terror.

So the detective submitted quietly and with a brave heart. If he was to journey into the Great Beyond he would go without fear.

But the end was not to be quite yet. He guessed from what Sir Gordon had said to Simpson that he was to be taken out by the Seagull and dropped overside to certain death.

But such a thing could not happen in broad daylight. Such grim work must necessarily be done when darkness was upon land and sea. So the prisoner found himself in a little cave, quite a long way from the observatory, and overlooking the restless sea. Here he would wait until the boat came after dark to take him aboard the Seagull.

In the cave, chained hand and foot, and with a burly ruffian guarding him, Nelson Lee waited.

CHAPTER VI.

Nipper's Story—The Wireless Station—A Shock for Sir Gordon.

DARKNESS enshrouded Solar Island.

It was early evening, and the last glimmer of daylight had disappeared. But the sky was clouded, and there was no moon. The darkness was dense and utter. Just off the island the gleaming lights of the steam-yacht Seagull showed up brilliantly against the background of inky sea and sky.

In the little cave the prisoner was still waiting. His captor, a big man with arms like those of a blacksmith, sat on a rock and stolidly smoked his pipe. He seemed in no way upset by the fact that he was acting the part of gaoler to a condemned man.

Upon the floor of the cave a storm-lantern rested, and it cast a flickering, weak light about the rocks. Yet, in comparison to the outer darkness, the cave was quite brilliant.

Nelson Lee was seated also. But his hands were manacled, and a chain secured him to an iron ring in the rock-wall. Upon first being taken to the cave he had had momentary thoughts of making a desperate attempt to

escape; but the chain soon settled matters. And, in addition, the man on guard was simply a mountain of muscle and sinew. One glance at the fellow was enough to convince Nelson Lee of the futility of attempts at escape.

"Better get yourself prepared," said the man abruptly, knocking out his pipe with calm laziness. "Simpson and the boat will be along before long. Reckon the time's drawing unhealthily close."

"I am not dead yet!" exclaimed the detective quietly.

"Near as no matter," replied the other. "There's no escape for you—unless an earthquake happens and swallows the lot of us up. Even then you'll take the long journey just the same."

Nelson Lee was silent. He had no desire to converse with the ruffian. He stared out of the cave-entrance into the black darkness. His guardian was sitting with his back partly turned towards the entrance, so that he could see nothing of the exterior.

The sea hissed and thundered upon the beach close by, and the detective was somewhat fascinated by the sound. It seemed to him that the waves were muttering a song of triumph. Very soon the grim sea was to claim another victim.

But suddenly Nelson Lee started. He stared out into the darkness again, but beneath lowered eyelids. And he had the greatest possible difficulty in restraining a cry from leaving his lips—a cry of absolute amazement and incredulity. For a face had suddenly appeared before him!

It was the face of Nipper!

Nelson Lee closed his eyes for a second. He shook himself slightly, and told himself that his mind was becoming feverish. The knowledge of what was to come had worked upon his brain to such an extent that—

But now, again, the face became visible.

The detective watched fascinatedly. Quite distinctly, Nipper's well-known features peered in at the cave-entrance some little distance away. And as he met his master's eyes, he placed a finger to his lips and pointed to the man on guard.

Nelson Lee's heart beat quickly. It was not often that he allowed himself to feel any great emotion, but on this occasion he could hardly prevent a gasp of joy from finding an outlet from his throat.

Nipper was there. It was no hallucination—no phantom of his tortured brain. Nipper was outside the cave in the actual flesh. The thing was extraordinary and amazing, but it was a fact.

With wonderful composure the detective remained still and silent. He did not turn a hair, and waited with feelings he could scarcely define. Death had stared him fully in the face. Rescue seemed about as probable as the earthquake which his guardian had mentioned with such mockery.

And yet rescue was at hand. Nipper—plucky, faithful young Nipper—was on the scene. The thing was so astonishing that Nelson Lee did not even attempt to think of an explanation.

"It is the hand of Providence," the detective thought. "Heaven never meant to be so unjust as to let me be brutally murdered!"

But there was no time for further thought. Nipper was again visible, and this time it was evident that the lad meant grim business. He crept nearer and nearer, and in his hands he held a great chunk of smooth rock.

The youngster's eyes were fixed upon the burly fellow, who was smoking so complacently. He certainly had not the slightest notion that danger was lurking so close to him—in the shape of Master Nipper.

The lad stepped right into the cave, and the stone in his hand was uplifted. His foot caught against a loose stone and there was a slight sound. It was only a mere tinkle of one pebble against another, but it was sufficient to cause the man to twist round with sudden inquiry in his eyes.

And as his eyes fell upon Nipper he half started to his feet.

"By thunder——"

But even as the words formed themselves upon his lips, the great stone in Nipper's hands was suddenly flung forward with terrific force. The aim was accurate and deadly, and there was no time for the fellow to dodge.

Crash!

The lump of rock thudded against the startled man's skull, and the words which were just about to thunder from his throat dried up in a kind of choking sob. He crumbled up like a house of cards, and lay still and silent upon the cave floor.

Nipper darted into the cave and bent over the fallen ruffian.

"Right on the napper, guv'nor!" he breathed excitedly. "My hat, what a cosh! This chap won't open his eyes again in a hurry. He's stunned for hours!"

"Nipper, my boy!" said Nelson Lee huskily. "Thank Heaven you have come!"

The lad breathed hard.

"Talk about surprises!" he exclaimed. "I nearly went off my nut when I spotted you in this cave, sir! And you seem pretty surprised to see me, too!"

"I am lost in wonder, young 'un."

"Is there any immediate danger, sir?" asked Nipper quickly.

"Grave danger? I am expecting a boat to come to this cave at any moment," replied the detective quietly. "I am to be taken aboard the Seagull, and ultimately dropped to the bottom of the ocean, probably tied in a sack and weighted!"

"Oh, so that's the little game! Quite a pleasant programme!" said Nipper. "Well, guv'nor, that programme is going to be altered a bit. Let's have a look at these chains and things! By gum, you look like a prisoner of the Spanish Main, waiting for the pirates to come and make you walk the giddy plank!"

Nelson Lee could not help smiling, in spite of the extreme gravity of the situation. Nipper was in the very highest of spirits—and with good cause. He had found his master just when he had given up all hope of seeing him again.

The chain which secured the detective's legs offered no difficulties. It was looped round his ankles and fastened with a huge nut and bolt. It was in such a position that Nelson Lee himself would have had the greatest difficulty in unfastening it; and he certainly could not have done so with his captor looking on all the while. Nipper very soon had the nut unscrewed, and his master rose—free.

The handcuffs were the next things to deal with. But they were of the ordinary regulation pattern, and Nipper carried two or three handcuff-keys with him on his bunch. A click, and the "bracelets" were off. All this was only a mere matter of time; there was nothing singular in Nipper freeing his master so easily.

On that island, surrounded by league members, there had been no necessity to secure the prisoner more tightly than he had been. Indeed, under the circumstances, his handcuffs and leg-irons had seemed rather a superfluity. But "there is many a slip twixt the cup and the lip," and there had been a slip this time, with a vengeance!

"Good lad, Nipper!" breathed Nelson Lee, as he rubbed his wrists. "Now, there is no time to waste. We must make ourselves scarce!"

Accordingly, they slipped out of the cave and emerged on to the dark strip of beach. Out to sea the lights of the yacht were plainly visible. But

AMAZEMENT ISLAND!

the pair did not waste any time in gazing at them. They scrambled along the rocky beach until several caves loomed up dully, and into one of these they plunged.

It was a long one, and they proceeded right to the end, and came to a halt in utter darkness. Nelson Lee felt his young companion.

"I think we can spare a few minutes to compare notes, my lad," he said breathlessly. "You are soaking wet, Nipper!"

"Well, that's not surprising, considering that I've only just swum ashore from the yacht," said Nipper. "Ugh, I'm jolly cold, too!"

Nelson Lee took the lad's hand, and wrung it fervently.

"You've saved my life, youngster!" he said quietly. "I was in the last depths of despair when I saw your face, and it was the most welcome sight I ever saw in all my life!"

"Never thought my chivvy was so beautiful, sir!" said Nipper, with a chuckle. "Oh, but if you were surprised to see me, I was simply bowled over to see you!"

Nelson Lee, in as few words as possible, related his own adventures, and Nipper listened with rapt attention. When he had heard all, and had commented upon it—rather strongly—he told how he had boarded the yacht by means of the trunk.

"Good gracious—a risky proceeding!" said Nelson Lee. "You might have been suffocated, my boy!"

"Well, I wasn't, so it doesn't matter," replied Nipper. "I busted the trunk, and found myself in one of the yacht's holds. It was battened down, and I knew at once that I was booked for a lonely passage. I daren't make a noise for fear of attracting attention. I wasn't an ordinary stow-away, you see, sir. An ordinary stowaway would have been made to work, and all that. But if I'd been discovered, I should have been collared and treated the same as you."

"Undoubtedly."

"So I lay low and said nuffin'. I was terribly anxious about you, guv'nor, but I daren't do anything. I simply had to wait and see what happened. Well, I waited, and got terrifically hungry. I had my torch with me, though, and I soon got busy with it. At first I was unsuccessful; then, in one corner of the hold, I found a pile of wooden cases. They were all full of grub, sir!"

"A lucky find, indeed!"

"Rather! One case was biscuits, another tinned tongue, and I soon had a good old feed. During the time I was in the hold, in fact, I had several feeds."

"But what about water? How did you quench your thirst?"

"Well, I thought I was going to be diddled over a drink," replied Nipper. "But when I was fairly parched I unearthed a box of cocoanuts. I couldn't get any water, of course, but I opened half-a-dozen cocoanuts, and the milk went down spiffingly. On the whole, I was jolly lucky to get that!"

"Splendid good fortune!" said Nelson Lee. "You would, of course, have survived easily even if you had had no food or drink, for the voyage was not extremely long. But you certainly would not have been in your present fit condition, and to have swum ashore would have been impossible. But how did you escape?"

"Easily as winking, sir. After the Seagull had anchored I heard the hold being unbattened, and I crawled into the trunk again, wondering if I should be nabbed. Somebody descended, and a couple of bales were hauled up. That's all, guv'nor! The hatch was left unbattened, and when it was dark I

managed to crawl up and slip out without being seen. I could just spot the shore in the gloom, so I struck out for it."

"How long had you been ashore before you discovered my plight?"

"Only about two minutes, sir. You see, I saw the glimmer of that lantern, and wondered what it meant. So I crept near and investigated—I'm a fearfully curious chap, you know. Well, as soon as I spotted you there, chained and handcuffed, and guarded by a man, I nearly had ten fits. But I decided what to do within a minute, and did it. I'll bet that chap's put to sleep for hours!"

Nelson Lee patted his young companion on the back.

"I cannot find words to express my thankfulness, young 'un," he said quietly. "You have, at least, rendered our position much more favourable. But we are still in grave danger. The island will be searched thoroughly when my escape is made known, and we must find a safe hiding-place. But now, at once, I wish to try a little experiment."

"What's that, sir?"

"You'll see very soon; we have spent enough time in talking."

They left the cave and walked along the beach until they came to a dark spot in the cliffs where it was possible to climb up. Very soon they were at the top, walking cautiously and slowly, Nelson Lee with his hand upon the revolver which he had taken from Nipper. If necessary, the detective would not hesitate to use the weapon. After what had passed he was not likely to feel any compunction about defending his own life and Nipper's at the cost of wounding one of the scoundrels who lived upon the island.

But the revolver seemed to be unnecessary, for no sign of life was visible—except for a few lights in the observatory, and the lights of the yacht at anchor.

Away to the left, upon a rising knoll, a little building stood out darkly against the dim sky. Nelson Lee had seen it previously, in the daylight, and knew that it was a wireless station. He had recognised the unmistakable poles and wires at once.

And now that he had gained his freedom a daring idea had entered his head. He proceeded to put it to the test at once. He and Nipper arrived at the little building, and soon found it to be absolutely deserted.

"Why have we come here, sir?" whispered Nipper.

"This is a wireless station, my boy," replied the detective grimly. "Don't you scent possibilities? If I can only manage to send a message to Clifford——"

"To Clifford! My goodness!"

"If only I can send my message I am confident that it will be delivered; and once Clifford is put in possession of the facts he will very soon make things hum. Clifford is a very useful chap when he chooses to move himself. He acts promptly, and with remarkably keen judgment."

"But—but——"

"I admit I am hoping for great things, but one never knows," said Nelson Lee softly. "It is obvious that this building is only seldom used, and as it is well away from the observatory, we stand a good chance of getting the thing over in safety. Anyhow, I'm going to risk it."

And without more ado the detective proceeded to break into the little shed. It was a light task, and while he slipped inside Nipper kept guard.

Nelson Lee was well accustomed to wireless instruments, and a few flashes of his electric torch showed him that everything appeared to be in order. A short, rapid test, and he knew that the instruments were working perfectly. His eyes gleamed with triumph as he settled down to dispatch his momentous message.

He was turning the tables on his enemies! It was a palatable thought—a joyous realisation.

With a jaw that was grim and set, he sent his warning speeding through the air currents, and it was picked up and recorded at a Government wireless station off the coast of Ireland. It was a long message, and it took a considerable time to dispatch; but when Nelson Lee finally rejoined Nipper the famous detective was wearing an expression of quiet determination.

“Well, sir? You’ve been time enough,” said Nipper. “It’s O.K! Not a soul in sight. Have you sent the message?”

“I have, my boy,” replied the detective grimly. “I first of all got into communication with a Government wireless station, and then sent off a long message in the secret code which is known only to Clifford, you, and myself. I received the assurance that the communication would be delivered to Clifford without delay.”

“My hat! What a stroke of luck!” exclaimed Nipper, with sparkling eyes. “Well, sir, what next?”

“We must return to the caves and find a safe hiding-place. Probably the island is being searched even at this moment, and so we must move with the utmost caution. After having defeated our enemies thus far, we don’t want to run our necks into the noose again.”

And they commenced walking silently through the darkness. Even at that moment Sir Gordon Hyde received the greatest shock he had ever experienced. He was in one of the palatial rooms adjoining the observatory, enjoying a cigar, when Simpson burst in without ceremony.

“The prisoner, sir!” he gasped hoarsely. “We went to the cave to fetch him, according to orders, and—and——”

“Well?” shouted Sir Gordon, his face whitening. “Well?”

“Nelson Lee’s escaped, sir!” panted Simpson. “There’s absolutely no sign of him, and Barclay is stretched out, stunned and unconscious!”

Hyde uttered a furious oath.

“Fools! Imbeciles!” he raved. “Somebody shall pay for this infernal carelessness! Go at once! Call all the men together you can, and search the island from end to end. Lee must be on the island, for there is no escape. See that he is recaptured without any loss of time. Go—go!”

Simpson went, and Sir Gordon sank back into his chair, biting his lips and grinding his teeth; and, although he frantically told himself that Nelson Lee would be recaptured, a cold hand seemed to be clutching at his heart.



CHAPTER VII.

In London—Clifford Acts—At the Admiralty—The Destroyer.

DOUGLAS CLIFFORD glanced at his watch as he rose from a luxurious chair in his club in the West End of London.

“Time I was moving,” he told himself. “I mustn’t keep Vera waiting, or I’d never forgive myself. By Jove, what a splendid thing to be able to dine with her again! It seems ages ago since I was sitting opposite to her!”

Clifford was apparently a man of middle-age, with iron-grey hair and beard. But in reality Douglas Clifford was young. He was compelled to adopt the disguise, and the name of “John Merrick,” because the League of the Green Triangle would have marked him down within twenty-four hours if his real identity had been made known.

For Clifford was the man who had supplied Nelson Lee with a great deal of valuable information concerning the league; Clifford was the man who had entered into a compact with the great detective to fight the league to the death. Years before Clifford had fallen foul of Professor Zingrave, and the Green Triangle had imprisoned Clifford, and had afterwards attempted to kill him. That attempt had been accepted as fact, and if Clifford had remained himself he would have been attacked again instantly. So, much as he disliked it, the young man changed his appearance and his name.

He had proved his worth on several occasions, and Nelson Lee trusted to his judgment and shrewdness with the utmost confidence.

And fate had cast things in a very quaint mould for Clifford. He had fallen in love with Vera Zingrave, the stepdaughter of the league's infamous chief. His love affairs, in fact, were matters of great delicacy and difficulty.

But he knew that he had made no mistake. Vera Zingrave was a delightful girl—innocent and perfectly pure. She knew absolutely nothing of her stepfather's villainies, and Clifford had never told her. One day he would do so, but he hated the task, and the shock which would certainly follow would grieve Vera terribly. She was aware that her lover was disguised, and that he was, with Nelson Lee, fighting the League of the Green Triangle, but she had no suspicion that the chief of the league was her own stepfather. Clifford was resolved to tell her all one day, and to rescue her from Zingrave's evil guardianship.

To-night Clifford had arranged to dine with Vera, and he was accordingly in high good humour. But as he rose from the chair in the club a man entered the door, and Clifford saw that he was Foster, his own valet.

Clifford regarded the man questioningly.

"Well, Foster?"

"I knew you were here, sir, so I came along by taxi," replied Foster. "A message came for you a short while ago, and realising that it was urgent, I brought it along. It's a wireless communication, sir!"

"A wireless!" ejaculated Clifford. "By Jove, let's see it!"

He guessed instantly that it was from Nelson Lee. He didn't know exactly why he came to that conclusion, but he could think of nobody else. He knew that Nelson Lee was engaged upon the case of the Oxford Street robbery, but he had no idea where the detective was now; and, to tell the truth, Clifford had been rather anxious. If this was a message from Nelson Lee he would gladly welcome it.

He tore open the envelope, and then started. The communication, he saw at a glance, was written in code. He dismissed Foster with a word of commendation for having brought the wireless with such promptitude, and then sat down again.

When he had read the message through, his eyes were gleaming and his teeth snapped together firmly.

"What an adventure!" he murmured. "And I'm completely out of it! By the Lord Harry, Lee's dropped into something exciting this time, and no mistake. But why has he sought my aid? Why didn't he send his wireless to the police? That would have saved time and— Ah, of course, the code!"

He realised that Nelson Lee had communicated with him for one reason—and a very excellent reason, too. He was the only man who understood the secret code, and by using the code the detective had been enabled to state in plain language the state of affairs at Solar Island. If he had sent his wireless elsewhere he would have been bound to word it in ordinary English, and that might have been fatal. For the League of the Green Triangle had several wireless stations, and if one of them picked up the message they

would instantly communicate with Solar Island and give the warning. By adopting the code, however, all risk was obviated. Even if a league wireless station did pick up the message, it was nothing but a mere unintelligible jumble. It had been rather a puzzle to the Government station which had received it, in fact, but they had sent it on exactly as received, the name and address of Clifford being the only clear words.

But the question was—what was to be done? Obviously, brisk action was required.

"There hasn't been much time lost," murmured Clifford. "Lee could only have sent off the message from the island just over two hours ago. He asks me to go to the Admiralty and to lay this communication before the officials there without delay."

He glanced at the form again.

"Request Admiralty send boat Solar Island immediately," he de-coded. "Yacht must be detained, and whole island community detained, Hyde included."

Clifford jumped to his feet briskly.

"That one passage is enough for me," he murmured. "I'll rush round to the Admiralty straight away. If Vera is kept waiting she will forgive me when she learns why I have been kept."

Outside the club he hailed a taxi, and was soon bowling towards the Admiralty. In London—hundreds of miles from Solar Island—steps were being taken to rescue Nelson Lee and Nipper and to effect the capture of Sir Gordon Hyde. The wonders of the wireless were stupendous. And the irony of it! Sir Gordon had been trapped by his own wireless installation, and solely owing to his own action in allowing Nelson Lee to visit the island.

Clifford had some little difficulty in reaching the high official he requested to see, and he kicked his heels impatiently in an ante-room for fully ten minutes. This, in reality, was very prompt, but it seemed to Clifford that he had been waiting ages before he was ushered into the presence of the high official.

"Well, Mr. Merrick," exclaimed the Admiralty gentleman, glancing at Clifford's card. "Your request to interview me was accompanied by some extremely urgent words. I was about to leave the building, but——"

"I'm glad you didn't," interjected Clifford quickly. "Have you heard of Mr. Nelson Lee?"

The other laughed.

"Have I heard of the Nelson monument?" he asked, with a smile. "My dear sir, I have known Mr. Lee for years. He is, in fact, almost a friend of mine. He has, on several occasions, done excellent work for the Government, and I hold him in high esteem."

Clifford thrust the wireless message into the other's hands.

"Please read that!" he said crisply. "I have pencilled the actual words beneath the code words. I received it not half an hour ago."

The Admiralty official looked grave as he read.

"But this is preposterous!" he exclaimed. "This Solar Island belongs to Sir Gordon Hyde, the famous astronomer. What on earth can Mr. Lee mean? Sure he doesn't accuse Sir Gordon—— Why, good gracious, what's this?"

The official went on reading, and his face grew longer and straighter.

"Send a boat to the island!" he ejaculated. "Detain Sir Gordon's yacht! Make a prisoner of every man, Hyde included! Upon my soul, I—I am at a loss for words!"

Clifford bent forward.

"You will understand, now, why I requested an interview so earnestly," he said. "My dear sir, every second is of value. One minute wasted might possibly mean the forfeit of Mr. Lee's life!"

"But—but—— Oh, come, Mr. er—Merrick, you surely cannot be serious?" he asked blankly. "You don't actually ask me to believe this message?"

"Ask you to believe it!" repeated Clifford grimly. "Is it not urgent enough?"

"It is so utterly wild that I suspect a practical joke!"

Clifford jumped to his feet impatiently.

"Is it Mr. Lee's way to play practical jokes?" he asked. "My dear sir, I know—absolutely know for a positive fact—that the message is deadly in earnest. Joke, indeed! When Lee's life is in constant danger! Perhaps this will convince you—that code is known only to myself and to Mr. Lee. Nobody else could have dispatched it but Mr. Lee. You say that you are a friend of his. Well, have you ever known him to play a trick such as this?"

"Frankly, I have not."

"Then for Heaven's sake move yourself and make things hum!" exclaimed Clifford almost roughly. "I will give you a cheque this very moment if you wish it, to defray the cost of a boat being sent to Solar Island——"

"Tut-tut! Please be sensible!" interrupted the official, struck, nevertheless, by his companion's excited earnestness. "Please wait here, Mr. Merrick. I will not be gone more than five minutes."

He passed out of the room, and was gone, actually, nearly fifteen minutes. By the time he came back Clifford was wearing a black frown, and was ready to condemn the British Admiralty to the lowest depths of perdition. But the high official's first words were reassuring.

"A torpedo-boat destroyer is stationed at a spot within forty miles of Solar Island," he said quietly. "A telegram has just been sent to the commander, ordering him to make straight for the Island with all speed, and to detain the steam-yacht Seagull, and to send a landing-party ashore in order to take Sir Gordon Hyde and his companions into custody."

Clifford's frown vanished.

"Splendid!" he cried. "You could certainly have done no more."

"I only hope there is no blunder," added the Admiralty gentleman a little uneasily. "Sir Gordon Hyde is a well-known man——"

"He will be well known enough before many days have passed!" interrupted Clifford grimly. "You will never regret this prompt action, sir—never!"

And a few minutes later Douglas Clifford was hastening to the restaurant where he had arranged to meet Vera Zingrave. He had done everything that lay in his power, and he was feeling pleased.

Meanwhile, right up north, a dark, sleek little vessel was racing seawards from port into the blackness of the night. Upon the bridge two figures were conversing together. One was Lieut.-Commander Reeve, and the other a sub.

"Don't know what the game is," roared the commander, as the wind raced past his ears. "Seems to be something wrong at Solar Island, and we're goin' along to take charge. Anyhow, it's a bit of a change, and there might be some excitement. The more of it the better!"

Swiftly the wicked-looking destroyer cut through the waves, and lessened the distance between her razor-like bows and Solar Island every second, and with every heavy pulsation of the throbbing engines.

Nelson Lee's wireless had decidedly borne fruit!

CHAPTER VIII.

Sir Gordon's Fury—A Desperate Decision—The Great Exp'losion—Conclusion.

"**M**AD—mad! I must have been mad!" muttered Sir Gordon Hyde fiercely. "What demon of insanity led me to bring that accursed Lee to the island? If he had been dropped over into the sea, this dreadful trouble would not have arisen!"

The astronomer was pacing up and down a room inside his observatory with nervous, unsteady steps. His face was drawn and haggard, and he seemed to have aged ten years. And there was ample cause for his terrible havoc of mind.

Only five minutes since a man had come to report the result of the search—the search of the island for Nelson Lee. And the report had been one of complete failure. The island had been scoured from north to south, and from east to west. This was not such a difficult task, for the isle was only a tiny one, almost treeless.

Nelson Lee had vanished!

In some miraculous way he had overpowered his guard in the cave, and had torn his handcuffs off, and had freed his feet. After that he had disappeared, and not a trace was left.

"The man's not human!" snarled Hyde, clenching and unclenching his fists convulsively. "How did he escape? Manacled and guarded—yet he escaped! I'll stake my life that every man here is faithful, and true to the league. There are no traitors. Nelson Lee could not have been assisted in his escape."

Nipper's presence, of course, had never been discovered. When the forward hold of the Seagull was examined, a clue might be forthcoming. But by then it would be too late, so it was of no consequence.

More than anything else, Sir Gordon condemned himself for having allowed Nelson Lee to ever set foot upon the island. But the baronet had been so absolutely positive of the safety of such a course that a doubt never entered his head. Not only had he taken careful precautions; but, knowing what a slippery eel Nelson Lee was, he had doubled those precautions.

He caused the prisoner to be handcuffed and chained inside the cave, and had placed the strongest and most ruffianly man on the island on guard. It seemed almost certain that the detective had been assisted in his escape.

But how? And by whom?

Sir Gordon's head was whirling, and singing painfully.

But the fuller and greater shock was yet to come. Simpson, the second officer of the yacht, suddenly appeared at the door, and he held a piece of paper in his hand. Sir Gordon looked up at the newcomer sharply, eagerly.

"Well, Simpson," he demanded sharply, "have you recaptured the hound?"

"No, sir—no sign of him——"

"Then go away, curse you!" roared Sir Gordon wildly, his usually gentlemanly face now distorted with alarm and fury. "Go away and continue the search——"

"I came to bring you this, sir!" interjected Simpson. "It is a wireless message, and had just been received. Strikes me, sir, we'd better clear off as soon as possible! Lee must have been busy——"

Sir Gordon swore violently.

"The message!" he roared. "Give it to me, you fool!"

He simply tore it out of the other's hand, and opened the piece of folded

paper with shaking hands. The wireless was from a league member on the mainland, and its information was simply stunning in its significance.

"Destroyer just left this port for Solar Island under forced draught. Fear grave trouble. Vessel will be off island within two hours."

That was all. But it was enough to cause Hyde to clutch at the table, and to turn on Simpson like a madman, and to order him from the room. Alone, Sir Gordon paced the room. His mind was chaos, and he fought hard to control himself.

"A destroyer coming here!" he muttered hoarsely. "What does it mean? By Heaven, I think I know! Nelson Lee is responsible; he either made previous arrangements, or else managed to swim to a passing ship—several went by this evening on the horizon—and communicated with the destroyer."

Sir Gordon gnashed his teeth.

"The man's a fiend!" he went on aloud. "He seems to possess powers that are not given to ordinary men. He has utterly wrecked everything for Solar Island. Observatory, workshops, everything, will have to be sacrificed for the safety of the league. Hang the man! I am at my wits' end!"

He paced up and down, and gradually grew calmer.

One thing was certain. The destroyer would never have to discover the slightest piece of incriminating evidence upon Solar Island. There were many secrets on the island which would do the league the utmost harm if they were ever discovered.

And preparations had been made for any grave emergency.

The time had now come to act drastically. This island, although one of the league's most valued possessions, was a mere trifle compared with all the other league transactions and possessions lumped together. Solar Island would have to be sacrificed. It was either that, or the utter wrecking of the Green Triangle.

Sir Gordon did not hesitate a second.

"The island must be left to its fate!" he muttered bitterly. "By thunder, my glorious observatory—Bah, and that man is responsible!"

His face looked terrible as he thought of Nelson Lee afresh. And it was not to be wondered at, this display of emotions. For the disaster which was about to happen was the most terrible that could happen.

The island was to be left to its fate! In short, it was to be blown to a million atoms, sky high! When the destroyer arrived there would be absolutely nothing left but wreckage and ruin.

The whole island was mined! The turning of a little switch would set a clockwork mechanism in motion, and at the expiration of an hour contact would be automatically made between two electric wires.

The circuit thus completed, a dozen highly-explosive mines would burst all at one and the same second. They were of such power that not a vestige of anything recognisable would be left. For the scheme was so cunningly contrived that immediately after the explosions fires would break out, and everything would be consumed.

Observatory, workshops, and everything else would be destroyed. It was a terrible step to take, but one that was necessary, under the circumstances. There was only one reason why a destroyer should visit Solar Island.

And the sooner the Seagull fled the better. Even as it was Sir Gordon had grave fears that he would never escape. Ever since Nelson Lee had become connected with the affairs of the island the baronet seemed to have been living in a nightmare.

He ceased to wonder, now, how the detective had escaped.

Wondering would do no good whatever.

It was a time for prompt, brisk action. It was sufficient to ponder over the harm Nelson Lee had wrought. For Sir Gordon never had a doubt upon the subject. He was positive that Nelson Lee had somehow escaped from the island, and had communicated with the authorities. Solar Island was being visited by a destroyer—and it was coming, moreover, under forced draught.

Not only was the whole game up, but Sir Gordon knew that his career was ended. Never again would he be able to appear in his own guise. He was a criminal now; his villainies had been exposed. He was a fugitive from justice.

And one man had brought the change about! One man who had been, barely three hours before, a firm prisoner! The thing was astounding and staggering. Level-headed man though he usually was, Sir Gordon Hyde began to think that Nelson Lee was possessed of superhuman powers.

Strangely enough, the baronet never even thought of a second enemy upon the island. He knew that no strangers were there, and so took it for granted that Nelson Lee had been working on his own. Had he known of Nipper's daring escapade, he would have gained a clearer understanding of the case.

"We must get away—away!" muttered Sir Gordon. "It's terrible enough, but anything is better than waiting here until all chance of escape is lost. By all the powers, what a pitiful end to all my hopes and plans!"

The baronet was a broken man. The shock—coming so suddenly, so unexpectedly—had crumpled him up. But he did not give way to despair. There was a chance of getting away from the island, and that was not to be thrown away.

He passed out into a courtyard, and a few moments later a bell began sounding loudly and insistently. It was a bell with a deep note, and it boomed deafeningly. It was heard from every quarter of the island.

It was, in fact, the alarm bell.

When that was rung, every man had to leave whatever he was doing and rush with all speed to the big paved space facing the front of the observatory. There the whole island community would cluster, and await their orders.

Nelson Lee and Nipper heard the bell distinctly. They were in their hiding place. It was only by a narrow shave that they had escaped capture, and they deemed it wise to lie low for a while, like brer rabbit, in order to let things calm down.

It had soon become apparent to them that the island was being searched. And they had found a retreat at the back of one of the largest caves. The cave was apparently a simple one, with no corners or crannies. One glance round showed that it was quite empty. But, ten feet up the face of it, near the rough roof, a kind of ledge sloped downwards into a hollow. And here the pair had crouched, completely unseen. The ledge was practically invisible from below.

A search party had entered the cave, and had departed again. And now, half an hour later, the great bell began to boom steadily.

"What can it be, gov'nor?" asked Nipper softly.

"I am at a loss for an explanation," replied Nelson Lee. "Unless it is a kind of call-bell. Probably that is the explanation. There are search parties all over the island, trying to find my excellent person, and Sir Gordon has suddenly decided to call them all in. If so, there must be a reason."

"I wonder if it's Clifford's doing, sir?"

"Well, we can wonder a lot if we once start," smiled the detective. "It doesn't do to wonder, my lad. Come, we will venture out and see if we can

discover anything. I do not think there is much risk now. That bell is decidedly curious."

They descended to the floor of the cave, and then crept quietly to the entrance. After the pitchy darkness of the interior, the night seemed almost light. They could, at least, see with a certain measure of distinctness.

The observatory was towards their left, and the Seagull rode quietly at her anchor almost dead ahead.

The tolling of the bell was louder than ever now.

And Nelson Lee, gazing round him keenly, saw several figures hurrying towards the observatory from all directions. Two or three of them were running, and the sound of distant shouting was plainly audible.

"What's up, sir?" asked Nipper huskily—for he had developed a cold.

"I think my original explanation is the only one that fits the appearances of the case," replied the detective. "The men are being called in. And, by the look of it, there is tremendous urgency. Well, we can do nothing but wait and watch. We have already done all that lies within our power. Now we have to cool our heels while others carry on the work."

"Clifford and the Admiralty, you mean, sir?"

"Exactly. Let us hope the Admiralty acts promptly."

Nelson Lee was feeling quite elated, in spite of the disagreeable position he and his young assistant were in. It was, at least, a splendid position compared with the one from which Nipper had rescued him. And the safe dispatching of that wireless to Douglas Clifford had been a master-stroke.

Sooner or later rescue would come. Sooner or later Sir Gordon Hyde would find himself in a trap.

But it became apparent, very shortly, that the baronet was making hasty preparations for departure. And not only himself, but all the rest of the island inhabitants. From where Nelson Lee and Nipper were standing they could see men hurrying down from the observatory towards the landing-stage.

Two boat-loads were taken to the yacht, and then another boat prepared to push off. The detective and Nipper had approached nearer now, wondering what was afloat, and Nelson Lee pressed his companion's arm.

"Apparently a general exodus, Nipper!" he murmured. "I can't see a single man on the island. It looks as though Sir Gordon has received warning from some source—warning that danger is approaching. Are we going to be left in sole possession of the island?"

"Half-a-tick, sir!" whispered Nipper. "What's that they're shouting?"

They listened intently, and a hoarse voice floated over the intervening space.

"Don't stop for it, you fool!" bellowed the voice. "Do you think we're going to stay here while you pick up the contents of your blamed bag?"

"Coming, sir!" called another voice.

"If you're not here in ten seconds we'll push off!" roared the first voice. "Then you'll be blown sky-high in a thousand shreds with the rest of the island!"

Nelson Lee suddenly grew rigid.

Nipper, too, caught his lips together, and bit the lower one rather hard. Both of them watched a man scramble into the last boat, and they watched the boat pulling quickly to the waiting yacht.

"Did—did you hear, sir?" breathed Nipper.

"You know I heard, young 'un!" said Nelson Lee quietly. "So that is the explanation? Our position, apparently, is not so rosy as we fondly imagined. Sir Gordon and his men are fleeing from the island."

"They're—they're going to bust it up, sir!"

"Apparently, my lad. Not altogether a pleasing prospect, eh?" pro-

ceeded the detective. "I comprehend now. The league have prepared for emergency, and a specially timed apparatus, probably, will blow the observatory and the secret workshops to smithereens in about half an hour or an hour. All evidence of the villainous work which had been going on will be destroyed."

"But what a sacrifice, sir!" gasped Nipper.

"An organisation like the Green Triangle is always prepared to make huge sacrifices if it is essential," replied Nelson Lee. "But I wonder how we shall be affected? I suggest, anyhow, that we adjourn to the safest point on the island—that furthest from the observatory. We can do nothing but wait."

"You're not going to investigate those workshops, sir?"

"My dear Nipper, am I the man to deliberately commit suicide?" protested Nelson Lee. "Had I not heard that man's remark I might have been tempted to make some inquiries. But the knowledge that the place will be blown sky-high at any moment is a very good deterrent."

The pair walked hastily along the beach. Truth to tell, they felt that the next half-hour would decide their fates. If the explosions were powerful enough, it was quite on the cards that they would fall victims.

The yacht was under steam now, making for the open sea. The minutes passed, and the Seagull's lights grew smaller and smaller until she finally disappeared over the horizon. But a surprise awaited the marooned pair. No sooner had the Seagull disappeared towards the south than other lights came into view from the north. And this vessel, whatever it was, was approaching at a terrific speed.

"It's a destroyer, gov'nor!" yelled Nipper suddenly, in a cracked voice. "My hat, Clifford must have been quick about his work! See, she's coming straight for the island!"

Nelson Lee nodded calmly.

"Appearances certainly point that way," he replied. "But we mustn't be too sure!"

Nipper was right, however. Ten minutes later the low, rakish destroyer had heaved to close to the island, and a boat was coming ashore quickly. When it at last grounded Nelson Lee and Nipper rushed up.

"What's the trouble here——" began a youthful voice.

"The steam yacht has only just disappeared below the horizon!" said Nelson Lee quickly. "The whole crowd have escaped, and this island is on the point of being blown to a thousand shreds!"

"By Peter! That's pleasant!" said the young officer, with a whistle. "Jump in, you two. We'll skip back to safety in double-quick time!"

The men pulled with a will, and during the short journey to the destroyer Nelson Lee rapidly explained the situation to the officer. The youngster was startled and amazed, but he concealed his amazement. He took it all as a matter of course, with the usual coolness and complacency of the Navy.

Once aboard the destroyer, the smoky, rolling vessel shoved her nose southwards and rushed after the Seagull. Nelson Lee, Nipper, and practically the whole crew on deck—who had received word of the impending disaster—stood on the deck and watched the little island in the gloom.

For five minutes nothing happened, and Solar Island grew smaller and smaller.

Then a flash appeared. And it was instantly followed by a vivid blaze of light—a blaze that seemed to light the whole sky. Across the sea a thunderous booming explosion came, and for the space of five seconds the spectacle was an amazing one. The whole sea and sky was illuminated, and it seemed as though the very island itself had been hurled into the heavens.

It was certain that if Nelson Lee and Nipper had been ashore at the moment of the explosion they would have been instantly killed. The shock alone would have caused their deaths.

Solar Island was no more. The daylight would reveal nothing but a charred, smoking mass of unrecognisable wreckage and broken rock.

Sir Gordon Hyde escaped.

At least, he escaped Nelson Lee's hand. When the destroyer came up with the fleeing yacht, the latter was stopped, and a party of bluejackets went aboard, accompanied by an officer and Nelson Lee.

But Sir Gordon was nowhere to be found. The diamonds, too, which Nelson Lee had thought to be on the vessel, were not to be found. If they had been salvaged from the island, they must have been hidden with wonderful care.

Hyde had leapt overboard. The captain of the boat described how the baronet had seen the destroyer approaching, and how he had ended everything in a plunge to certain death.

Nelson Lee had triumphed again. But this time he had an uneasy feeling that the league were still in possession of the stolen property. If so, then the detective told himself that he would take his revenge before a very distant date.

The League of the Green Triangle had not seen the last of the great detective, by any means.

He was to have innumerable battles of wits with the great organisation before it was finally wrecked and ruined.

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. The man refuses, but asks Hugh if he can wrestle, to which the young explorer replies that he is willing to match himself against anyone. (Now read on.)

The Great Wrestling Match.

HERTSEG went up to Osth and whispered to him; whereupon the chief burst into a guffaw of sinister laughter, and nodded his head.

"Listen, stranger," said Hertseg. "We have, near at hand, one who is reputed to be the strongest wrestler in our country. He is not here at the moment, but I can send for him. Art thou willing to try a wrestling bout with him without arms of any kind?"

"Quite ready and willing," said Hugh quietly.

"Then I have our chief's permission to send for him. He will be here shortly. And, meantime, thou hast a breathing space. Make the most of it, for I warn thee thou wilt want all thy breath."

Wondering a little as to who this redoubtable wrestler could be, Hugh turned to Ruxton, and they chatted apart for a while.

Then was heard the rumble of heavy wheels, and a great cage, drawn by over a dozen "thralls," was seen approaching.

From it came screams and shrieks and roars of frantic rage and demoniacal fury, and the two chums turned and stared at it in no little surprise.

"Why," exclaimed Val, "it's one of our yellow-haired friends—a missing-link! Now, what on earth does this mean?"

"It's a rum go," murmured Hugh. "I suppose it must be one they have caught and caged as we at home might cage a baboon."

"But this is not fair—it is nothing but a low down trick," exclaimed Val. "That trickster Hertseg asked if you would wrestle with one not then present. Of course we thought he meant a man. Now it turns out that he meant this beast. It's not fair! If I were you I should protest."

"Oh! What's the good? You know it would be of no use. Besides, I vanquished 'Caliban,' so I suppose I can manage this one."

"But they must have got here the biggest one of the lot—it appears to me to be a larger and more formidable specimen than any we've seen. I'm afraid they've set you a terrible task."

Hugh stared at the creature thoughtfully. "Well, now, Val," he said slowly, "now, it seems to me, is the time to put your theory to the test. You thought it was my voice that subdued the one you called Caliban. I wonder if it will have any effect here?"

"By Jove! That's a good thought!" exclaimed Val. "See here! If I were you I should try the effect in some way without letting these johnnies into the secret. If you find that 'the oracle works,' keep it dark, if you can; and let them ascribe it all to your mighty strength. See?"

Hugh agreed with this suggestion; and it was also deemed politic to seem to demur to the task thus placed upon him.

"My lord," he said, addressing Osth, "it seemeth to me that I have been unfairly tricked here. When I was asked if I were willing to wrestle with one who was not then present I naturally supposed that one of your subjects was intended—"

"This is one of my subjects; he liveth in the land. Oh, oh, oh!" cried Osth, with another guffaw. "How now? By Thor's hammer it seemeth to me that thou dost wish to shuffle out of this trial of thy boasted strength."

"It scarcely seemeth to me fair——"

"He is afraid. I though we should find something he was afraid of," cried Hertseg insultingly.

Hugh turned on him scornfully.

"I am not afraid of thee, jarl, at all events," he cried, drawing himself up. "But it seemeth that thou art afraid of me, and that is why thou desirest that I should enter yonder cage. If I am torn to pieces by that monster thou wilt be rid of me. Thou wilt not then have to fight with me."

"Now out on thee for an insolent churl——" Hertseg began; but Hugh interrupted him.

"Never mind about that, but answer this question: If I enter yonder cage and fight with the monster within, wilt thou afterwards fight me in fair and open combat?"

"Yea—if thou comest out alive—or art then able to fight," jeered Hertseg.

"What sayest thou, my lord?" queried Hugh, turning to Osth. "Wilt thou keep him to that?"

"By Odin's hammer, yes—if thou art in any condition to care about another fight," Osth declared, with another brutal laugh.

"It is clear that they expect you will be killed," Val whispered. "If things go wrong I shall put a bullet through the monster, and one each through the monsters over there—Osth and Hertseg."

Hugh pressed his friend's hand, and walked steadily to the door of the cage. The creature within—which, by the way, they afterwards found was called a "Borghen"—was all this time clinging to the bars and shaking them with rage. With its glaring eyes, its long claws, its bristling, yellow hair, and its awful, blood-curdling cries, it seemed more like a demon from the lower regions than any creature of ordinary flesh and blood. And as Hugh drew near, and saw it more plainly he perceived that it was, as Vai had said, bigger than any of those by which they had been attacked.

"I'm afraid it's a fight to the death here," Hugh muttered to himself. "This one doesn't look the sort of creature to give in as the other one did. I must be cautious. Much will depend here, I'm thinking, upon how I receive the brute at the first rush."

The cage door was opened for him by one man, while others drew off the attention of the raging occupant at the other end. As the door was slammed to behind Hugh, the creature heard it and turned, paused one moment in surprise, and then flew at the intruder like a veritable fiend.



The Struggle in the Cage—A Mysterious Warning—A Double Duel— The Alarm.

HUGH had been allowed no weapon with which to meet the "borghen." His sword and dagger had both been taken from him, on the pretended plea that it was a wrestling match in which he was about to engage.

It was as clear to his mind as anything could well be that Hertseg had proposed this as a means of getting rid of him. The "jarl" thought he was sending the stranger to certain death; and had laughed in his beard at Hugh's challenge to fight him afterwards.

"I'll make him fight me, though," Hugh said to himself. "Let me get out of this, and I will teach him what a proper fight is really like—or a proper wrestling match, either, if he prefers it."

But now he had this business to settle first; and he realised that he had his work cut out if he was to come out of it alive.

The creature literally leaped upon him, throwing itself at him like a wild-cat. Hugh, however, profiting by his former encounters with these monsters, gripped it at once in such a manner as to prevent it from making use of its terrible claws.

But the strength of this particular specimen far exceeded anything he had previously had to do with. And though he succeeded in holding it for a space at arm's length, so to speak, in such a position that it could do no immediate mischief, he felt he could not long maintain that position, unless the foe itself should tire—and of that there was no sign.

For a few moments Hugh forgot about the plan he and Ruxton had suggested. The baleful eyes that glared into his, the hot, steaming, sickening breath, the gnashing fangs that hungered to bury themselves in his throat, put all such thought out of his head. And when they recurred to him the idea appeared but a hopeless fancy. It seemed mere folly to suppose that the sound of his voice could have any effect upon such an awful enemy as he had here to deal with.

But try it he must—he could not hold it at bay much longer.

"Come, come!" he cried to make his tones as much like his ordinary speech as possible, "come, this won't do! Down, sir, down!"—this as though he had been speaking to an unruly dog—"Down, I say! Lie down, you brute!"

And lo! At once he felt the creature's muscles relax! The fiendish glare

in its eyes died away and turned to the same curious expression he had seen in those of its fellows. Hugh noted the change, and continued to talk to it; and gradually matters followed much the same course as they had taken in the case of the other he had fought with. This furious, raging monster, that had been ready to tear him to pieces, was conquered; had become as docile as a lap-dog!

There was a great outburst of astonishment from the spectators. They had watched the encounter with breathless interest, deeming Hugh, indeed, to be a doomed man, and the strange result so amazed them that they now made the place ring with their shouts. And amongst them were again many cries of "Skool," their term of admiration and approval.

As to Hugh, he was, in his own mind, as much astonished as any one. He could scarcely believe the evidence of his own senses. And while he was standing gazing round, now at the crowd, now at the creature crouching so submissively before him, he heard a low voice behind him:

"Thou hast performed a wonder; but be warned!" said the voice. "Do not look round to see who speaks, but give heed to his words. Trust not Osth the Hard; believe him not when he speaks thee fair, nor Hertseg, nor Berdrok. Thou art young and brave and strong; but that will avail thee little. Be on thy guard, and look not for either mercy or justice or fair dealing in the land of the Thorbegen."

These words, spoken in low, clear tones, reached his ears in the midst of the confused shouts of the crowd. He listened to them like one in a dream; yet, when he turned, he saw no one there with whom he might connect them. Many persons had crowded up to the bars of the cage and were staring in curiously and wonderingly, chattering the while; but not one of them looked at him in any specially friendly manner.

Ruxton was there and the rest of his party. The eyes of the chums met, and Val laughed:

"So the charm worked?" he said.

"So it seems—but it's a greater puzzle to me than ever! I can scarcely believe it."

That was all that was said between them then. Hugh opened the door of the cage and stepped out, leaving his late foe—which would evidently have liked to follow him—behind.

He strode off, with his friends beside him, and once more they stood before Osth. But Hugh's manner had changed. No longer was he the good-natured, easy-going stranger they had seen before. His brow was lowered, his voice stern and hard, and his eyes flashed.

"My lord," he said to Osth. "I have done thy bidding; now I claim the fulfilment of thy promise! I call upon the jarl, Hertseg, to meet me as was arranged. I challenge him to fight with me!"

"And I," exclaimed Ruxton, taking his cue from Hugh, "I challenge the holda, Berdrok."

"'Tis well!" cried a number of voices. "A challenge! A challenge! Skool to the strangers! They have done well, and shown themselves to be strong men and brave fighters. Let their challenges be accepted."

There were signs that the two thus called upon would have backed out if they could; and Osth was inclined to find some excuse for forbidding the acceptance of the defiance, Kern, too, put in his plea. He was entitled, he urged, to be first.

But, on the other side, there were ominous signs that the rest of the "jarls" and "holdas" were looking forward to the spectacle of a good stand-up fight, and did not intend to be balked of it. So, in the end, Osth gave way, Kern's claim was postponed, and the two nobles—the one a jarl and the other a holda—had to agree, whether they wished it or not.

While some preliminaries were being arranged, Ruxton slipped his revolver in Cable's hand, who, in turn, concealed it in his tunic.

"Do nothing rash," he whispered, "but be on the look-out for treachery! I distrust the good faith of these two, and shall not be surprised if they try on some foul trick against Mr. Arnold or myself. If so, make use of the pistol—but be sure you only use it in the case I have said."

"Ay, ay, sir, I unnerstan's. Ye can trust t' me," was Bob's answer.

The two Vikings, after a conference apart, claimed the universal law in the case of those who are challenged—the choice of weapons. And this being conceded, they declared for battle-axes and swords, and no daggers. Hugh and Ruxton had no other course open to them than to consent; though they had expected that the double duel would have been fought with swords alone.

Battle-axes were therefore served out, each combatant gave up his dagger, and retained his sword.

The four paraded, two and two, before Osth and the rest of the spectators; loud blasts sounded upon some horns; and the fight began.

And then the attention of the whole assembly was concentrated upon the combatants. A great hush fell upon the scene, broken, at the beginning, only by the ring of metal and the clash of steel. But soon these sounds became intermingled with exclamations, at first low and half-smothered, then gradually becoming louder as the excitement increased.

For a while the double duel raged without obvious advantage to either side. Neither Hugh nor his chum had been used to this kind of fighting; and they saw that it was wiser to stand on the defensive with a view to wearing their men down. But as they gained confidence, and saw opportunities here and there, they took advantage of them; and so, by degrees, the conflict waxed warmer and more exciting.

Each combatant, in turn, had narrow escapes; each had marks upon his armour; and there were slight wounds. As for the shields which had to bear the brunt of the fighting—for they received most of the blows—they were soon well-nigh hacked to pieces.

Suddenly a great shout went up. Hugh, seeing his chance, had dealt a terrible blow and caught the handle of his adversary's axe. The head flew off, and Hertseg, with a snarl like an enraged tiger, sprang back, threw the piece away and drew his sword.

At once Hugh sprang back, threw away his own axe, and drew his sword likewise.

A great clamour went up on all sides; and there were many cries of "Skoal! Skoal to the stranger!"

So now they fought with swords; and here Hugh felt himself on safer ground. Hertseg was a better swordsman than Kern, and a more formidable antagonist in every way; but Hugh proved to be as good a match for him with the sword as he had been with the battle-axe.

Meanwhile Ruxton had held his own with "Berdrok the Fierce," and, stimulated by Hugh's example, was watching for a similar chance. It was not long in offering itself; he dealt a tremendous stroke at Berdrok's head which the Viking caught, indeed, upon his shield, but with the result that it was shivered to pieces.

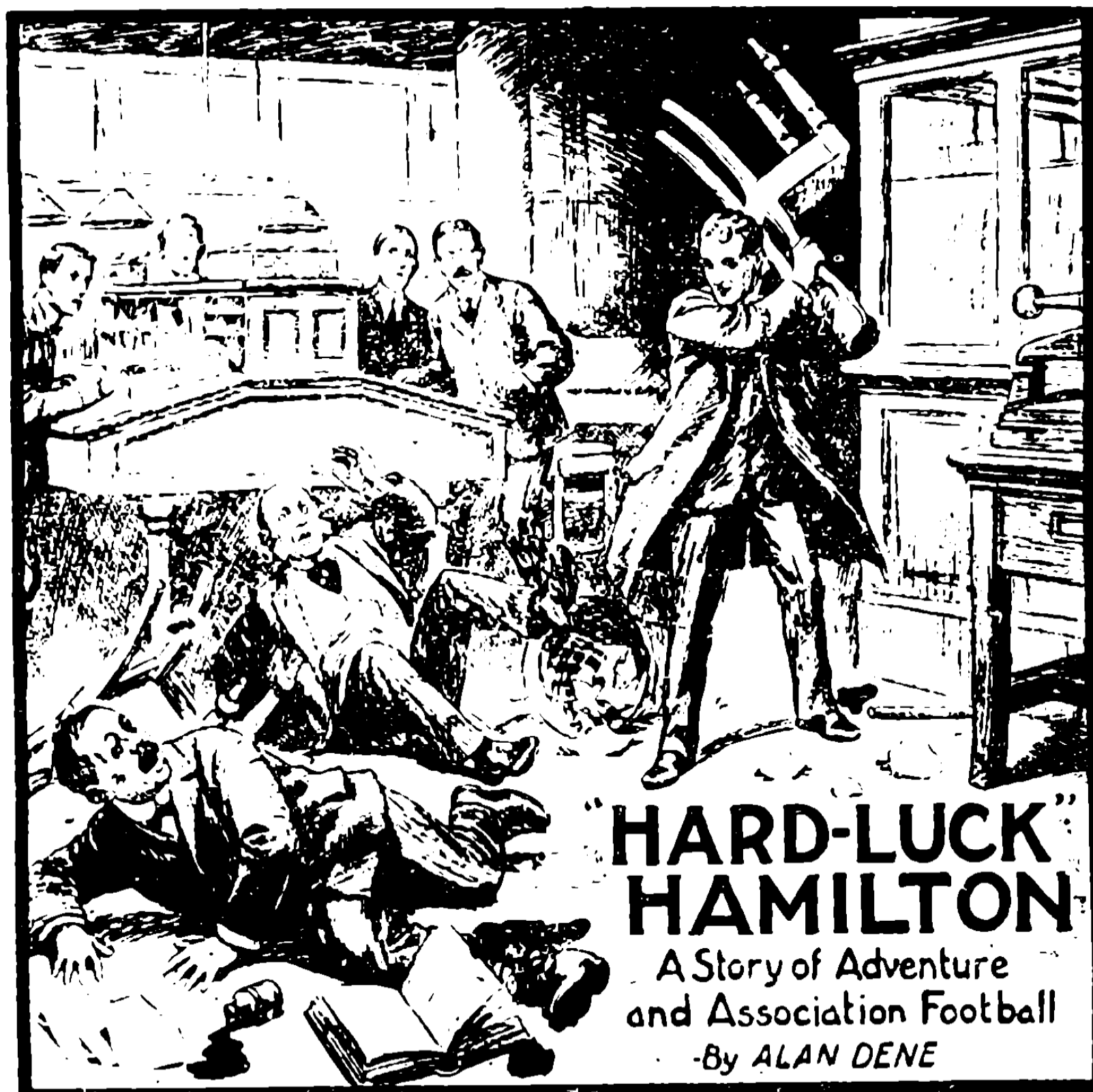
Without his shield the Viking was at a disadvantage. Therefore said Val to him:

"Throw away thine axe, and I will throw away both axe and shield. Then we shall be equal again, and can fight with our swords."

(To be concluded shortly)

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