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*Week ending
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PROLOGUE.

Stephen Yorke, Inventor—The Earthquake!—The Vanished Plans.

"COMPLETE—complete at last!"

Mr. Stephen Yorke murmured the words to himself in a kind of ecstasy, and rubbed his hands smoothly together with great satisfaction. Before him, on a bench, were several finely-executed plans and designs.

Mr. Yorke was an elderly man, slightly bent, and with grizzled hair and beard. He was attired rather carelessly, and a long, brown overall-coat was loosely thrown over his ordinary clothing. He looked exactly what he was—a practical engineer.

But Mr. Yorke had retired several years since, and had been working strenuously on a new invention. To be brief, he had designed a printing machine. This, barely put, does not sound much. But the old engineer's invention was one of the most remarkable and revolutionary that had ever been designed. It was not a small affair, but a huge intricate apparatus, which was destined to cause great changes in printing of every description. This new machine not only required less labour, but it did its work in half the time of existing machines, and did it with infinitely better results. It was expressly intended for great factories, for colour-printing work of the most delicate and expensive variety.

It was the result of years of labour, of tremendous brain-work and careful thought. And at last the plans of the invention were complete to the final detail. Mr. Yorke felt proud as he gazed at the designs upon the bench. Those designs were worth a fortune. He knew very well that it would now only be a matter of time before "his ship came home," and before he could count himself a very rich man.

For at present Mr. Yorke was poor. But, as he had often told his wife, they were only waiting—waiting for the day of success which would surely come. Their only son, Harold, was in London, and he had always been rather sceptical regarding the success of his father's invention. But now

he would be sceptical no longer, for the wonderful machine was a triumph—an amazing triumph in every way.

Mr. and Mrs. Yorke lived in an extremely lonely neighbourhood. The house, although not exactly small, was of a very low rental, owing to its isolated position. And, for the inventor's peculiar work, this isolation was really a boon rather than a drawback. It was quietness he wanted, and he certainly had quietness here.

For the building was situated not far from the cliff-edge, on an extremely lonely point on the coast of South Wales. There was no other house in either direction for over a mile, and it was some considerable distance to Langland Bay, with its splendid hotel nestling among the trees.

From Langland Bay it was only a short distance to Mumbles, with its well-known lighthouse, and to Oystermouth. From Oystermouth the quaint railway conveyed one to the great seaport of Swansea, about five miles distant.

It was not often that Mr. and Mrs. Yorke journeyed to Swansea, but they did so occasionally. It necessitated a long walk to Oystermouth, for they had no trap or motor-car. As the engineer had often declared, they were only living their present lonely existence for the sake of the glorious future.

On this particular morning the great work was completed—finished to the last stroke of the pen. Nothing remained now but for negotiations to be made with several large engineering firms. Harold Yorke would arrive from London on the following day, and he would transact all the business connected with the invention. So far, Harold knew nothing except the bare facts; he knew no details of the invention. But these his father would explain upon his arrival.

Mr. Yorke's workshop, in which he was now standing, was a rather curious apartment. It was, in reality, a kind of basement at the rear of the house. The light was admitted by means of two large skylights at one side of the room. These skylights were actually on a level with the ground, for the workshop was sunken like a cellar. Mr. Yorke himself had fitted up the place, and it certainly made a magnificent workshop—quiet, secluded, and perfectly private.

As Mr. Yorke looked at the plans he heard a footfall on the stone steps outside, and the next moment the door opened and his wife appeared. Mrs. Yorke was a small woman, delicate-looking, but with a brave, kindly expression in her eyes.

She had waited many years now for the prosperity her husband had always been foretelling. And she had waited without a murmur; she had put up with hardship and worry with never a complaint. She had implicit faith in her husband, although she never even tried to understand his work.

"You have just come at the right moment, Nellie, my dear!" exclaimed the inventor smilingly. "It is finished! The designs are complete to the last stroke. Thank Heaven, fortune will smile upon us from this day!"

"I hope so, Stephen," said Mrs. Yorke gently.

"Hope so—hope so!" cried the other. "There is no hope about it, old girl! This is not a doubtful success; it is a certainty! Why, four different firms have already offered me huge sums for my machine. But I do not intend to do business in a hurry. Harold will see that a fair arrangement is completed. In a very few months from now we shall be rich—we shall be wealthier than I ever dreamed of. My machine has developed wondrously, and it is a veritable triumph!"

Mrs. Yorke gazed at the intricate plans, and then shook her head.

"Dear, dear, they're a maze to me!" she exclaimed. "I don't under-

stand anything, Stephen. And Harold doesn't, either! Harold has an idea that your machine won't be much good—at least, he used to have that idea."

The engineer chuckled.

"He used to!" he replied. "Harold has got more sense now, my dear. He knows that his old father isn't such a duffer after all! The letters I have had from great engineering firms prove that they realise that a great revolution in printing is to come about. Why, even the papers have published paragraphs about me!"

"Look at this wall, Stephen—just look at it!" said Mrs. Yorke abruptly. "It is positively dangerous! If you don't get it repaired you will have the whole cellar tumbling about your ears!"

"Nonsense! The wall is safe enough!"

"It is not safe—it is almost falling!" cried Mrs. Yorke.

The inventor frowned, and gazed at the wall his wife indicated. To tell the truth, he had scarcely noticed anything wrong, although he had been told of this particular defect on several occasions. But he was so engrossed in his own work that everything else seemed of no account.

The wall was certainly rocky. A great crack zig-zagged across it from ceiling to floor, and at some places the opening was fully four inches across. And the bricks adjoining the crack—the cellar walls were distempered—were loose and obviously unsafe. The floor was cracked, too, and a builder would instantly have seen that the foundations below had sunk, and were probably precarious.

For months the thing had been getting worse and worse; but Mr. Yorke had never really given the matter any attention. It had been such a gradual process that he did not realise that danger might exist.

"H'm, it has got worse, certainly!" he remarked. "But don't let it worry you, Nellie. I don't suppose we shall be in this house a month longer, so it's hardly worth while having it repaired now, is it?"

He caught his wife by the arms, and pressed them.

"The future is bright," he said quietly. "Fortune has come at last, old lady. I retired when I really couldn't afford to retire for the sole purpose of perfecting my invention. And now we are going to reap the benefit."

"You were always confident, Stephen," Mrs. Yorke said. "Thank Heaven you have not been disappointed. Oh, I'm so glad we shall be moving from this place! I've never grumbled, but the loneliness has been terrible for me!"

A few minutes later she went upstairs again, and the inventor, with rather moist eyes, turned to his plans on the bench. For some little time he pored over them. Then, with a sigh of satisfaction, he gathered them up, folded them carefully, and placed them in a strong cash-box.

"They're worth a fortune!" he murmured. "When Harold comes to-morrow I will take them out and show them to him, explaining the intricate details of the machine."

He turned the key in the lock, and was about to remove it when a startling thing happened. It was utterly amazing and unexpected.

As the engineer stood in the centre of the workshop the very earth beneath his feet quivered and shook. A scream sounded upstairs from Mrs. Yorke, accompanied by the crashing of crockery.

What was happening?

"An earthquake!" gasped the inventor. "Can it be possible? An earthquake in Wales! Good gracious——"

Those words, broken off abruptly, were the last which ever passed the lips of Stephen Yorke.

What was happening was, in plain truth, an earthquake!* The shocks themselves were not very violent, and in Swansea, Oystermouth and district the damage was mostly confined to falling chimney-pots.

But here, on this lonely cliff, the damage was infinitely more serious. And it was not the earthquake itself which caused the main trouble. The cliff was formed very curiously, although this was never suspected at the time. Moreover, the wall of the cellar workshop had been almost on the point of falling even before the earthquake.

The tremors were the last straw, as it were. Even as Mr. Yorke stood in the centre of the basement, the cash-box in his hand, the cracked wall collapsed with a roar like that of thunder. The brickwork flung itself forward full upon the unfortunate man, and as he fell the cash-box flew from his grasp and disappeared into a wide crack which had appeared in the stone flooring.

In that one second, as Mr. Yorke was on the point of death, he saw that a gaping cleft had appeared in the floor. The cash-box, with its almost priceless contents, was cast into this cleft and disappeared. Then the worst was over.

The whole tragedy had occupied no more than twenty seconds. During that little space of time it seemed as though pandemonium reigned. The falling masonry crashed and thundered, and the air was filled with choking dust. And the workshop became a mere piled-up mass of wreckage and ruin. Beneath it lay Stephen Yorke, crushed to instant death.

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The grim tragedy was truly appalling in its far-reaching effect. The Hermitage—as the house was fittingly named—was by no means wrecked. But one corner of it had collapsed owing to the ruin of the cellar. Mrs. Yorke was not injured, but she was absolutely prostrated by the awful shock.

Several men were occupied for hours in recovering the inventor's body, and it was clear that he must have perished painlessly. After the shock of Mr. Yorke's death had become somewhat numb, his wife and son thought of the cash-box containing the priceless plans.

But the cash-box had completely disappeared. Realising that all depended upon its recovery, Harold Yorke did everything in his power to find the buried fortune—for that is exactly what it was.

A buried fortune!

Not a sign of it was found, although the floor of the workshop was dug up to a great depth. The local and the London newspapers made much comment on the startling affair. But the grim truth could not be denied; the invention was buried and lost.

Harold Yorke knew nothing whatever of the wonderful designs for the new printing machine. He knew that his father had been working for years on the machine, but he was in ignorance regarding the complexities of its construction. And Mrs. Yorke had never bothered her head by inquiring into her husband's mechanical ideas.

The situation was not only galling but pitiful. For years the inventor had worked hard at his clever ideas; he had perfected a machine, which would have made his fortune in a very short space of time.

And the plans were buried—buried beyond recovery. A fortune had

* Several years ago—at the period of this prologue—there was an earthquake in Swansea and district of more than slight dimensions. The writer himself was actually present in Swansea at the time of the earthquake shock.—AUTHOR.

disappeared into the ground, and thousands of people sympathised with Mrs. Yorke and her son. But sympathy, after all, was not of much use.

The fact remained that they were poor. On the threshold of great prosperity had come this terribly tragic occurrence. Harold Yorke and his mother, the latter almost broken in body and spirit, went to London, and tried to forget. Instead of becoming the son of a rich man, Harold was forced to seek a paltry situation again.

But the thought of that vast fortune which had come within reach, and had then darted away again, was a terribly bitter reflection. In one blow Mrs. Yorke had lost her husband and all prospects of the wealth he had so often promised.

CHAPTER I.

In Swansea—Sidney Ackworth's Adventure—A Remarkable Discovery!

DOUGLAS CLIFFORD looked at the sky critically as he emerged from the entrance of the Cameron Hotel, High Street, Swansea. Rather ragged clouds were moving swiftly across the heavens, and Clifford pursed his lips.

"I shouldn't advise you to venture far out into the bay to-day, Ackworth," he exclaimed. "I'm not much of a judge of weather, but to my idea the atmospheric conditions look none too healthy for yachting."

Sydney Ackworth laughed.

"I've been out in worse weather than this, Mr. Merrick," he remarked cheerfully. "Don't you worry about me. I'm used to it."

The pair walked the short distance through Castle Street, and then proceeded down Wind Street towards the docks.

Douglas Clifford was in South Wales merely on pleasure. It was Clifford who had done so much to assist Mr. Nelson Lee, the celebrated detective, in the grim campaign against the League of the Green Triangle. Clifford's visit to Swansea had nothing whatever to do with Nelson Lee's affairs. It was not long since the great detective and his assistant, Nipper, had returned from South America, and after an exciting tussle with one of the Governing Members of the Green Triangle. Needless to say, Nelson Lee had emerged triumphant.

At one time Douglas Clifford had been a prisoner in the hands of the league. He had escaped, mainly owing to Nelson Lee's assistance, and the pair had then started on a great campaign against the terrible criminal organisation. Already many prominent members of the league had been dealt with, but the great fight was by no means at an end.

To avoid being recognised Clifford had adopted a clever disguise. He was a young man, well under thirty, tremendously rich, and lived in a luxurious flat in the West End. His entire fortune was at Nelson Lee's disposal, if necessary, to combat the league. Clifford had allowed his beard and moustache to grow; and Nelson Lee, by some method of his own, had rendered them iron-grey in colour. Clifford's hair was grey, too, and he was apparently a man well past middle-age. And, naturally enough, he had adopted a false name, and would use it until it was safe for him to resume his own identity. To the world at large he was known as Mr. John Merrick, a wealthy gentleman of no particular occupation.

On many occasions Clifford had assisted Nelson Lee materially in his work, and he was always eager to help the famous detective.

Sydney Ackworth was a youngster of about twenty-three, and Clifford had become acquainted with him some months previously. Ackworth was a decent

fellow all round, and Clifford was on decidedly friendly terms with him. But, although this was the case, Ackworth had no idea of his seemingly elderly friend's real identity. That secret was known to very few people indeed.

This present visit to Swansea was merely a whim of Clifford's. Ackworth had travelled to Wales partly on business and partly on pleasure, and Clifford had accompanied him just for the sake of the trip.

They had been in the great Welsh seaport for several days now, and on this particular morning Ackworth had announced his intention of going for a sail across Swansea Bay. But the wind was blowing rather stiffly, and promised to freshen. Douglas Clifford was one of the most courageous fellows on earth, but he had the strongest objections to being scaked through to the skin just for the mere fun of the thing.

"If you go for a sail this morning, you'll be a young ass," he said candidly. "If this wind freshens, as it promises to, the sea will be positively dangerous before the morning is out. Take my advice, and give up the idea."

"Rot!" Ackworth laughed. "I don't mean to be impolite, old man, but I think I'm a better judge of yachting than you are. Why, it'll be just glorious with a breeze like this."

Clifford shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, my idea of glory may be totally different to yours," he replied. "If you call it glorious to get chucked about, and converted into a wet rag, then your notions are decidedly original."

The young man grinned cheerfully, and for some minutes they walked on in silence. But Clifford's advice was really good; and Ackworth, had he been sensible, would have heeded it. But he was a reckless youngster, with rather a big idea of his own knowledge on this particular subject. This was really his only failing, for in all other respects Ackworth was a splendid fellow.

Presently the pair were among the docks, where there was considerable activity and life. But neither Clifford nor Ackworth were interested in Swansea's shipping, and they made their way to the spot where a tiny little sailing yacht was moored. It was not Ackworth's own boat, but he had hired it for the week, to make use of when he fancied.

"Well, I've only come down here for one reason," said Douglas Clifford, as they halted near the yacht. "You know what that is, Ackworth?"

"No, I don't. What is the reason?"

"To try and persuade you to give up this foolish idea."

"My dear chap, you can talk until you're blue in the face, but I sha'n't do anything of the sort," said Ackworth calmly. "I'm going for a sail, Merrick, and when I come back I bet I'll eat a luncheon double the size of yours. There's nothing like a blow to give a fellow an appetite!"

"Oh, do as you like," said Clifford resignedly. "Only, if you go to the bottom, don't blame me."

"I sha'n't very well be capable of blaming anybody," Ackworth remarked dryly. "But I've tested this boat, and she's thoroughly seaworthy. Besides, I sha'n't venture out very far."

The sea was choppy, owing to the fresh wind, but the little yacht was soon bowling along smoothly and under perfect control. Indeed, the young man chuckled to himself as he thought of Clifford's fears.

But, as it turned out, Ackworth would soon have to admit that his friend's advice had been exceedingly good. It was merely a case of over-confidence. Ackworth had had a good deal of experience in sailing yachts, but he had never been capsized; consequently he was rather inclined to be rash.

As the little vessel skimmed along with the wind, Mumbles Head was soon quite close over to starboard, with the lighthouse standing out distinct and prominent on the little island on which it was built.

Ackworth touched the tiller, and the little yacht altered its course a trifle now, making more for the open sea. The wind was almost dead astern, and the vessel fairly flew along.

After a while Ackworth decided to make for home again. But he soon found that, true to Clifford's prophesy, the wind had freshened considerably, and was becoming more violent and gusty every minute. The sea, too, was much rougher, and the tops of the waves were being cut off as though by giant whips.

"Jove, old Merrick was right!" muttered the young man, rather anxiously. "I'd better be getting back, or he'll have the laugh over me for weeks!"

But it was easier to talk of getting back than accomplishing the manœuvre!

Ackworth soon found that the wind was fast strengthening into a gale. And, even while he was skilfully turning the yacht, disaster overtook the frail craft. For some minutes the wind had held steady, but without warning a furious squall tore down the bay, and the yacht was struck violently almost broadside-on.

Crash! Boom! Crash!

It was all over in ten seconds.

The sail boomed and thundered for a moment, and then the canvas simply tore to shreds. At the same time the mast snapped like a carrot a foot from the deck. By an extremely lucky chance Ackworth was not in the way of the falling gear, and it hurtled overside into the water.

"Good lord!" gasped the yachtsman.

The tangled mass did not cling to the boat, or it would surely have capsized. Almost before Ackworth knew it the little craft was tearing along with the gale, stripped and bare, and utterly unmanageable.

Even the tiller had been snapped like a carrot, so steering was impossible. Ackworth clung on, thoroughly alarmed now, and fully conscious of the fact that his position was fraught with dire peril.

The yacht was plunging dangerously, and the bows constantly dived down into the waves and sent the spume flying over the deck in drenching, icy sheets. Ackworth was soaked to the skin, and he could scarcely see for the biting foam and spray.

"By jingo! This is a nice mess!" he mumbled, chatteringly. "In about two ticks the boat will decide to investigate the ocean-bed, and then it'll be all U.P. with little me. What a blithering ass I was not to take Merrick's advice!"

But the stripped craft was apparently still seaworthy, although no longer manageable. She pitched and tossed, but kept afloat bravely. The decks were almost constantly swept by the drenching waves, and Ackworth was forced to cling to the mast stump to prevent himself being swept headlong overside.

After a while he endeavoured to discover where he was, and where the yacht was making for. He knew, now, that Douglas Clifford's warning had been timely. For the wind had risen to a gale, and was blowing in furious, wicked gusts. And the sea had attained a violence which was terrifying even out here. What it was like on the rocky coast beyond the Mumbles Ackworth hardly dared anticipate.

And he saw that the yacht, slowly but surely, was being driven nearer and nearer to the coast. Mumbles Head was already astern, and through the misty spray which constantly swept the boat he saw the dangerous rocks

which lie between the Head and Langland Bay. The tide was almost at the flood, and the great waves were breaking on the rocks with a crashing roar and with a violence which sent the spume almost to the cliff-tops.

The partially wrecked yacht was being tossed along at an appalling speed, and even as Ackworth watched, Langland Bay grew more distinct and nearer. But, although it was evident that he was being driven ashore, Ackworth knew that it would be at some point considerably beyond Langland Bay.

The young man was pale now—pale with cold and dread.

"Fool!" he muttered bitterly. "What a fool I was to disregard Merrick's words!"

He wondered if it would not be better to leap overboard now, and so perish in the open sea. It would be better than being crushed to death on those cruel fangs. But he held himself in check, with set teeth and compressed lips. While there was life there was hope! And there was a slim chance that he would be cast ashore alive—maimed, perhaps, but alive.

The end was not long in coming.

Nearer and nearer the helpless little craft was driven to the shore. Langland Bay was astern, and bare, rocky cliffs and jutting fangs were ahead. Ackworth could see that he would be flung right on to the rocks at the foot of the cruel cliffs. There was no beach, no chance of being cast ashore on to sand or pebbles. He would be flung among the rocks and battered to instant death!

Almost before he realised it, the yacht was picked up by a great wave. She pitched drunkenly, and the next second her solitary occupant was flung out into the foaming waters.

Ackworth went under, gasping and spluttering. He struck out desperately, but he might as well have tried to stem the Falls of Niagara as to fight against that sea. A helpless, struggling speck amid the foam, he felt himself sucked down and whirled about as though he were a mere cork.

For one second he saw the rocks ahead of him, then he was hurled forward with awful force and driven down into the all-powerful surf. In that moment, he gave himself up for lost. He knew that the rocks were dead ahead, and he knew that this great wave would hurl him straight on to them.

But no crash came. With his ears drumming with terrible noise, with his throat filled with salt water, he found himself still alive and still uninjured. Exactly what happened, he could never tell; but after an eternity, so it seemed, he came to the surface, gasping agonisingly, and with his lungs half-filled with sea-water.

He seemed to be in darkness, and the waves were subdued and quiet. His hands, outstretched before him, banged against something hard and smooth. In his ears echoed the roar of the surf, but it had a hollow sound, as though the waves were far off.

Instinctively, Ackworth felt with his fingers, and found a smooth rock right against him. He grasped it, pulling himself up with all the strength he was capable of. Less than a minute later, he was lying on the rocks, clear of the water, panting with exhaustion and filled with a strange wonderment.

He was not dead! He was not even injured, except for several painful bruises, which, at the moment, he scarcely noticed. What had happened? Where was he? What was the meaning of the strange darkness? And how was it he had not been dashed to pieces on the jagged fangs?

The answer was simple, although Ackworth was some little time in realising the truth. When he had been flung forward, he had plunged right into the heart of the wave, far beneath the surface.

And he had been cast into the wide mouth of a gaping cave. By a miraculous stroke of fortune, he had not struck the rocks, but had entered the cave, to come to the surface in comparatively calm waters.

Although he did not know it at the time, the cave entrance was one which was never uncovered to the light of day. Even at low tide, the mouth of this cavern was not revealed. It is doubtful if the existence of the cave was ever suspected or known. Ackworth's escape was nothing short of amazing. The angry sea, in spite of its fury, had been merciful to him, and had cast him into this refuge uninjured.

Presently, as he lay there regaining his breath and his wits, he was struck by one fact. He was not in darkness, for a kind of deeply subdued twilight filled the curious cavern.

He could even see the sea gurgling and swirling in through the submarine opening in the rocks, and he could see that he was lying on a ledge which led inwards to a spot which was quite dry and free from water.

He staggered to his feet, and drunkenly crossed the slippery rocks to the dry portion of the cavern. But the place was hardly a cavern, he saw, for it was not more than two yards in width, and seemed to have no roof. Looking upwards, the light seemed to be stronger, and he realised that it was admitted high above him.

The curious formation was actually a fissure cutting right through the cliff from summit to base. Without wasting a second, for he knew that inaction in those soaking clothes would soon have rendered him helpless and weak, he set about climbing the jagged side of the fissure.

This, it proved, was an easier task than he had anticipated. Eight feet from the floor, the cleft narrowed until it was no more than three feet across, and he was enabled to place his back against one wall, and to worm himself upwards by clinging on to the rough rock projections.

As he progressed, so he became calmer. The activity warmed him, and sent the blood coursing warmly through his frame. His coat had disappeared during his fight with the waves, and his shirt was very soon rent in a dozen places. His collar was torn clean off, and his trousers would have disgraced any tramp.

But Ackworth's personal appearance didn't worry him in the least now. His main object was to reach the summit of the fissure, and to see from whence the light was entering. It was an all-important question, for it was quite possible that he would find himself in a living tomb.

If the opening was not large enough to admit his body, he knew that he would be imprisoned within the cleft, with probably no chance of rescue. The cliffs at this part of the coast were deserted and uninhabited.

Ackworth had not seen the cliff-top during his tussle with the waves, but had he had a chance to look up, he would have seen a grim old house directly above. So, even if he had seen it, he would have entertained no hope of being rescued.

The house was the Hermitage, the former home of Stephen Yorke, the unfortunate engineer who had perished as a result of the earthquake several years before. Since that date, the lonely house had been allowed to go to rack and ruin.

Ackworth struggled upwards without pausing for breath. Very soon he was panting heavily, and he felt the steam rising from his wet clothes, caused by the heat generated by his exertions.

Quite suddenly the cleft came to an end. This was within twenty feet of the top, where the light was filtering in through the unseen opening behind the rocks. Ackworth placed his hands on the two sides of the fissure, and lightly leapt on to solid rock. He saw that he was in a wide cavern, which

extended many feet in both directions. Above him the light was streaming in quite brightly.

The young man breathed heavily, and looked above him. Until he saw a clear means of exit, he would not entertain any definite hopes; but from where he stood he could not see the opening which admitted the light. He stumbled forward for several paces, hoping that when he turned he would be able to see what he wanted. He was forced to bend low, for the roof was no more than four feet from the floor.

Suddenly he kicked against something which gave a metallic ring. He paused and look down at his feet. To his astonishment, he saw a cash-box lying on the floor—a strong, perfectly preserved cash-box, with the key still in the lock!

"Well, I'm hanged!" he muttered involuntarily.

For the moment, he forgot all else, and picked up the steel box and examined it. The key turned rather stiffly, but the lid opened without any trouble. Within were some carefully folded papers.

Ackworth unfolded the topmost paper, and hastily gazed at it.

"Plans!" he muttered. "Oh, it's nothing! What's this? 'Stephen Yorke.—Designs for new printing machine.'"

He paused and bent lower, so that he could see better in the dim twilight; and when he looked up at last, he was breathing quickly, and his eyes gleamed with a strange light.

"The plans of Stephen Yorke's invention!" he muttered excitedly. "I remember—I remember perfectly! It was when I was at college. There was an earthquake or something, and Yorke was killed. The newspapers made a terrific splash about it because a cash-box, containing the designs of an invention worth a fortune, had disappeared into the earth. Great Scotland Yard, I've found 'em! I've found the lost plans! Well, this is the queerest thing that ever happened!"

Sydney Ackworth was amazed, and with good reason.

He had been flung among the deadly rocks at the foot of the cliffs, had plunged into an unsuspected cleft, and had clambered to the surface—or to within twenty feet of the surface—to find the cash-box which had been jerked from the hand of Stephen Yorke years before!

Fate had indeed played a strange trick!

CHAPTER II.

The Escape—The Well-dressed Stranger—The Eavesdropper—A Big Game

SYDNEY ACKWORTH could scarcely believe the evidence of his own eyes. The remembrance of that earthquake tragedy flooded his mind. He had been hardly more than a boy at the time, but he naturally took an interest in the occurrence, as he had often visited Mumbles and district as a child. It was evident that this cleft in the cliff must be immediately beneath the basement in which Stephen Yorke had met his death.

"Well, when I come to think of it, I was chucked ashore at about the spot where the old house stands," murmured the young man. "By glory, what a yarn to tell when I meet old Merrick again!"

His adventure, he could see, was going to turn out for the good, after all. He was by no means dead, and the cost of the yacht was a mere trifle. He had found a fortune, and that was certainly ample compensation for the discomforts of his adventure.

Not that Ackworth had any idea of personal gain. He knew that the plans of the invention were the rightful property of the dead man's son,

Harold Yorke. Ackworth, as a matter of fact, was the son of a very rich man, and had all the money he wished for. But he was tremendously elated with himself for having found the almost forgotten designs of the old engineer's invention.

His narrow escape from death was to be the means of his doing somebody some good, at all events. But, having made this discovery, Ackworth very soon dismissed it from his mind in face of his own personal position.

Was he to escape, after all? Or would he remain buried, as the cash-box had been, for years? He knew that he had entered the fissure by about one chance in fifty thousand. What if there was no exit?

Light was entering, certainly, but it may be admitted by a mere slit—a space no bigger than his arm. The only way to end the suspense was to make a rapid and a thorough investigation.

Ackworth lost no time. He stumbled along the cavern until he came to the dark abyss of the fissure again. Taking care not to fall down the death-trap, he gazed about him, and presently saw that he would be able to ascend to the rocky spot where the hidden light was entering by making a detour and climbing up some sloping rocks which had previously escaped his notice, owing to the gloom in that quarter.

He paused as he was about to start the climb. He had closed the cash-box again, locking the valuable contents inside. And he had deposited the box close against the cavern wall, far in the corner. A moment's reflection told him that he had better leave the cash-box where it was.

If there was no escape for him, there was no sense in being hampered by the clumsy box. And if he did gain his freedom, he realised that he would present a curious spectacle—coatless, ragged, scratched, and carrying a cash-box! He would be suspected, at once, of having been up to some sinister work. Far better leave the plans where they were, and return for them when he was dry and well-clothed. Besides, he could bring his friend, "Merrick," with him. Having remained undiscovered for years, it stood to reason that the cash-box wouldn't run away—even if left for another period of years.

So the young man, shivering slightly, started the climb. He was nimble and active, and had done a good deal of mild mountaineering. So this proposition was a very simple one. He reached the top safely, and gazed upon the exit.

His heart gave a leap at what he saw. Before him, at the end of a kind of short tunnel, was an opening in the rocks about a foot wide and eighteen inches deep. It was covered with a mass of green vegetation, which accounted for the peculiarly subdued light. Ackworth wormed his way forward eagerly.

"It's big enough," he panted thankfully. "I can escape. Heaven be praised!"

With feverish haste he forced his way through the narrow hole, careless of scratches from the bushes which choked it. And in a few minutes he was standing under the sky—free and safe.

After the first few moments of fervent joy he looked about him curiously. He was standing in a thick plantation, which grew within a few yards of the wrecked corner of the old house. But his head was on a level with the ground.

Actually, he was standing in a kind of pit, six feet in depth, and no more than eight feet wide. It was choked with stunted bushes and rotten grass. Rough boulders were strewn about, and it was obvious, at a glance, that no human being had set foot on the spot for countless years.

The opening into the fissure was completely hidden. Ackworth understood at once why the place had never been discovered.

Without more ado, the young man forced his way up out of the pit-like depression, and then strode from the plantation. The wind was roaring through the branches, and Ackworth walked briskly, in order to keep himself warm.

Luck favoured him.

He soon left the old house behind, and broke into a trot as he traversed the narrow track which led to the roadway. He was feeling chilly now, for the gale was cutting and sharp. He half-expected to meet some local inhabitants, who would display curiosity at his appearance. But there were no houses within sight—not even a cottage. Ackworth knew that he would have to walk well over a mile before he came within sight of a habitation.

But when he reached the road, and had trotted along it for several minutes, he heard a familiar sound. A motor-car was approaching him. Ackworth nodded to himself with satisfaction; he would surely be able to persuade the motorist to give him a lift to Oystermouth.

The automobile came within sight, and Ackworth halted, and held up his hand. Then, as he looked at the man in the driver's seat of the car, he started forward, with a glad cry on his lips.

"Mr. Merrick!" he shouted huskily. "By jingo, what luck!"

The motor-car jerked to a standstill, and Douglas Clifford hopped nimbly out.

"Ackworth, as I live!" he exclaimed amazedly. "You young idiot, what have you been doing to yourself? How in the name of all that's infernal did you get into this disgusting state? You're hardly decent!"

Ackworth grinned feebly as he gazed at his torn clothing.

"I've been through the mill——" he began.

"I thought you were dead!" interjected Clifford, half-angrily, but with relief in his voice. "I became anxious about you when the wind rose to a gale, and telephoned to Mumbles. Somebody told me that a small sailing yacht had been dashed to splinters on the rocks in this neighbourhood, so I came along to pick up your remains. And here I find you, perfectly whole, as much alive as ever. What's the meaning of it, Ackworth?"

While Clifford was speaking he had removed his warm, heavy overcoat, and it was now closely buttoned over Ackworth's torn, damp clothing. The young man hung his head rather sheepishly.

"I was an ass not to take your advice," he said. "The confounded gale capsized the yacht, and I was driven ashore. Fortunately, I escaped with my life, though I'm bruised and grazed. I'll tell you all about it when I'm fixed up. For goodness' sake take me to Swansea, and let me get into some decent clobber!"

Clifford was a man of brisk action. He could see by his companion's blue lips that he was cold and chilled; and standing here, in the full force of the wind, wouldn't do him any good. So, two minutes later, Ackworth was being whirled swiftly towards Oystermouth.

The village passed through, the journey to Swansea was soon accomplished; the car passing one of the trains of the Mumbles Railway en route. The swift automobile, travelling in the same direction as the train, caught the latter up and passed it with ease. And yet Clifford's speedometer registered only thirty-two miles an hour.

For the Mumbles Railway is a curious little system. The track runs parallel with the road all the way from Mumbles to Swansea, and for a great deal of the distance it absolutely adjoins the road, with no fence or barrier. The trains themselves are composed of carriages which resemble tram-cars, for one can travel either inside or outside. The latter is

pleasant on a summer's day—except when the smoke and steam from the puffy little engine happens to blow right along the carriage-tops.

Clifford's car passed one of these curious trains soon after it had steamed out of Blackpill Station—which is almost midway between Oystermouth and Swansea. By the time the automobile reached Brynmill the train was left behind, just slowing down at Sketty Road Station. At a point known as the Slip, Clifford bore to the left, leaving the quaint railway behind, and making for St. Helen's Road. Once in the latter thoroughfare—which is right in Swansea itself—it was only a matter of minutes before High Street and the palatial Cameron Hotel was reached.

Ackworth was bundled out of the car, and he swayed somewhat as he stood on the pavement. Almost immediately after he had settled himself in the car, the reaction had set in, and he felt dizzy and sick. And now he was distinctly rocky.

"Come right upstairs, Merriok," he said, his voice somewhat hoarse. "I've got to tell you the whole yarn yet."

"That'll do when you're fit," said Clifford briskly.

They passed into the lobby.

"I'm fit now—nothing wrong with me!" declared Ackworth. "Oh, and there's something else. I've got to tell you of a terrific discovery—an amazing stroke of luck. There's a fortune for somebody; literally pots of money——"

"Oh, you're dreaming!" interjected Clifford cheerily.

"No, it's true!" the other persisted. "If we were dishonest, old man, we could make tens of thousands for ourselves."

They passed upstairs, Ackworth becoming somewhat animated as he warmed to his subject.

He had spoken rather loudly to Clifford, and neither of them noticed an exceedingly well-dressed gentleman standing close by, smoking a cigar, and studying a telephone directory. Yet, had Douglas Clifford looked at the stranger he would instantly have recognised him.

For the well-dressed gentleman was Mr. Dudley Foxcroft, the famous financier—Foxcroft, the City magnate—Foxcroft, the influential Governing Member of the League of the Green Triangle!

At the present moment he was smoking as calmly as before, but his eyebrows were raised, and he was looking at the backs of Clifford and Ackworth as they disappeared. Foxcroft was a clever man, and a shrewd man. Those words of Ackworth's had struck him with much force.

Being by nature a pretty complete scoundrel, he was constantly on the look-out for openings which would lead to something big for the league. Foxcroft was one of the most important members of the league's Governing Circle, and one of Professor Cyrus Zingrave's chief advisers. Zingrave, the renowned scientist, was actually the head of the whole infamous organisation.

"A fortune for somebody!" murmured Foxcroft to himself. "Pots of money—tens of thousands! I wonder if there was anything in those words? Perhaps it would be as well to look into the matter."

Foxcroft had only arrived in Swansea an hour or two before. He had come to Wales merely on business—on a question of finance. And the rooms which had been allotted to him, he soon found, were adjoining those of Clifford and Ackworth.

Foxcroft had been inclined to dismiss the matter; for, after all, those chance words may have meant nothing at all. But when he learned that the pair occupied the rooms next to his own, he determined to act at once.

Accordingly he walked briskly upstairs, and was soon in his own apart-

ments. Here he proceeded to unlock a travelling-bag, and from a little leather case within he produced a curious little instrument.

It was an article Foxcroft always carried with him, wherever he went. Professor Zingrave had invented it, and the apparatus had proved its worth on many an occasion. By placing one side of the instrument against any wall it was possible, by applying the ear to a kind of tube, to hear everything that was being said on the other side of the wall. The thing was, in fact, an article specially designed for eavesdropping. In the peculiar work of the league the "pocket listener" was an extremely useful object.

Another fact had impressed itself on Foxcroft's mind. He learned that the bearded gentleman was "Mr. Merrick"; and the financier knew that "Merrick" was a close friend of Nelson Lee's. That he was Douglas Clifford, the league's supposedly dead enemy, Foxcroft never suspected for a moment.

No harm would be done, anyhow, by satisfying himself by listening for a few moments to what his next-door neighbours were discussing. As events turned out, Foxcroft was to hit upon a very big game.

Locking his door, so that he would not be interrupted at his sneaking work, he placed the listener against the wall, and immediately the voices of Clifford and Ackworth came to his ear. The voices sounded dull and far away, as though through a telephone, but the words were perfectly distinct.

"You were right—dead right!" were the first words he heard. "After I'd been out in the bay some little time the wind rose to a gale, and I was simply buffeted about like a cork. All of a sudden a squall came along, and played old Harry! The sail busted to shreds, and the mast went overside, just missing me by inches. Well, in the end, I was tossed ashore on about one of the rockiest bits of coasts I have ever seen."

"How in the world did you manage to get ashore in one whole piece?" came Clifford's voice wonderingly.

"Well, to tell the truth, I haven't ceased being amazed at my escape even yet," replied Ackworth. "You see, Merrick, it was like this——"

And Dudley Foxcroft listened while the young man went into an explanation as to how he had escaped almost certain death. At first Foxcroft was inclined to give up his task, but he became so interested that he remained.

And he was amply rewarded for his patience. For, in due course, Ackworth came to the most interesting and most important part of his narrative. The net result of Foxcroft's eavesdropping, after another half-hour had elapsed, was interesting.

He knew that Stephen Yorke's valuable plan had been found, and that they were still lying in the fissure in their cashbox. But Ackworth had said nothing which would form a clue to the exact whereabouts of the fissure.

"Well, that's the whole yarn," Foxcroft heard Ackworth exclaim. "What do you advise, Merrick?"

There was a short silence.

"Well, I've been thinking," Clifford replied. "This seems to be a very big matter, and I hardly like to advise you. You say the cashbox is quite safe where it is?"

"Perfectly safe. Not a soul would ever discover it."

"Then, as it's lain there so long, it may as well lay a little longer," went on Clifford. "I suggest that we travel to London by the noon train to-morrow and tell Nelson Lee all about your discovery. He will know exactly the best thing to do, and will see that justice is done. Lee, as you know, is a great friend of mine."

Two minutes later Foxcroft heard a door bang, and knew that the pair had left their apartments. The Governing Member placed the little listening instrument away, and his face was grim and set.

"I can see possibilities!" he muttered slowly. "If I can only get the plans of Stephen Yorkc's invention into my hands there is a mint of money to be made. I know for a fact that this printing machine is a marvel of mechanical construction. It will make all other machines obsolete and out of date. But the young fool did not say how the fissure is to be entered. There are difficulties, but they are by no means insurmountable."

He paced the room, thinking deeply.

Ackworth and Clifford were to travel to London by the noon train on the following day. Foxcroft knew the bare facts of the young man's discovery, but he had absolutely no details. Those details he was determined to obtain. To get them in a straightforward manner was impossible, for Sydney Ackworth was not the type of young man who could be bribed or bullied. Other methods—more drastic methods—would have to be adopted.

And, accordingly, Foxcroft set about making plans. There was only one way to gain the desired information—and that way was to kidnap Ackworth and force the truth from him. He and Clifford would not be leaving Swansea until noon, and Foxcroft's active brain was very soon scheming a plot which would ultimately end in Ackworth becoming a prisoner of the league.

CHAPTER III.

A Slight Alteration—At Nelson Lee's Rooms—The Shadower.

"LOOK here, why should we wait for the midday train to-morrow?" asked Ackworth, as he and Clifford lounged in a secluded corner of the smoking-room at the Cameron that evening. "Why shouldn't we go straight after breakfast, by the morning express? We shall then arrive in London in the early afternoon."

"Well, it's a matter that is of no great importance," Douglas Clifford replied. "When I suggested the midday train, however, I was thinking of you, Ackworth. By to-morrow morning I doubt if you'll be able to travel by either train. It's a wonder that you're able to sit in this smoking-room."

The young man chuckled.

"I'm a pretty hardy sort of animal," he said cheerfully. "I think I've got a deuce of a cold coming on, and I am bruised and scratched a heap more than is comfortable for me. But I'm not the fellow to lay in bed. And the sooner we make tracks for London, the better."

And so, by a slim thread of chance, Dudley Foxcroft's plans were set at nought. He had made all arrangements to have Sydney Ackworth lured away from Paddington terminus as soon as the train arrived the following day. But Foxcroft did not learn of the change of plans until Clifford and Ackworth had actually started. And then it was too late.

The pair arrived in London the next day to find the weather in the metropolis much brighter than it had been in Swansea. The heavy rains of the past week had at last come to an end. Huge downpours had descended upon London and district, and floods were rising everywhere.

As Clifford and Ackworth were chartering a taxi to take them to Gray's Inn Road, Dudley Foxcroft was on the noon train from South Wales, inwardly fuming at the failure of his plans. He knew that he would have to be very sharp in putting the league's machinery into motion if his scheme was to bear fruit.

Foxcroft had thought of going straight to the old empty house on the cliffs, and searching diligently for the entrance to the cleft. But, after a very short reflection, he realised that he would be probably wasting his time. Ackworth had said nothing—in Foxcroft's hearing, at least—regarding the whereabouts of the opening. And the Governing Member knew that the task would be very much like looking for a needle in a haystack. He might possibly find the entrance, but all the odds were dead against such a thing. It was far the better course to get hold of Ackworth and learn the precise facts. More trouble might be entailed, but it would be the quickest in the end.

Meanwhile, Douglas Clifford and his young friend arrived at Nelson Lee's room in Gray's Inn Road. The famous detective was in, and he was exceedingly pleased to see Clifford. Nipper was there, also, and both he and his master were looking somewhat brown—the result of their recent trip to the South American Republic of Brazaquay.

"So, Merrick, you have brought this young gentleman to see me," Nelson Lee remarked genially, as he offered his visitors his cigar-case. "I gather, Mr. Ackworth, that this is simply a friendly call?"

The young man shook his head.

"On the contrary, I wish to consult you in a professional capacity," he replied. "Or, in plainer words, I want your advice, Mr. Lee."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Fire ahead!" he exclaimed. "I am quite sure that Merrick would not have brought you here unless you have something interesting to tell me. Pray proceed."

And, while the famous criminologist listened, Sydney Ackworth again told of his extraordinary experience in the fissure under the old ruined Hermitage. When the young man had done Nelson Lee sat for a few moments in silence.

"This is very interesting," he exclaimed at length. "Your discovery is one of the utmost importance, Mr. Ackworth. I remember the facts of the case quite distinctly. Old Mr. Yorke was killed by the collapse of his workshop, caused by the earthquake which occurred in the Swansea district on that day. The cashbox, containing the plans, completely disappeared, and all efforts to recover it were futile."

"And now this young ass gets himself pitched out of a sailing yacht and stumbles across the invention which was thought to be buried in the earth for ever," Douglas Clifford put in. "Fate works in strange paths, but I think this is certainly one of the queerest tricks it has ever played."

"Where are the plans now, Mr. Merrick?" put in Nipper.

"They are still in the fissure."

"But why the dickens didn't you bring the cashbox to London with you?" the lad asked.

"Because it is safer where it is."

"I agree with that view," remarked Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "The contents of that box are the rightful property of Harold Yorke. We do not know the man, and it will be far better for him to go down to the old house and bring the plans away with his own hands. As you mentioned, Mr. Ackworth, it will give Yorke peculiar satisfaction to recover his father's property personally. Its value will be greatly enhanced by taking this course—to Yorke's mind, of course, that is—and there cannot possibly be any dispute. It is very fortunate indeed that Chance led an honourable, honest man to make the discovery."

"That's true enough," Ackworth replied. "If I'd simply been an impecunious blighter I should have been sorely tempted to make something for myself out of the affair. But I don't need to do that, and I'm only too

glad to be of assistance. I reckon Yorke will be in the seventh heaven of delight when I tell him my news."

"By the way, how are you going to find out where the man lives?" asked Clifford.

"That is a very simple task," Nelson Lee replied easily.

And in less than fifteen minutes the detective had obtained the desired information. He learned that Yorke lived with his mother in a modest house at Fulham, and that he was employed by a big City firm.

"You came to me for advice, Mr. Ackworth," said Nelson Lee. "Well, my advice is quite simple. Take your story straight to Harold Yorke and leave the rest to him. Once you have acquainted him with the facts, your responsibility ends."

Ackworth jumped to his feet.

"Right-ho," he said briskly. "I'll be off at once."

"There is really no necessity for hurry," Nelson Lee protested. "Yorke does not leave business until about six, and I should not advise you to visit him at his office. Run over to Fulham early this evening, and see him in his home. Meanwhile you and Merrick must remain here and be my guests for tea."

And thus it was arranged.

Apparently the affair was all over, and Nelson Lee practically dismissed it from his mind. But, at the time, he had not the slightest notion that the League of the Green Triangle was busying itself strenuously in connection with Ackworth's visit to London. Before long the great detective would discover that he was only just on the threshold of another startling adventure with the great criminal society.

Events were destined to move with dizzy swiftness from that hour onwards.

Soon after tea Sydney Ackworth took his departure, intending to visit Harold Yorke at Fulham. But the young man never reached his destination.

As he stepped out briskly along Gray's Inn Road a dim figure detached itself from a dark corner on the opposite side of the road, and followed twenty yards in the rear. Ackworth, innocent of all danger, strode on cheerfully.

Yet he was being shadowed by an emissary of the Green Triangle.

CHAPTER IV.

Tricked—In the Hands of the League.—Ackworth's Refusal.

IT was Ackworth's intention to walk down Gray's Inn Road to Holborn, and there charter a taxi to convey him to Fulham; or, if a taxi appeared beforehand, to charter it at once.

But before he had proceeded two hundred yards, the league acted.

Ackworth's shadower paused beneath a street lamp, and deliberately removed his hat. Then he walked on again. In less than twenty seconds a big commercial motor-van, with plain black sides, drove up, and the shadower hopped nimbly aboard.

Then the commercial van sped on until it overtook Ackworth, and finally came to a halt fifty yards ahead of him. All this the young man didn't see at all. The street was fairly busy, and he was only on the look-out for a taxi.

As he drew near to the now stationary motor-van he heard a sudden, short cry, as though somebody had been hurt.

"Hi, mate!"

Ackworth looked at the van sharply, and saw a man in a peaked cap looking out through the half-open rear doors at him.

"Speaking to me?" Ackworth inquired, coming to a halt.

"Yes, sir," replied the man, screwing up his face. "D'you mind hopping up here an' giving me a hand for a tick? I've got my foot jammed under a blooming great case, and I can't lift it. Wow! Hurry up, guv'nor!"

Ackworth smiled good-naturedly.

"Foot jammed, eh?" he said. "That's awkward. We'll soon have you released."

He nimbly leaped up into the van, and entered, as was only natural, in a bent position, with his head thrust forward. Before he could straighten himself a thick sack descended over his head with terrific violence, and he was tripped roughly.

Filled with amazement, anger and alarm, Ackworth attempted to struggle. But the muffling sack was drawn tighter, and he found himself sat on forcibly. At the same second the van started forward with a roaring of its low gear, and the rear doors slammed to.

Ackworth was a prisoner in the hands of the league.

The affair had been carried out with astonishing ease, considering the circumstances. The very audacity of it was amazing. In Gray's Inn Road, in the early evening, in full view of many pedestrians and L.C.C. tram-cars, Ackworth had been attacked and rendered helpless.

Almost before he knew it his feet were bound, his hands were secured behind his back, and a thick gag was tied over his mouth. His head in the sack, he found it difficult to breathe with any degree of comfort. But he was in no danger of suffocation, and his personal discomfort was of no concern to his captors.

Ackworth lay on his back, utterly helpless. The motor-van bumped along, and after a time he was aching considerably. He could hear the voices of men, and guessed that there were three altogether—the driver and two others.

But what did it mean?

Who had kidnapped him, and what was the reason for the extraordinary attack? The whole business was a complex puzzle to him, and his head soon ached with thinking and with the jolting of the van. In all probability the pain in his head was mostly due to the bumps it continually received against the hard wood flooring.

He came to the conclusion that he had been kidnapped in mistake for somebody else. He never connected this outrage with the Swansea affair. Probably, when the journey came to an end, his captors would discover their mistake, and would release him. But he was furious, and determined to discover the truth.

Ackworth knew nothing of the league of the Green Triangle. He had certainly heard rumours of the great organisation, but anything connected with crime and criminals was entirely out of his province.

What could it mean? Where was he being taken to?

As it proved, the journey was not a lengthy one. While Ackworth was still racking his brain for a possible explanation the van came to a standstill, and he heard the rear doors forced open.

There was a short, low conversation, and then silence. Everything was so quiet that the captive knew he must be somewhere quite out of London, and in a lonely spot. As a matter of fact, the motor-van had come to a halt in a dark, unlighted lane not far distant from Sunbury, near the Thames. The river was almost within a hundred yards of the stationary vehicle, and close by was a pretty little bungalow cottage.

Two men were standing in the porch, talking, and presently they parted,

one entering the building, and the other making his way to the commercial van. He joined the other two men there, and Ackworth was bundled out and carried swiftly and quietly across the intervening space, and so into the cottage.

After he had been deposited in the front room two of the men left, and departed in the motor-van. The other remained in the cottage with the man who had already entered. The front door was closed and locked, and the window of the apartment into which Ackworth had been carried closely shuttered.

"Off with that sack!" one of the men exclaimed gruffly. "We'd better get this business through as sharp as possible."

The man who had spoken was wearing a heavy mask—both men were, in fact. But it was evident that the speaker was in charge of the operations. He was, to tell the truth, a controlling agent of the league—Martin Caine. The other man was an ordinary working member, and under Caine's orders.

The sack was swiftly removed, and Ackworth glared about him with staring eyes. He was sitting in a chair, and could see at once that the room was furnished rather barely, and that both his companions were masked and unrecognisable.

Martin Caine himself took a seat in front of Ackworth, and opened his mouth to speak. But the prisoner used his voice first. With the removal of the sack the gag, of course, had been taken from his mouth also.

"Your infernal scoundrels!" gasped Ackworth hotly. "What in the name of all that's villainous do you mean by this outrage? Why have you brought me here? Who in thunder are you? What the——"

"Steady—steady!" Martin Caine interrupted quietly. "Please don't excite yourself, Mr. Ackworth, and don't delude yourself into thinking that if you raise your voice it will bring assistance. This cottage is quite by itself, well out of earshot of all thoroughfares and other buildings. Moreover, if you do make an outcry the gag will be instantly re-applied."

The calm voice made Ackworth cool down somewhat.

"You must be making a mistake!" he exclaimed fiercely. "What possible reason can——"

"There is no mistake," put in Caine. "Your name is Sydney Ackworth, I think?"

"Yes, it is!"

"Well, you are the man we want," continued the controlling agent smoothly. "You have been brought here, my young friend, for a definite object—which I will now proceed to explain. What I am about to ask you is nothing very much. You, yourself, will not lose a farthing, and will not be one whit the worse for this little adventure. To-day you arrived in London from Swansea."

Ackworth started.

"Well, suppose I did?" he demanded sharply. "What's it got to do with you? And, in any case, how the deuce did you know?"

"Never mind that. You came from Swansea, you interviewed Mr. Nelson Lee, and when you were tricked into entering the van, you were just about to start off for the home of a certain Mr. Harold Yorke."

Again Ackworth gave a sudden start.

"By James!" he flared up suddenly. "So that's the game! You know all about the Yorke business and want me to play a low-down trick on a decent man? I'll tell you now, before you start, that you can take your demands to blazes! You won't get any information out of me—not a confounded word!"

Caine shrugged his shoulders.

"What a fiery youngster you are," he said gently. "Before you make such statements hear what I have to say. While in the vicinity of Swansea,

you discovered a fissure in a cliff, and in that fissure is a cash box containing the plans of a certain printing machine. I don't intend to tell you how I know all this—I do know. And all that I want you to do is to tell me how to find the entrance to the fissure. Quite simple, isn't it?"

Ackworth's eyes gleamed.

"Remarkably simple," he agreed. "I was expecting that you'd require much more of me. So you merely want me to explain where the entrance to the cleft is situated?"

"That is all."

"I can tell you in twenty words."

"Excellent! You are acting sensibly——"

"Bound up as I am I can't act at all—but if I could use my fists I'd do something sensible right away!" exclaimed Ackworth hotly. "I'd punch your nose level with the rest of your face! Yes, I could tell you how to find that fissure in twenty words; but if you think I'm going to do it you're decidedly off-side!"

Martin Caine looked grim.

"This obstinacy will not help you——"

"Whether it helps me or not I am not going to act the part of a cowardly hound," interjected the young man defiantly. "Those plans in the cash box are the sole property of Mr. Harold Yorke, and I'm not going to let the first scoundrel who comes along wrench the secret out of me. Even at the price of my own liberty I am not going to be a traitor!"

"But Harold Yorke is nothing to you!" exclaimed Caine. "Why, you have never even met the man."

"That's neither here nor there. You're requesting me to act dirtily towards a man who has had quite enough misfortune in his life already. The plans of his father's invention are his—and if I can help it you sha'n't steal them from him!"

"Is that your last word?"

"Absolutely my last word!"

Martin Caine rose to his feet, biting his lip.

"Well, Mr. Ackworth, I can see you are determined," he said evenly. "You are very foolish to take up this attitude, for it will avail you nothing in the long run. At the same time I cannot help admiring your pluck——"

"Admiration from you is an insult!" Ackworth cut in sharply.

Caine laughed softly, and then his face became grim.

"I am quite sure that you will alter your tone before so very long," he said. "You will be kept a prisoner in this cottage until you consent to reveal the secret of the fissure. You will be allowed no food or water, and will be guarded constantly. At present you are very determined, but hunger and thirst will soon bring about a change!"

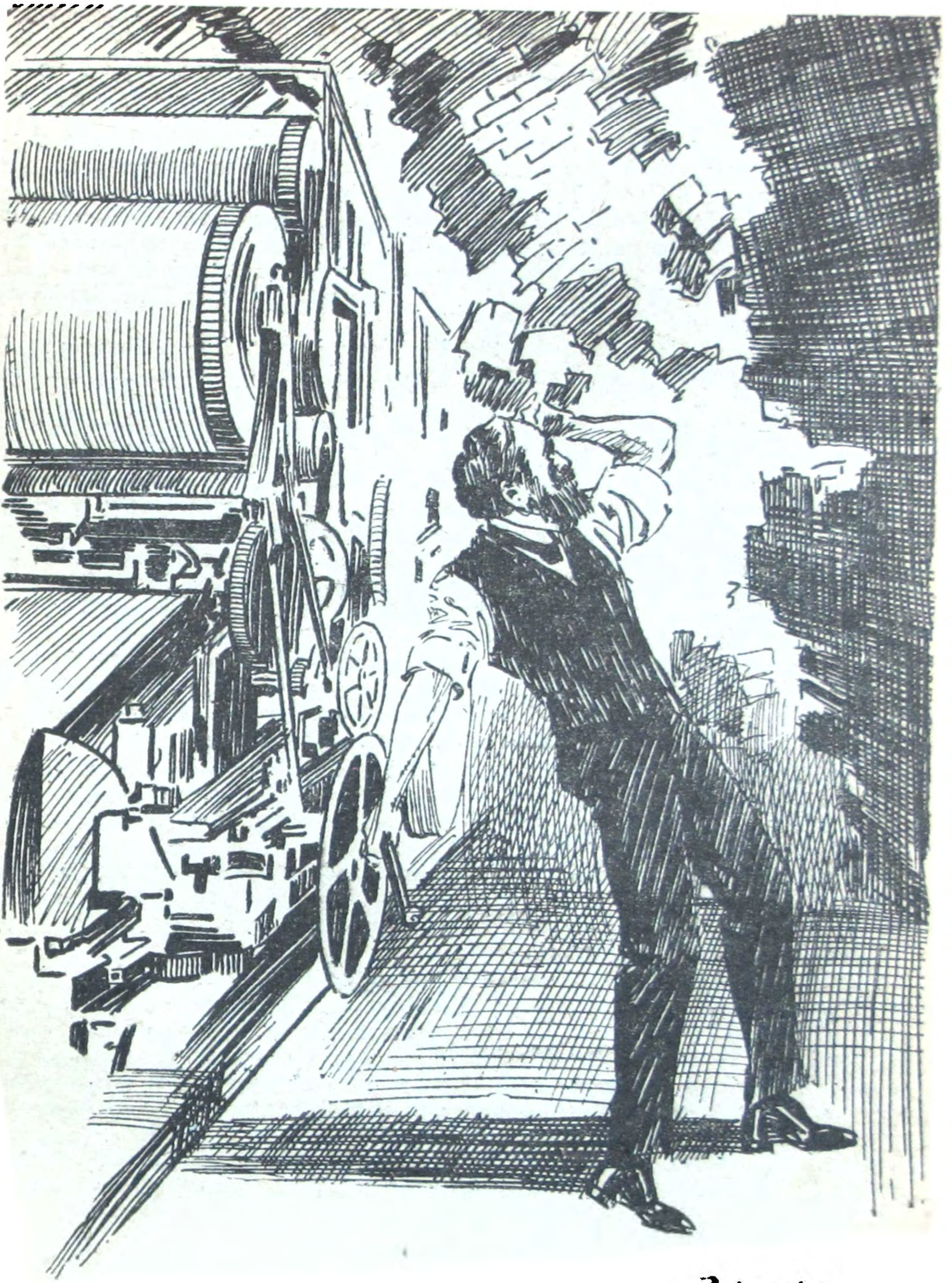
Caine turned to his companion.

"On with the gag!" he said briskly. "I expected something of this sort, but I've done my best. You remain here, Jem, while I make my report. I think I can rely on you to guard Ackworth thoroughly?"

"Trust me, guv'nor!"

A few moments later the prisoner was again gagged, and Martin Caine left the room. The door slammed, and Ackworth was left alone with his guardian.

What the end of the amazing adventure was to be he could not possibly imagine. But he was a young man with a very strong will, and he swore to himself that he would never accede to the demands which had been made of him.



Even as Mr. Yorke stood in the centre of the basement, the cash-box in his hand, the cracked wall collapsed with a roar like that of thunder.

The brickwork flung itself forward full upon the unfortunate man, and as he fell the cash-box flew from his grasp and disappeared into a wide crack which had appeared in the stone flooring. (See page 4.)

CHAPTER V.

Nipper Learns Some News—Caine Reports—The Meeting of the Circle.

NIPPER strode down Gray's Inn Road whistling cheerily. He had left Nelson Lee and Douglas Clifford chatting in the consulting-room. They were, in fact, discussing the progress of the campaign against the Green Triangle. And Nipper, becoming fed-up, had ventured out for a breath of fresh air, and to purchase an evening paper.

Clifford, he knew, was waiting in Nelson Lee's rooms until Sydney Ackworth returned—for the young man had promised to come back immediately after his interview with Harold Yorke. It was now getting near the time when Ackworth should be due back.

As Nipper walked along he wondered how long it would be before he and his master were provided with another opportunity to strike a blow at the Green Triangle.

Curiously enough, even as Nipper was exercising his mind on the subject, an incident occurred which was practically an answer to his thoughts.

The street was rather dark, for most of the shops were closed, and traffic was thinning—both pedestrian and vehicular. In a particularly gloomy portion of the pavement Nipper noticed a man, muffled up, approaching him from the opposite direction. The lad did not take much stock of the stranger, but, as he was passing, the man clumsily lurched into him, and then passed on.

"What the dickens——"

Nipper paused. In his hand was a tiny screwed-up ball of paper. It had been thrust there by the muffled-up man with a quick movement which Nipper had been unprepared for. He turned and gazed after the fellow, and saw that he was now walking at a much slower pace.

Wondering exceedingly, Nipper retraced his steps several yards until he came to a street lamp. And there, with great presence of mind, he took a notebook from his pocket, and pretended to be studying it while he read the note.

There were merely two words and two initials: "Follow me. M. C."

Nipper calmly put the pocket-book away, and leisurely walked in the same direction as the mysterious stranger, tearing the crumpled note into a hundred particles as he did so.

"Martin Caine!" Nipper muttered to himself. "So old Caine's got some more information for the gov'nor? Good man! He's always turning up trumps at the right moment. By gum, I wonder what it means this time?"

Nipper knew very well that Martin Caine was a controlling agent of the league. But he also knew one fact which the Governing Circle itself never suspected. Martin Caine, while apparently working heart and soul with the league, was actually one of Nelson Lee's most faithful helpers. The great detective had, a considerable time since, saved Caine from a terrible death. And the latter, his sympathies already dead against the league's nefarious work, had agreed to assist Nelson Lee to the full extent of his abilities in the great battle against the grim society.

And now, apparently, Martin Caine had fresh news. He was forced to use the most stringent precautions in making his secret reports. For, had a spy of the league discovered the true state of affairs, Caine's life would not have been worth a snap of the fingers.

Nipper followed Caine down a dark side turning, and then into a little lane which was situated quite beyond the inhabited thoroughfares. Here, in a secluded corner which was free from observation, and from listening ears, Martin Caine turned.

Nipper approached him, and the pair silently shook hands.

"Lucky I spotted you, lad," said Caine in a low voice. "It's saved me a lot of trouble. I've got news for Mr. Lee--very important news."

"Any work for us to do?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"Plenty. A young man named Sydney Ackworth started out from your guv'nor's rooms about two hours ago. Well, Nipper, that young gentleman is now a prisoner in the hands of the league in a little cottage in the Sunbury district!"

"Great Jupiter!" Nipper gasped. "Ackworth a prisoner! But what the dickens for? What's the game?"

"I will tell you," proceeded Caine rapidly. "I was forced to do the job because I received the Governing Circle's orders--or, rather, the orders of Dudley Foxcroft, which amounts to the same thing."

And the controlling agent briefly told Nipper precisely where Ackworth was imprisoned, definite directions as to how the spot could be reached, and why the young man had been kidnapped. Nipper stored the information in his keen brain, and knew that he would not forget a single detail.

"What a surprise for the guv'nor!" the lad murmured. "So this affair of the buried plans at Swansea is turning out to be a Green Triangle job after all!"

Martin Caine walked off after a few more words, leaving Nipper to follow after a lapse of several minutes.

Caine mounted a motor-'bus, and was soon speeding westwards. At Charing Cross post-office he alighted, entered the office, and proceeded to write a report on a sheet of plain notepaper, in one of the divisions usually used for telegram-writing. Caine wrote his report in an exceedingly curious kind of shorthand, and then sealed it in an envelope, and addressed it to Dudley Foxcroft, at the Orpheum Club.

Exactly fifteen minutes later a messenger-boy entered the Orpheum Club, and delivered the note into Foxcroft's own hand. The palatial building, apparently one of the most select clubs in the West End, was really the headquarters of the League of the Green Triangle.

Foxcroft read the note with ease—for this was the usual manner in which reports were made to governing members by the league's agents. But he read it with a frown on his face, and with his teeth biting deeply into his cigar.

"So the young fool's proving obstinate!" he muttered. "I half expected something of the sort. Well, I had better run over to Sunbury myself, where Caine failed I'm pretty confident that I can succeed."

But, before going, Foxcroft decided to seek the advice of Professor Zingrave. It happened that a meeting of the Governing Circle was arranged to take place almost within ten minutes.

There were many matters to be discussed—many scoundrelly enterprises to plan—and the meeting promised to be a long one. Dudley Foxcroft decided that the business connected with Sydney Ackworth could not be delayed. He would bring the matter under discussion immediately the Circle had gathered together.

And Foxcroft did so. The Governing Chamber, hidden and unsuspected beneath the Orpheum Club, was very soon occupied by a representative throng. Every member of the Circle was not present; but Sir Roger Hogarth was there, Lord Sylvester, Edmund Gresswell, K.C., Prince Yoni-Saka, the Japanese nobleman, and very many others. And, of course, Professor Cyrus Zingrave presided.

The world-famed scientist was as calm and cool as ever, speaking with his musical voice in perfectly modulated tones. The professor made a striking figure as he stood addressing the leaders of the terrible league.

His high, domed forehead was smooth and white, his long black hair glistened under the electric radiance. The gathering might have been merely an innocent scientific discussion, with Professor Zingrave as the lecturer.

But no. These men, mostly famous and highly respected, were scoundrels all. In this mysterious apartment the league's grim work was planned and concocted. And it was generally from Professor Zingrave's powerful brain that the league's most successful schemes emanated.

On this occasion, however, Dudley Foxcroft had a scheme. He told his fellow governing members all the facts concerning the invention of Stephen Yorke—that the plans were still buried in the fissure, and that the man who could reveal the secret was a prisoner at Sunbury.

Zingrave expressed his approval.

"You have acted with admirable promptitude, Foxcroft," he said softly. "If we can get that invention into our hands there is no telling what a tremendous scoop it will be. Although many years have passed since the disaster, no other engineer has succeeded in producing a machine one half so effective as Yorke's promised to be."

Foxcroft nodded.

"Quite so," he said. "And if I can obtain possession of the plans it will be quite a simple matter for me to alter some insignificant details, and to then produce the designs as my own—or as those of a poor inventor whom I am financing. Once the plans are in our hands we can easily decide upon a course of action."

The discussion was not a long one. Foxcroft suggested, and Zingrave approved, that under the circumstances it would be the best course for Foxcroft to depart immediately for Sunbury, to interview Ackworth, and to force the secret from him.

It would be far better for Foxcroft to see the thing through personally. Once in possession of the secret, he declared, he would travel to Swansea and take possession of the cash-box with his own hands.

And so the financier did not remain in the Governing Chamber a minute longer than was necessary. Having come to a decision, he took his departure at once, intending to make straight for the bungalow by the river—and to adopt force, if necessary, in order to make Sydney Ackworth speak.

But Foxcroft was unaware that Nelson Lee was even then busying himself strenuously on behalf of the league's prisoner; that the great detective and Nipper were listening to the rescue.

And that was ~~all~~ to make all the difference.

CHAPTER VI.

Nelson Lee Acts—The Rush—Ackworth Speaks—A Misfortune.

NELSON LEE was looking very grim.

Nipper was rather breathless, having been running, and having talked a great deal in a small amount of time. The lad had, in fact, just told his master of Martin Caine's news. And Nelson Lee and Douglas Clifford, who was present also, made no attempts to hide their surprise and consternation.

Clifford was simply dumbfounded.

"Well, you could knock me down with a feather!" he gasped. "Young Ackworth captured by the league! Why, I hadn't the slightest notion that the Green Triangle was on the job. How on earth did Foxcroft get to know—"

"My dear fellow, no good will be done by asking riddles," interjected Nelson Lee crisply. "The league's ways are strange and secret ways. The fact remains that Ackworth is a prisoner, and that Foxcroft intends to obtain his secret."

"We're going to Sunbury, gov'nor?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"Immediately," replied his master. "We'll frustrate this plot at the very outset!"

Nelson Lee and Nipper were not long in preparing for departures. They disguised themselves swiftly but thoroughly. Clifford decided to remain at Gray's Inn Road.

"If everything goes satisfactorily we shall return with Ackworth in less than two hours," Nelson Lee told Clifford.

Very shortly afterwards the great crime investigator and his young assistant were travelling towards Sunbury as fast as a taxi-cab would take them. At a certain spot, which Martin Caine had suggested, the vehicle was dismissed, and the two rescuers continued on foot. The district was a quiet one, the river being quite close, and Nelson Lee and Nipper scarcely passed a soul.

When they were nearing the little bungalow, indeed, they might have been in the heart of the country. Everything was still and silent. Caine had given very careful directions, and Nelson Lee knew that he was going right.

The bungalow was situated quite near the river, apparently on the edge of a meadow. Some tall trees grew close by, and the building was reached by a narrow lane, bordered by fairly high hedges, with spacious gaps at intervals.

Nelson Lee and Nipper slipped through one of these gaps, and halted. The cottage was within fifty yards of them, dark and seemingly deserted. But the detective knew that Sydney Ackworth was a prisoner in the front room, behind shuttered windows, and with a league man on guard. Caine had said definitely that only one man was there. So the task of dealing with that gentleman did not promise to be a difficult one.

"We will adopt a ruse——"

Nelson Lee ceased speaking, and gripped Nipper's arm. His keen ears had caught a faint sound; and now, as he listened intently, he recognised the sound at once. Nipper, too, heard it, and looked into his master's face.

"A motor, sir!" he murmured softly.

Nelson Lee nodded. A motor vehicle of some sort was certainly approaching.

It came to a halt a few yards away from the spot where the two would-be rescuers were crouching behind the hedge. Nelson Lee bit his lip with annoyance and vexation. He was too late! Other Green Triangle men had arrived at the spot, and it was now impossible to effect Ackworth's rescue.

Peering through a tiny gap Nelson Lee saw a man alight from the motor-car, and he instantly recognised the newcomer as Dudley Foxcroft himself. He was joined a second later by the driver of the vehicle—who proved to be Martin Caine.

"Dear me, this is interesting!" murmured Nelson Lee to himself. "Foxcroft himself is here! What can the game be, I wonder?"

Voices came to his ears, and he listened intently.

"That is the plan, my friend," came Foxcroft's soft tones. "You and I will see the business through ourselves. I have no doubt that our men are to be trusted, but this is a matter of exceptional importance."

"I think the same, sir," replied Caine. "It's a wise decision of yours to leave nothing to chance. But I'm afraid that Ackworth won't blab."

Foxcroft laughed confidently.

"Ackworth will be forced to speak," he said grimly. "And, as soon as we have the necessary information, we will start straight for Swansea—without any delay. There is a train from Paddington at midnight, and we will travel by it. And in the morning we will visit the fissure in the cliff and gain possession of the plans."

Nelson Lee set his teeth.

So Dudley Foxcroft meant to do the work himself! All in a moment, the detective's plans were altered. He knew that he could not rescue Ackworth now; but another scheme had entered his fertile brain.

After all, his main object was to strike a blow at the League of the Green Triangle. At present there was not an atom of proof against Dudley Foxcroft; but if Nelson Lee could "nail" the wealthy and respectable financier, he would have struck a severe blow indeed.

There was only one course to adopt.

And that was to allow the whole thing to go through—to allow Ackworth to reveal the secret, and to let Foxcroft journey to Swansea and enter the fissure. But Nelson Lee would be in the fissure first; and would catch the Governing Member absolutely red-handed. The proof would then be conclusive, and Foxcroft would be dishonoured and disgraced. His downfall would be complete.

But there was one doubtful matter for consideration.

Would Sydney Ackworth "blab"? Nelson Lee was confident that the young man would point-blank refuse to say a word. In that case this new plan would come to nothing. It was imperative that Ackworth should speak. In order to entrap Foxcroft, Ackworth must apparently play the traitor.

Nelson Lee swiftly came to a decision.

"Nipper!" he breathed. "I am going on a little expedition. Remain here, perfectly still, and wait for my return."

"But what's the wheeze, sir?" gasped Nipper startled.

"I cannot stop to explain. Don't move from here."

And, before Nipper could protest further, Nelson Lee had slipped off among the bushes. For a few yards the detective skirted the hedge; then, crouching low, he went off at an angle, and made his way by a detour to the back of the bungalow. He performed this manoeuvre so skilfully that neither Foxcroft nor Caine had the slightest suspicion of what was occurring. Caine, of course, believed that Ackworth had by this time been rescued. But he affected to be heart and soul with Foxcroft's plan.

Nelson Lee found himself confronted by a small rear door. As he had suspected, it was merely fastened with a catch, and an ordinary lock. Thick bushes grew in profusion at the back of the cottage, so the detective's movements were screened. In less than a minute the door was silently opened; a skeleton key had made short work of the cheap, common lock.

With noiseless tread Nelson Lee moved across a kind of scullery to a door under which a dim light showed. He knew that Ackworth and his guardian were in that room. Bending down, the detective applied his eye to the keyhole. He could not see Ackworth, but the emissary of the league was in full view, sitting on a chair, calmly smoking.

Even while Nelson Lee was thinking of a ruse to get rid of the man—so that he could have a word alone with Ackworth—the problem was solved.

The league man suddenly sat up straight, and then rose. He had heard voices outside, for Foxcroft and Caine were approaching the bungalow. Nelson Lee saw him move across to the outer door, and open it.

The cottage was a very small one, and the front door led straight into the room. The man passed outside, into the rustic porch, and the door

swung to behind him. For the moment Ackworth was alone! But, as he was bound and gagged, there was no chance of his getting away.

Nelson Lee did not waste a second.

He opened the thin door, and put his head round it. Sydney Ackworth was bound to a chair, within two yards. He saw Nelson Lee at once, and his eyes widened with astonishment. But he could not speak, for he was gagged. And, as he watched, the newcomer peeled off a false beard.

"Ackworth, I am Nelson Lee!" breathed the detective. "You recognise me?"

The young man nodded swiftly, his heart beating with wild hope.

"Two men will enter this room immediately," went on Nelson Lee. "They will ask you to reveal the position of the fissure. Tell them! You understand—tell them! I am on the track, and I wish to catch the scoundrels red-handed. It is imperative that you should reveal the secret."

Ackworth's eyes expressed his surprise.

"Quick, man!" urged Nelson Lee. "Do you understand?"

The prisoner nodded.

"You will reveal the position of the fissure?"

Another nod.

"Splendid!" breathed the detective. "Have no fear, Ackworth—you will be rescued from this plight almost at once. Good-bye! I must not stay another second."

It was a near touch, even then. For as Nelson Lee softly closed the door, the outer door opened, and Dudley Foxcroft and Martin Caine entered—both masked beyond recognition.

Nelson Lee did not wait. To slip out of the cottage, and to relock the back door, was the work of a few moments. Then he noiselessly crept back to the spot where his young assistant was anxiously waiting.

"Oh, here you are, guv'nor!" murmured Nipper, in relief. "Where've you been?"

In a few words the detective explained the position. And Nipper fairly gasped when he learned of the fresh plan of action.

"Foxcroft and Caine are leaving for Swansea by the midnight train," Nelson Lee breathed. "Well, Nipper, we must forestall them. We must get to the fissure first. There is a train leaving for Cardiff at ten-thirty—a fast express. Well, we can hire a racing motor-car in Cardiff and be at the old house on the cliffs long before Foxcroft and Martin Caine arrive."

"Yes; but shall we be able to catch the ten-thirty from Paddington?"

"Quite easily. It is by no means late," replied the detective.

Very soon the door of the cottage opened, and Foxcroft and Martin Caine emerged. For a moment they paused, and Foxcroft said something to the man who was on guard; then the pair walked briskly towards the stationary motor-car.

"So much for your efforts, my friend," Foxcroft was saying. "You declared that you could not get Ackworth's secret from him. Yet, after a little persuasion from me, he very soon came round."

"I can't understand it, sir," said Caine in a puzzled voice.

Two minutes later the motor-car started, and Foxcroft and Caine departed. After the sound of the automobile had finally died away, Nelson Lee and Nipper emerged from their place of concealment and stood in the lane.

"Poor Caine was in a great way, Nipper," murmured Nelson Lee. "He thinks that everything is going wrong. And I'm afraid it will be many hours before his anxiety is relieved."

Before Nelson Lee could speak further a startling thing occurred.

Without warning several dark figures emerged from the hedges, and they flung themselves upon the detective and Nipper before the latter could

prepare for the assault. The attack was so unexpected that Nelson Lee had no time to draw his revolver.

The scuffle was short and sharp.

The odds were overwhelming, and almost before the fight had started Nelson Lee and Nipper were lying on their backs in the lane, held down by strong arms. Their hands were rapidly bound, and their ankles similarly treated.

At the moment of success had come disaster! Even as the pair were setting off for Paddington, in order to forestall Dudley Foxcroft, they had been captured by spies of the League of the Green Triangle!

CHAPTER VII.

The Rising Floods—Clifford Takes a Hand—Too late!

"**T**HERE, Mr. Nelson Lee, that's what you get for interfering!"

The voice was harsh and sneering, and the detective made no reply to the taunt. He would have found it very difficult to do so, for a thick pad was jammed into his mouth with a strong piece of cloth tied round the lower part of his face, thus making an very effective gag. Close beside Nelson Lee, Nipper was in a precisely similar plight.

Two hours had elapsed since that startling incident in the lane against the little bungalow.

After their capture Nelson Lee and Nipper had been carried into a back room of the cottage, and had been informed that they were in the clutches of the Green Triangle. Having known this already, it was not exactly stunning news.

The pair had been left while their captors held a consultation. Over an hour passed before the prisoners were again visited; and they had been so securely bound that to escape was utterly impossible.

They had been carried roughly out into the night, the league men obviously highly elated at their capture. They knew that the Governing Circle would reward them liberally for having rid the league of its worst enemies. The capture had been, apparently, a mere matter of chance—the rogues having come across Nelson Lee and Nipper more by accident than anything else.

But the fact remained that the situation was appalling.

Dudley Foxcroft had gone, taking the secret of the fissure with him, and by this time was almost due to start for Swansea. Nelson Lee's plan to forestall the scoundrel was now knocked on the head; it seemed that the league was to win the game after all.

And what was the fate of Nelson Lee and Nipper to be?

Their captors, none of whom the detective knew, had prepared a terrible fate for them. At the present moment the position of the two prisoners was about as dire as it could possibly be.

They were bound to the wooden wall of an old, disused boathouse—a boat-house which was built on piles in a little backwater of the river. The floor of the little building was the river itself; for it was one of those boat-houses which accommodate skiffs and boats without drawing them from the water.

It will be understood, therefore, that Nelson Lee and Nipper was submerged in the water as far as their shoulders. Only their heads and necks projected into the air, and already, though they had not been placed in this terrible position many minutes, they were chilled and cold. They

could not move their heads, for strong cord was drawn across their throats, and fastened to the wall.

"Yes, that is what you get for interfering!" went on one of the league men callously. "You fully understand your position, don't you? Owing to the recent rains the river is swollen, and it is rising higher every minute. Before long it will be rise above your heads, and then—— Well, you can imagine the rest, I reckon!"

The man was standing on the little platform which was built on one side of the boathouse.

Nelson Lee was calm, but his heart was filled with horror and fury.

So this was to be the end! The great campaign against the League of the Green Triangle was to end in miserable failure; he and Nipper were to forfeit their lives! Instead of the Green Triangle being stamped out, it would be Nelson Lee and Nipper who would succumb.

Hope was almost dead in the breast of the great detective. When he had least expected it, disaster had befallen him. And, to make the grim tragedy more galling, his capture had been more or less of a fluke. There was no hope or chance of rescue, for who was there to perform such an office?

Fastened to the coats of both victims was a little tin disc, with a green triangle neatly painted upon it. When their bodies were discovered—perhaps days hence—the police would know that the mysterious league had struck another blow. And there would be no clue; the murderers would escape scot free.

Having delivered himself of his brutal utterances, the man, who was apparently the leader of the league's murderers, quietly made his exit from the boathouse and left the prisoners to themselves and to their bitter thoughts.

Conversation was impossible, for they were both gagged. And it was soon evident that the man's words regarding the floods were no idle ones; for even during the last five minutes the water had risen from their armpits to their necks.

The end could be no longer than thirty minutes in coming.

Once Nipper attempted to free himself, but he soon realised that there was nothing to be gained by struggling. On the contrary, the lad caused himself agony by making the ropes cut into his flesh.

Yet, could the unfortunate pair only have known it, rescue was almost at hand—in spite of its seeming impossibility.

And the rescuer was to be none other than Douglas Clifford.

The reason for Clifford's presence in the vicinity of the bungalow—for this boathouse was within a stone's throw of the cottage—was obvious, and quite simple. Nelson Lee had told Clifford that he would return with Ackworth before two hours had elapsed. Clifford had waited the specified time with ill-concealed impatience, but with no feeling of alarm.

When two and a half hours had passed, however, Clifford began to have doubts. He became restless, and paced the detective's consulting-room anxiously and with growing misgivings. At eleven o'clock he became positively alarmed, and decided to hang about no longer. He would travel to Sunbury—he had precise directions—and ascertain what was happening. If he missed his friends on the way no harm would be done.

And so it came about that Douglas Clifford hastened to the bungalow beside the Thames in the vicinity of Sunbury. He arrived within sight of the little cottage to find the place seemingly deserted and uninhabited. Creeping forward, intent upon closer investigation, he arrived at the side of the bungalow which bordered the river.

And here he suddenly crouched down, all his senses on the alert.

He had seen figures leaving a low building about fifty yards away, which had a curious appearance of being built right in the water. Even as Clifford watched, he realised that the low building was, indeed, a boathouse.

Hidden behind the thickness of some dense bushes he waited. There were several men, and they were talking in low tones. The words became audible to Clifford very soon.

"Pretty rotten business, but it had to be done!" one man muttered. "Wish I had a nerve like you, Hobson!"

"You're white-livered!" said another man contemptuously. "Ain't Nelson Lee and his brat the worst enemies of the league? It's a good thing they're settled—that's what I say! I've got no pity to waste."

"We'd better get clear of this place, mate," said a third voice. "No need to wait until the 'tec and his youngster are right under. They can't escape, anyhow. Wonder how long it'll be before they're discovered——"

The low voices died away as the men passed on. And Douglas Clifford crouched behind the bushes, his heart throbbing, and his brain in a terrible whirl. So Nelson Lee and Nipper had fallen victims to the league.

"Good heavens! There can be no mistaking the meaning of those words!" Clifford hissed to himself. "Exactly what has happened I hardly dare imagine. Have Lee and Nipper already been done to death?"

What had happened—what had happened?

Clifford displayed wonderful coolness and clear-headedness by remaining still; but at last he could stand the suspense no longer, and he swiftly ran across to the low boathouse. When he arrived in the shadow of it he turned.

But the coast was clear now. The league's assassins had departed completely out of sight and earshot. It seemed as though Clifford were alone—utterly alone. The silence of the night struck a chill to his very marrow.

A cold stab seemed to strike his heart. He turned to the boathouse and saw a low, ramshackle doorway in front of him. And he found it a stiff job to pluck enough courage to open the door. What would he find within the building?

The door was fastened merely by a rusty catch, and he lifted this and swung the rotten woodwork open. As he entered he drew the door to after him, and took out a little electric torch—a waistcoat-pocket affair which he always carried.

It was lucky for him he flashed on the light at the moment he did, for another step forward would have plunged him into the murky water. Right at his feet the river gurgled and sighed against the slime-covered wood. Clifford shifted the beam of light round, and then held it perfectly still upon one spot.

At the same second a sob of amazement and untold relief escaped his dry lips. Two pairs of eyes were watching him, and he gave a great start. The sight before him was a startling enough one, in all conscience.

Nelson and Nipper were there. They were tied to the wall of the building, and heavy gags made them dumb. The rising river, swelling rapidly, owing to the heavy rains, had covered them right up to their chins, and as Clifford watched the water rose sluggishly and covered Nipper's gagged mouth and his bare nostrils.

Rescue had come only in the nick of time!

"Thank God!" said Douglas Clifford huskily.

It was exactly four minutes later the doomed pair were rescued. Clifford had slashed through their bonds, and they were stamping about, trying to regain their natural warmth, and gasping and spluttering.

"Clifford, I won't question you," said Nelson Lee hoarsely. "I won't ask how you came to be on this spot. But Fate must have guided your footsteps. Another five minutes and both Nipper and I would have been no more."

Clifford gripped the detective's hand.

"But what does it mean, Lee?" he asked. "How did you——"

"Why, those murderous rotters sprang out upon us!" put in Nipper hotly. "They——"

"We have no time to talk, Nipper," interjected Nelson Lee. "We have been delayed, and Foxcroft is already on the way to Swansea, for midnight is just passed. We must act—and act at once!"

"But—but you've got to get to bed!" gasped Clifford.

"Bed! Bed when Foxcroft is stealing a march on us!" exclaimed Nelson Lee grimly. "What do you say, Nipper? Are you game to get straight to work?"

"Game for anything, guv'nor!" said Nipper pluckily.

"Then we will set Ackworth at liberty, and then get straight home," went on the detective, in even tones. "After a swift change into dry things we will set out for Paddington, having meanwhile arranged—by telephone—for a special train to Swansea. We are too late for the ordinary trains, and so will charter a special!"

Events were moving apace, indeed!

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CHAPTER VIII.

The Special Train—Wireless at Work—The Train Wreckers.

NELSON LEE and Nipper had come to no real harm; their ordeal in the boathouse, terrible as it had been, had not injured them in any way. They were cold and chilled, perhaps, but both were as tough as nails, and brisk action restored their circulation.

Clifford had undoubtedly saved their lives; there was no doubt about that. And Nelson Lee and Nipper were truly grateful. But the urgency of the moment was such that there was scarcely any time even to express thankfulness.

Dudley Foxcroft was even now on his way to Swansea. And he was possessed of the secret of the fissure! Unless almost superhuman steps were taken the scoundrelly financier would obtain old Stephen Yorke's invention.

The only way was to get to the fissure in time to prevent the theft.

First of all the trio entered the bungalow and rescued Ackworth from his unfortunate position. To Nelson Lee's surprise the little building was deserted save for the prisoner. The league man who had been left on guard was nowhere to be found.

Ackworth threw light on the matter, however. He declared that the man had suddenly become alarmed, and had slipped out of the cottage two minutes before the rescuers entered. And he had apparently gained his freedom.

Nelson Lee did not worry, however. He did not see how the man could do much harm now. But the detective was wrong. Knowing as he did the power of the great league, he even then underestimated the Green Triangle's amazing organisation. Ackworth's jailer reported the fact that Nelson Lee and Nipper had escaped, and that Ackworth had been freed. And, very soon, other league spies were getting busy.

It was practically impossible to obtain a taxi in that quiet neighbourhood, and at such an hour. So a big garage was soon located, and the proprietor unceremoniously knocked up. In a very few minutes a motor-car was speeding away for Gray's Inn Road, and in due course the quartette arrived at Nelson Lee's rooms.

While Clifford and Ackworth talked animatedly over the exciting happenings in the consulting-room, Nelson Lee and Nipper hastily changed into dry things. Before doing so, however, the detective rang up a certain department of the Great Western Railway at Paddington, and put matters in training for the charter of a "special."

In an astonishingly short space of time, Nelson Lee and his young assistant were ready. They hustled into the consulting-room, attired in travelling coats and thick mufflers. And the detective had taken care to arm himself with a thick wad of banknotes.

"Now, you two chaps, Nipper and I are off," exclaimed the detective crisply. "Every second is of value, and we can't waste a single one. We'll have a long chat over this stirring business when the matter is settled. Things have gone wrong—and they might have been fatal but for your commendably prompt action, Merrick—and we must do our utmost to set everything right."

"But, after such an ordeal, are you in a fit state——"

"Fit, my dear Merrick?" laughed Nelson Lee. "I feel ready for anything. And I'll warrant Nipper is eager enough to start the chase."

"Rather, guv'nor!" said Nipper promptly.

"We can have a nap in the train," went on his master. "Now, you fellows, just a word of advice. Take Ackworth home with you, Merrick, and visit Harold Yorke the very first thing in the morning. Having acquainted him with the facts hurry with him to Swansea—you will find me at the Hotel Metropole, in Wind Street. By the time you arrive I trust everything will be over. It will, indeed, be settled one way or the other."

And in another minute Nelson Lee and Nipper hustled off. The hired motor-car was waiting below, and it soon whirled the pair to Paddington. As they were entering the great station the time was exactly one o'clock.

Nelson Lee effectually woke the railway officials up.

His 'phone call had paved the way, and before fifteen minutes had elapsed a special train, consisting of an express engine, a single first-class coach, and a guard's van, pulled into the station.

Desperate means were essential now, and Nelson Lee was adopting the only possible course open to him. The special train cost a huge sum, but the detective paid it cheerfully and promptly. Not only was he intent on saving a fortune, but a Governing Member of the Green Triangle was to be dealt with.

"You're lucky, Mr. Lee," exclaimed a high official, as the train was on the point of starting. "It so happens that there's not much traffic at this time, or your departure would have been considerably delayed. As it is, you'll have a clear run."

"And we shall pass the Swansea express at Cardiff?"

"Yes. The telegraph has been getting to work, and the line will be clear the whole way down," replied the other. "You'll travel at a much faster speed than the ordinary train, and will catch up with the express at Cardiff. Anyhow, the express will be stopped at Cardiff and side-tracked in order to allow your special to pass through. You'll arrive in Swansea a full hour ahead of the midnight express."

A minute later the special train steamed out of Paddington, and was soon roaring through the night at tremendous speed. The engine-driver had been interviewed by Nelson Lee, and had been tipped with a fiver. The worthy man was determined to get every ounce of speed out of his iron monster, and to do the trip in record time.

But Nelson Lee was unaware of one thing.

Before he had arrived at Paddington a shabbily-dressed man had been lounging about. To be frank, the shabby man was a spy of the league, and he had been stationed there in consequence of the report given by Ackworth's escaped guardian. He saw the detective arrive, and he saw him depart.

Then, without wasting a second—having seen with his own eyes that Nelson Lee had actually started for Swansea with the intention of arriving before Foxcroft—he hurried away.

The situation, from the Governing Circle's point of view, was desperate enough.

And drastic steps were taken.

The power and resources of the League of the Green Triangle were amazing and extraordinary. The organisation of the sinister society was absolutely perfect. Even now, when it seemed positive that Nelson Lee would triumph, the means to encompass the detective's destruction were put into practice.

The exciting events of this memorable night were by no means over!

Already packed with peril and surprises, there was to be another grim trap laid. But Nelson Lee and Nipper were already rushing through the darkness on board the special train. How could the league possibly act?

The answer is simple. Within fifteen minutes of the spy's report, a secret wireless station of the league's was sending its message through the dim atmosphere.

Being in code, there was no fear of a Government wireless apparatus picking up the message. Even so, it would have been indecipherable. The cryptic message could only be understood by the league's members.

Without delay activity made itself apparent in Bristol, where the urgent instructions had been received.

A powerful racing motor-car started off, and turned its head in the direction of the mouth of the river Severn. Its destination, in fact, was the famous Severn tunnel—through which Nelson Lee's special would have to pass.

The automobile arrived at the mouth of the tunnel with plenty of time to spare in which its occupants could do their dread work. They were two well-dressed men, and they had already ascertained certain facts.

After the Swansea express had passed—and that would be in about half an hour—there was no other train until the special roared along in pursuit. So the work was straightforward and simple. There could be no mistake.

The two rogues crouched behind a bush in the cutting, close against the tunnel-mouth, and waited. The spot was desolate and dark, and there was no fear of interruption or discovery.

In due course the express rumbled within earshot, and flashed by.

"All clear now, Butler," one of the men said softly. "Our chaps are in that train, and Nelson Lee won't live to reach the other end of the tunnel. It's a grim business this—but orders are orders."

"Oh, don't grumble! Our job's simple enough; and we shall be well paid."

"Yes, that's one consolation."

And the two train-wreckers, cheered by the thought of the large reward to come, crept down into the tunnel and set about their murderous task.

CHAPTER IX.

What Nipper Saw—The Smash in the Tunnel—The Last Lap!

"GETTING on, sir," said Nipper cheerfully. "Just passed through Bristol."

Lee wore a very thoughtful frown, and sat smoking a cigar with jerky, impatient puffs. The special train was tearing along at full speed.

Nipper turned from the window, against which he was standing, and eyed his master curiously.

"What's up, guv'nor?" he asked. "You look worried."

"I am worried, young 'un."

"What the dickens about? Everything's as simple as the alphabet now!"

Nelson Lee looked hard at Nipper.

"I wish I were as optimistic as you," he said quietly. "I have been pondering over the matter ever since we left London, but more particularly within the last half-hour. Don't forget, Nipper, that the man who was on guard over Ackworth made his escape. It is almost certain that he reported our escape from the boathouse."

"Well, suppose he did? It's too late for the league to act now, sir."

"Have you forgotten one thing?" asked the detective shrewdly. "What about the wireless? The league has wireless stations in many parts of the country, and there is sure to be one at Swansea, or within fifty miles."

"My hat! Then—then——"

"Ah, you begin to understand now?" went on Nelson Lee. "Green Triangle agents will possibly be on the alert in Swansea, intent on killing us, or delaying us. When we arrive in the great Welsh seaport we must exercise every care and precaution."

"Um! I never thought of that, guv'nor," said Nipper. "Hadn't we better think of some wheeze to diddle the blighters?"

"I am trying to think of a plan even now."

Nelson Lee went on smoking, and Nipper turned to the window again. The night was far from cold, so the window was wide open. Nipper hung his head out, and his hair waved madly about in the rushing wind caused by the train's speed.

The sky was clear here, and the stars gleamed down brightly.

Leaning out as far as he dared, Nipper could see the footplate of the great engine, with the firebox open, sending a shaft of lurid light into the sky. The fireman was piling more coals on, but in a few seconds the door was closed, and the glare disappeared. Nipper gazed along the embankment ahead, and as he did so the engine emitted a shrill long blast from its whistle.

"Ah, we're just entering the Severn Tunnel," Nipper heard his master remark.

The lad didn't turn, but continued to lean out. He wanted to feel the effect of the train plunging headlong into the black opening. Ahead, he could just see the low opening, and his gaze wandered to the embankment bordering the track.

And he saw something which caused him some little surprise.

A man suddenly emerged from behind a thick bush, and stood watching the short special train, and he raised his fist and shook it. Then, while he stood there, a second man appeared, and dragged the other back.

Nipper turned swiftly.

"It's queer, sir!" he shouted, in order to make himself thoroughly heard. "Some chap just emerged from behind a bush and shook his giddy fist at me! Then another fellow pulled him back. Looks a bit fishy, doesn't it?"

Nelson Lee started.

Then, without a word, he simply leapt upwards and dragged at the communication cord. He pulled it with all his strength, and repeated the performance again and again. As he was doing so the train plunged into the tunnel to the accompaniment of a shrieking roar from the grinding brakes.

So abrupt was the stoppage, in fact, that Nelson Lee and Nipper were pitched forcibly against the cushions. The lad was somewhat surprised, and stared at his master with wide-open eyes.

"What's the idea, guv'nor?" he asked. "Why did you pull the cord?"

"Because there is a possibility of an obstruction being placed across the line," replied Nelson Lee grimly. "I had been thinking of such a thing, but dismissed it from my mind. When you mentioned those two men——"

The detective's utterance was interrupted by a terrific crash, and a still more terrific, jarring lurch. The coach seemed to jump clean into the air, and then it swayed giddily, and jolted with such violence that its occupants were flung to the floor.

As they picked themselves up the crashing ceased, and only a roar of escaping steam could be heard. Nipper was somewhat pale, and trembling violently; but he was quite cool and collected.

"A smash, guv'nor," he said huskily. "You were right! What would have happened if the train hadn't pulled up?"

"One needs very little imagination to form a guess," replied the detective with set teeth. "We should have been dashed to pieces, Nipper. Thank Heaven you spotted those men at the second you did. It was a providential stroke of luck; I can only believe that Fate guided your vision!"

Nelson Lee, in fact, had proved himself to be possessed of wonderful presence of mind. The slightest delay would have meant disaster. The detective had acted so promptly that the brakes were applied to such effect that when the engine struck the obstruction upon the rails—a mass of piled-up sleepers—no loss of life was entailed. The engine leapt the rails, and the coach followed suit, glass being broken and the permanent way torn up for many yards. But the smash was not the death-dealing affair it had been planned to be.

The door of the compartment was jammed slightly, but Nelson Lee soon had it open. He and Nipper jumped out, and found a bright lantern gleaming into their faces.

"You all right, sir?" exclaimed the guard's voice anxiously. "By thunder! There's been some foul work here! If you hadn't pulled the cord we should have been smashed to smithereens!"

"You must thank this lad for saving your life," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "It was he who gave me the warning. But what about the engine crew?"

The driver and fireman at that moment came staggering up. Both were badly shaken, and the fireman's forehead was gashed; but they were both whole.

"The devils—the infernal brutes!" raved the engine-driver furiously. "I've been on the footplate for thirty odd years, but I've never met with anything like this before! Who in the name of all the fiends can have done this vile work?"

"No time for explanations now," said Nelson Lee crisply. "I think the would-be murderers are close at hand, however. Nipper and I will attempt to capture them. Meanwhile, one of you must hasten to the nearest signal-box and give warning of this disaster—otherwise a real tragedy will occur."

The wrecked train, in fact, was foul with the other set of rails, and it was extremely urgent that action should be taken at once. Nelson Lee knew that he could trust the railway men to give the necessary warning.

So he and Nipper, flashing an electric torch in front of them, hurried down the tunnel to the exit.

"Whereabouts did you see the men?" the detective asked as he ran.

"Fairly close to the tunnel, sir," replied Nipper breathlessly. "About a hundred yards away, I should think."

Nelson Lee realised that the men had been waiting to see the results of their handiwork. Having heard the crash of the accident they would probably think that their murderous efforts had been successful. Even now they were probably congratulating themselves upon their success.

With his revolver in his hand the detective emerged from the tunnel and looked about him with keen eyes. He meant grim business, and would shoot at sight. If he failed to do so, he would probably be shot himself.

But everything was quiet and still.

After the blackness of the tunnel the starlight seemed almost bright, and the detective hastily mounted the embankment with Nipper close at his heels.

The grass was soft and thick, and the pair made no sound as they progressed. At last they came to a spot where only a hedge stood between them and the roadway. And as they crept up behind the hedge they distinctly heard a sudden metallic ring and then the soft whirring of a powerful motor.

"By James!" murmured Nelson Lee tensely. "A motor-car! The engine has just been started, young 'un! We may yet arrive in Swansea in time!"

To tell the truth, the detective had been bitterly telling himself that all efforts to frustrate Dudley Foxcroft's designs were now hopeless. Since the special train was wrecked the Swansea express would proceed to its destination.

But here, by a wonder trick of Providence, was a fast automobile which would travel to Swansea almost as quickly as a train itself. It was particularly ironic that it should be the property of the men who had attempted to murder Nelson Lee and Nipper.

The motor-car had not yet started, and the hidden pair could hear voices and could see, through a gap, two dim figures preparing to board the vehicle.

Without warning Nelson Lee sprang into the roadway and hurled himself with all his strength at one of the men. Without the slightest compunction the famous crime investigator brought the butt of his revolver down with terrific force upon the scoundrel's skull. Without even a cry the man crumpled up and fell to the stony road.

The second man let out a bellow of fury and reached round to his hip-pocket. He was standing in the car itself. But as he was in the act of drawing his own revolver Nelson Lee flung his own weapon straight into the league man's face.

With a cry of agony the fellow staggered back, tripped, and fell out of the car backwards. He lay upon the ground groaning and cursing violently.

"Hop in, Nipper!" rapped out Nelson Lee.

Nipper, who had been hoping that he would be able to take a hand, obeyed without question. His master slipped into the driver's seat and pressed the clutch home, accelerating the engine at the same time.

With a defiant roar from the exhaust the automobile lurched forward, leaving its original owners lying upon the roadway completely knocked out of time. Solely owing to brisk promptitude Nelson Lee had gained another chance of success. But he knew only too well that it was touch and go now—that the odds were all in the favour of Dudley Foxcroft.

The car was an excellent one, with a powerful engine, and with a good store of fuel. There was nothing to prevent a swift run to Swansea. It

fairly flew along the dark roads, Nelson Lee caring nothing about the two men who were now left far behind.

All the detective's thoughts were ahead.

Would he and Nipper arrive at the fissure in time to save Harold Yorke's property, and to effect the downfall of another Governing Member of the league?

What was the end of this perilous adventure to be?

CHAPTER X.

The Arrival—Caire Reveals His True Colours—Finis.

"**A**T last!" exclaimed Nipper. "That house is the Hermitage, guv'nor, as sure as we've been having the very dickens of a time. On the whole, we've got here jolly quickly, and— Oh, crikey! We're too late—Foxcroft and Caine are already here!"

Nipper's tone was one of dismay. The car, with Nelson Lee at the wheel, was jolting up the ruddy lane which led to the old ruined house. It was now broad daylight, of course, and the journey had been made in record time. As Nipper pointed, the detective could see a small motor-car standing against the wall of the house.

"Excellent!" exclaimed Nelson Lee, with set face. "Splendid, Nipper! I was prepared for the very worst, and now we have visible evidence that the game is not yet lost."

"But we're too late, sir!"

"How do you make that out? If Foxcroft had been here and had departed we should have indeed been too late. But that deserted car is sufficient proof that Foxcroft and Caine are, at this very moment, within the fissure!"

Nipper's eyes danced.

"That means another scrap!" he exclaimed with satisfaction. "My stars! We're having some excitement this trip, and no blessed mistake. Well, I'm quite ready for another little dust-up!"

The journey had been one of breakneck speed and hairbreadth escapes on corners, but Nelson Lee's nerve was in no way impaired. He was still as grim as ever, and his hands were perfectly steady. Dark rings showed round his eyes, caused by the strain of the ordeal—but a great hope filled his breast that all would yet turn out triumphantly.

Nipper, too, was anxious to see the end of the case. He rather liked strenuous work, but things had been a little too strenuous during the past twelve hours even for him.

The car was brought to a standstill on the opposite side of the house to the automobile, which was already there. And Nelson Lee and Nipper hopped out and hastened towards the plantation which concealed the entrance to the fissure. Their limbs were stiff, but neither of them noticed the discomfort. They were all intent upon the task in hand.

Having precise directions it was a simple matter to find the pit-like depression which concealed the opening of the fissure. Nelson Lee led the way, and with extreme caution he wormed his way into the pitch blackness, taking care to have his revolver where he could grip it at a second's notice.

Nipper came close at his master's heels—literally. For the detective's boots were within an inch of the lad's face. Very shortly, however, the tunnel-like aperture widened somewhat, so that the explorers were enabled to get into a crouching position.

Then, with light tread, the pair clambered downwards until, at last, they stood in the low roofed cavern which was situated about twenty feet below the surface. The formation here was decidedly curious; the cavern extended a good distance in either direction, and right across the floor of it ran the fissure which formed a sheer abyss to the submerged cave at the cliff base.

Nelson Lee's feelings had been somewhat mixed so far; but now he knew that he had not failed. In addition to the dim light which was admitted from above, another light proceeded from one portion of the cavern itself. And, when Nelson Lee and Nipper set foot upon the rock floor, they beheld a spectacle which filled them with satisfaction and excitement.

Dudley Foxcroft and Martin Caine were right up one corner of the cavern, bending over the fateful cash-box, examining its contents by the light of an electric torch. They were so engrossed in their task that they saw or heard nothing of the new-comers. Indeed, the latter's approach had been so silent that there was nothing surprising in this. As they watched, Nelson Lee and Nipper retreated somewhat into the opposite portion of the cavern. The fissure lay between them and the other pair.

And while Nelson Lee was wondering how to act, the final scene in the stirring drama was enacted. Nipper, backing into the recesses of the cavern with his master, suddenly kicked against a loose piece of rock. In that hollow cavity the sound was intensified.

Dudley Foxcroft looked up quickly—and stared straight into Nelson Lee's face. To do the scoundrel justice, he displayed wonderful coolness. For, without hesitating a second, he whipped a revolver from his coat pocket, and fired.

The action was almost lightning-like in its swiftness; and Nelson Lee was forced to admit that he had not been prepared for it.

That which happened next was totally unexpected by both parties. It was amazing and startling. The report of the revolver—one of large calibre—echoed like thunder in the low cavern, and the air quivered and shook.

The bullet struck the rock a clear yard from Nelson Lee's head; and then it seemed as though a second earthquake was happening! With a rumbling roar a great mass of rocks fell from the roof, causing a terrific dust, and reverberating like thunder. And when the dust cleared Foxcroft and Caine saw that the other half of the cavern had completely disappeared! The fall of rock had filled up the cavity from roof to floor, and the other side of the fissure was now merely a broken wall of boulders.

Nelson Lee and Nipper had utterly disappeared!

"Good heavens!" gasped Martin Caine, with a pale face. "They are buried! The rocks have fallen down and crushed them! Nelson Lee and Nipper are dead!"

Dudley Foxcroft grated out an oath.

"I did not expect such an easy triumph!" he exclaimed harshly. "But I don't think Nelson Lee and Nipper are dead, Caine. By the look of these rocks I am convinced only a small portion have fallen. There is a big cavity behind, and those hounds are imprisoned in a living tomb!"

Caine's face flushed with hope.

"Alive!" he cried. "Thank Heaven for that! We can rescue them——"

"Rescue them!" cut in Foxcroft sharply. "Are you mad, Caine? Leo and Nipper will remain there, alive or dead, until they rot! It matters not to us whether they are still breathing. There is no escape for them!"

And Martin Caine, whose sole interests were with Nelson Lee, felt himself boiling and fuming with an uncontrollable rage. His every instinct was dead against the League of the Green Triangle. He was only working with the league because it would have meant death to back out, and because

he was materially assisting Nelson Lee in the campaign against the dread organisation.

But Nelson Lee and Nipper were imprisoned—possibly fatally injured! In a second Martin Caine became a madman, and his fury was directed against the man who had caused the tragic occurrence to come about.

“You have killed them!” he shouted wildly. “It was your doing, Foxcroft——”

“What is this?” snarled Foxcroft. “Are you mad, Caine?”

“Yes, I am mad—mad with hatred against you and the rest of the infernal league!” cried Martin Caine, in a quivering voice. “After what has just occurred I cannot keep my secret any longer. You think that my interests are with the league—that I am heart and soul with you in your foul work. I am not! Do you hear me—I curse the very day that I joined the Green Triangle! For months past I have been working against the league—I have been supplying Nelson Lee with facts which enabled him to bring about the downfall of many of your accursed partners!”

The Governing Member became galvanised into action.

He simply flung himself at Caine, imagining that he would gain the advantage by so doing. But Martin Caine was quite prepared for the onslaught. He lunged out with his right fist, and met Foxcroft's chin with a staggering crash.

Foxcroft uttered a strangled cry and fell back. And as he picked himself up he gripped his revolver with deadly intent. The cavern was dim, and he could scarcely see Caine in the deep recesses. But Foxcroft intended to blaze away until a bullet found its mark.

But Caine guessed what was about to happen. And he followed up his advantage without a second's hesitation. Striding forward he wrenched the revolver from his companion's hand and stepped back.

“Now, you cur!” he panted. “You are at my mercy! You have not the pluck of a mouse, and I am going to——”

With a snarl of rage Foxcroft glared round him and saw some loose chunks of rock on the other edge of the cleft. With his breath hissing between his lips in great gasps he staggered to his feet intending to grab the boulders.

But, as he stepped forward he swayed drunkenly, for his head was dizzy and singing with the blow he had received. Black murder was in his heart.

He lurched forward in order to recover his balance. And, as fate would have it, he tripped upon a loose particle of rock, thrown there by the recent collapse, and fell forward with a terrible cry.

For, as Foxcroft was falling, he saw the fate which was awaiting him. He endeavoured to draw back, but it was too late. The next second he plunged down the cleft with a despairing scream.

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As Foxcroft had intimated, Nelson Lee and Nipper had not been seriously injured by the fall of rock. They were scratched and bruised, but otherwise none the worse for their thrilling adventure; and before half an hour had elapsed, the valuable plans were safe in Harold Yorke's hands. Needless to say, the young man's delight and gratitude knew no bounds.

“Now, guv'nor,” said Nipper, as the great detective and his young assistant sat down to a well-filled table. “Who's next?”

Lee's reply was a grim smile.

NEIL THE WRECKER

A Thrilling Story
of Adventure in
the North Sea.

By DAVID GOODWIN.

HAL FORSYTH, the hero of our story, is one of the crew of the trawler *Bonnie Jean*.
The skipper,

JOE WEST, takes a great liking to the lad as does his son,

BEN, whose chum Hal quickly becomes. The young seaman has a great enemy in HAGGART NEIL, the brother of "Black Jack," a notorious North Sea pirate, who, by Hal's hand has been brought to book. Neil swears revenge on the lad and the *Bonnie Jean* in general. Ben and Hal soon show their bravery by boarding a large ship whose crew is in mutiny, and rescuing the captain, who has been locked in his cabin.

Order is soon restored, but just as the captain comes forward to thank the two lads several figures scramble over the side of the ship—and, wonder of wonders! the newcomers are Haggart Neil and his crew. They, however, are soon put to flight. (Now read on.)

Neil's Plot.

"If you an' your boats aren't awa' before my engines start, I'll drive ower the lot o' you!" called the skipper after them. And he turned to Ben and Hal. "Laddies, I hadn't the time to give you proper thanks, for those scum comin' in atween us. But you've done well by me, an' a pluckier pair o' young seamen I never set eyes on. You shall have that twenty pounds that black-visaged beggar asked for himself, an' you've earned it! I reckon the niggers would ha' been too much for us if you hadn't been as sharp as you were lettin' me out."

"We don't want any reward, captain," said Ben quickly. And Hal echoed him. "If we were any good at all we're glad of it. We won't take money, thanks."

"But see here, lads——"

"No, no!" broke in Joe West. "The boys are right, captain. I know neither of them 'd touch it. We're all seamen here—you an' me, too. We don't make money out o' each other's troubles, an' you'd ha' done as much for me. The *Bonnie Jean* isn't a wrecker."

Nothing the skipper could say would induce the boys or their captain to take anything at all. He and the engineer, and many of the crew, shook hands with them heartily, and gave them a rousing cheer.

"Well, if ever I can gie any o' you a helping hand, I'll go a hundred miles off my course to do it!" said the skipper. "Is there nothing I can do?"

"Yes, there is," said West, "if you feel like that about it, cap'n. Give my trawler a tow in as far as the pier heads of Ymuiden, and then we can make the harbour and sell our fish, instead of rolling about here. It'll take us hours to get there against this light breeze."

The skipper agreed eagerly, only too glad to make some returns.

"How about your black crew in the forecastle, sir?" asked Hal. "Will they give you any more trouble?"

"Hech! They'll be mild as milk noo," said the engineer. "Once you teach a nigger who his master is, an' that he mustn't start ootin' and pull out knives, he's easier than a bairn to manage. I'm not fond o' the black loons, but I could stomach 'em better than rats off the Vulture, or whatever ye call her. Ye'd best look out for that crew, laddie, they mean thee mischief."

"They're welcome to try it," said Joe West with a dry laugh. And returning to the Bonnie Jean her crew manœuvred her up to the steamer, and took the tow-rope aboard.

Twenty minutes later, having made good her defects, the ship started off at a steady pace, towing the Jean astern. The rage and disgust of the Vulture's men, who were left to pitch and toss over the swells in the light breeze, made the boys laugh heartily.

It took but a short time to reach Ymuiden piers, and there the tow-rope was cast off, and with a parting cheer between the two vessels, the steamer went off on her way northwards for Hamburg. The Vulture was now out of sight in the haze, three or four miles to seaward, where they had left her. The Jean shot gently in between the piers, and sailed slowly up the long, narrow harbour.

"Well, I've seen some rum things in my going to sea, but this afternoon's game pretty near beats the lot," said Ben, who had enjoyed the adventure thoroughly.

"I mind that same thing happening down Channel once, off Havre, with a lascar crew," said West; "there's nothing new under the sun. It's a pity they can't man British ships with white men instead o' that sort o' trash. Haggart Neil must ha' been hungry for plunder if he thought he could bring off such an impudent bluff as that against a Scotsman, too! Well, I'm thinkin' we shall see no more of him for a spell. It's been a bit of luck for us. That tow to harbour 'll let us sell our fish at good prices before the other fishin'-boats get in. I shall track her right through to Amsterdam, an' put the catch on the market, instead o' unloadin' it here."

The Jean had to down sails and make fast alongside the quays at Ymuiden while the Dutch Custom-house cleared her, but she had nothing dutiable on board, and getting off again, she passed through a couple of swing-bridges, and one of the small tugs that ply on the Dutch waters gave her a cheap tow down the long miles of the canal, till the tall spires of Amsterdam showed over the fens. The Jean passed on steadily, and made fast after dark to a quay in one of the thousand waterways of the stately city. There were scores of Dutch vessels around, but her particular piece of quay she had all to herself.

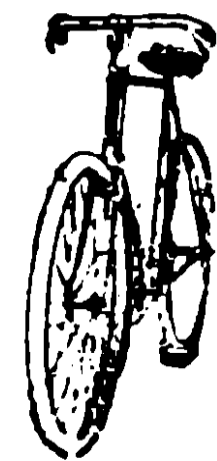
"Couldn't have a much quieter berth than this, after tossing about on the North Sea," said Hal. "Here's a fat native coming down to greet us."

"An' a good thing, too," said West. "that's the fish salesman, an' by his looking us uplike this instead o' waitin' for us, it's sure they're short on the market."

(Continued overleaf.)

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West proved to be right, and as there were few better bargainers than he, a deal was fixed up which made all the crew rejoice. They had not cleared such a good profit for many long months. The fish was unloaded at once and taken away.

When it was done, all hands turned in dog-tired, and slept soundly.

Next morning West had the shipwrights down early to inspect the trawler, and gave his orders. He hoped to get to sea within another forty-eight hours, though the trawler was too much damaged by the recent gale to put out again till she was made sound.

The repairs to the Bonnie Jean took longer than West expected. The covering-board and top-strakes were badly started, and, as Dutch shipwrights, though good, are slow workers, putting the matter straight kept the trawler at her wharf for some days.

The sale of the fish, however, left such a good profit, in spite of the cost of the repairs, that West did not grumble; and the boys were hugely pleased at getting so long a spell in the big, Dutch city, where they found plenty of fun. Several escapades, that have nothing to do with this story, kept them busy dodging the Amsterdam police, who did not appreciate British practical jokes.

Hal complained that the Dutch had no sense of humour.

"But they're not a bad lot on the whole," said Ben, on the evening of the last day, as they strolled ashore after supper. "Let's turn down here, an' have a final spree before we go to sea."

"Oh, not that blessed place!" said Hal. "It gives me the blues. There's nothing to see except a lot of people making beasts of themselves."

They were standing at one end of the long, narrow street called the Ness, which has the most evil repute of any in Amsterdam. Nearly every house in it is a gin-palace or a low-down music-hall, infested by sharks of every kind. Anyone anxious to undergo the process of being "shanghaied," would stand a very good chance by frequenting the dens of the Ness in the small hours of the morning.

The boys, unlike most of their kind when ashore, had no taste for low pleasures, and did not think it manly to drink and gamble and mix with the riff-raff of the seaports.

"It's a pestilent alley, sure enough," said Ben; "but we'll go in, all the same. I've got a reason. I saw—somebody who'll bear watching."

"Oh," said Hal. "I didn't know. Come on, then, by all means."

"We've had a quiet spell these three days," said Ben, as they walked up the ill-lit, roaring street. "An' yet the enemy is by us all the time. I believe there's mischief brewing."

"Let's do some scouting, then," returned Hal. "Early information often wins the battle. Where do we go first?"

"I've lost sight of the party I'm looking for," replied Ben, threading through the shouting touts and rascals of all descriptions. "But this is just the sort o' company he likes. We'll go in here an' lie low for a spell, and keep our weather-eye lifting."

(Don't miss next week's instalment of this grand new sea story.)

NEXT WEEK'S LONG COMPLETE STORY

will be entitled:

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