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Week ending
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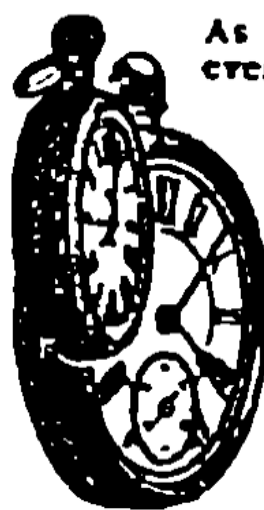


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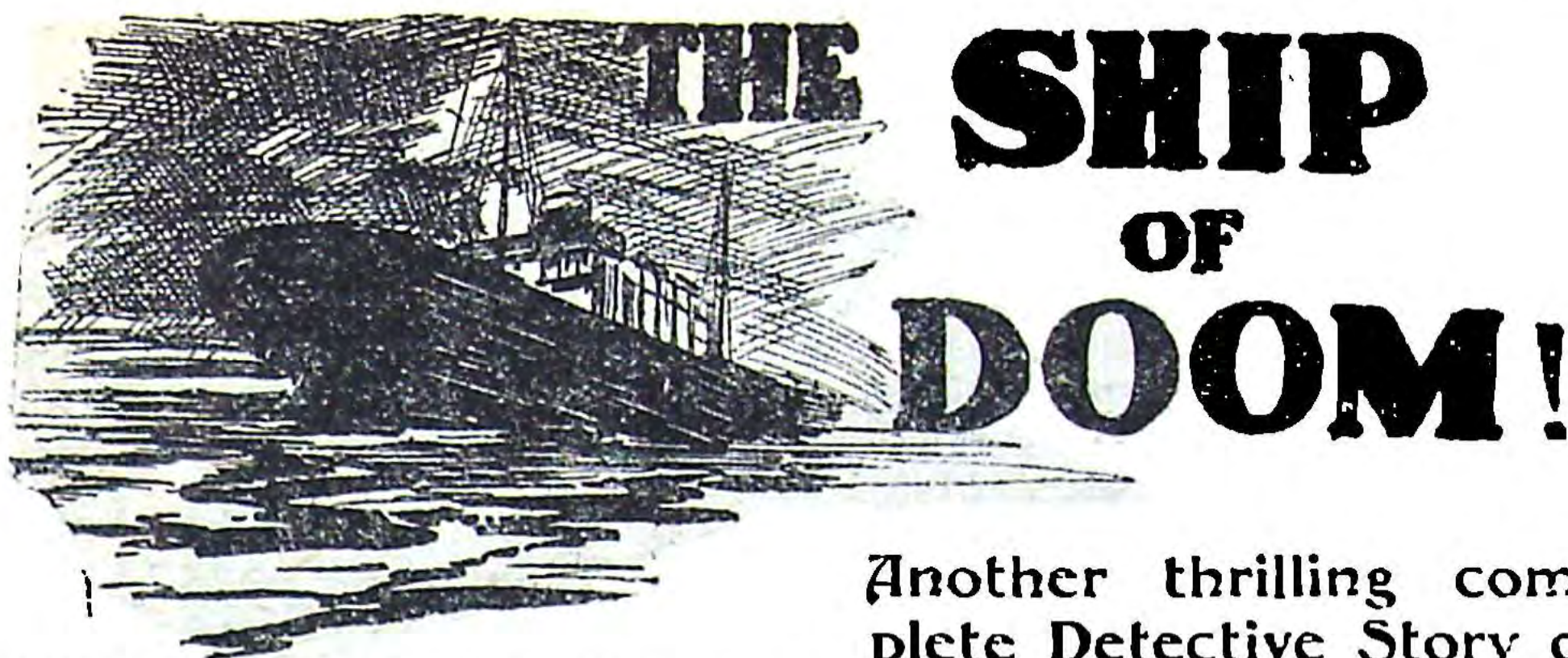
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CHAPTER I.

Gresswell's Dejection—An Alarming Incident—A Decision.

"**E**RE y'are! Six-thirty! Py-per!"

The newsboy's voice was loud and raucous.

"Py-per!" he yelled again. "Balham murder trial result! Six-thirty!"

Edmund Gresswell, K.C., frowned impatiently as the lad approached him, and he roughly waved his hand as a sign that he did not require a paper, and hurried on. Considering that Gresswell was even now on his way home from the Old Bailey, it will be understood that the eminent King's Counsel was in no need of an evening paper.

He had received the result of the Balham murder trial at first hand.

The case had created a fair amount of public interest, and the trial had been a tense one. In brief, a man named Peter Hayes was in the dock, charged with the brutal murder of a well-known City banker. The evidence against Hayes was overwhelming, but it was entirely circumstantial. There were no actual witnesses of the crime.

Edmund Gresswell, K.C., had defended the accused man. He had used all his ability and almost superhuman efforts to convince the jury of Hayes's innocence. And yet all the time Gresswell knew perfectly well that Hayes was guilty.

Why, then, had Gresswell defended the murderer?

Not because he had been bribed with large fees; not because the two were personal friends, but because the barrister had been forced. Both Gresswell and Hayes, to be straightforward, were members of the League of the Green Triangle.

The Green Triangle!

The most infamous, the most powerful secret organisation of criminals in the world. Edmund Gresswell was one of the league's Governing Members, and Peter Hayes was merely a controlling agent—a man who carried the instructions of the Governing Circle to the ordinary working members.

But Hayes was a valuable man. He was the smartest cracksmen in the league, and his loss would have been a great blow. Therefore Gresswell had been instructed to use all his ability to get Hayes acquitted.

The man had really committed the crime. He had blundered, for he had allowed himself to be caught. And Gresswell had been given his orders by Professor Cyrus Zingrave, the Chief of the League. Those orders were definite and clear. At all costs, Hayes was to be proved innocent.

But the evidence had proved too strong. In spite of all Gresswell's efforts—and he was one of the cleverest barristers at the Bar—the case for the prosecution had been successful.

Peter Hayes was found guilty of wilful murder.

In Gresswell's own hearing, the judge had passed the dread sentence of death, and the verdict was now being discussed throughout London.

It was a blow for Edmund Gresswell, for he had been confident of getting Hayes acquitted. Several times before, the rascally barrister had "proved" the innocence of guilty men—league members—and this affair had seemed simple to him. He had, indeed, pledged his word to Zingrave that Hayes should be saved.

And now?

Gresswell's thoughts were bitter as he walked along, his head down, his steps somewhat uncertain. Professor Zingrave, he knew, would be furious, and Gresswell feared Zingrave. There was not a member of the league who did not fear him. The professor was a remarkable man, and one who had an almost uncanny influence over his fellow-criminals. Apparently a highly respectable scientist of great renown, he was really the most dangerous rogue outside of prison walls.

Moreover, of late weeks Zingrave's temper had undergone a rather unlooked-for change. Usually the professor was the most genial of men—always smiling, witty, and entertaining. It was behind this mask of geniality that his real, villainous nature was concealed. Seldom, indeed, was it that Zingrave revealed his true colours.

But lately a change had come about.

His eyes were more deeply sunken, his face more pallid, and his infectious smile was forced. His dome-like forehead, instead of being smooth, had become lined and wrinkled. And the professor was irritable—irritable and sharp-tongued.

And why had this change come about?

Every member of the Governing Circle was well acquainted with the reason. In simple truth, the League of the Green Triangle was on the decline. The great society's star of success was waning.

One man was mainly responsible for this state of affairs. Scotland Yard and the police of the Kingdom, although knowing that the Green Triangle existed, were utterly in the dark as to its leaders or its headquarters. The police had done absolutely nothing towards encompassing the league's ruin; indeed, being entirely devoid of information, the police were incapable of action.

But the one man who had been such a terrible thorn in the league's side; and who was possessed of inner knowledge regarding the league's secrets, was Nelson Lee, the celebrated detective.

It was Nelson Lee who was working his hardest to destroy the league. He had two very able helpers in Nipper, his young assistant, and Douglas Clifford, the rich young man who had suffered heavily at the Green Triangle's hands, and who had supplied Nelson Lee with much valuable information.

But even Zingrave, clever as he was, did not know that Nelson Lee was

responsible for the many failures which had lately overtaken the league's schemes. The professor knew that Nelson Lee was a clever man, but he did not regard the great crime investigator as a positive danger.

The fact could not be denied, however, that everything the league seemed to touch only drove home another nail in the great organisation's coffin. In a terribly short time, many of the most valuable Governing Members had paid their account in full. They had been meted out the justice they so richly deserved.

The Governing Circle was now barely half its former strength, and those who had gone had been the league's cleverest men.

Edmund Gresswell was not a superstitious man. He was a hard-headed barrister. But he was almost inclined to be superstitious now. It seemed to him as though a curse had been cast upon the Green Triangle. He did not guess that a grim campaign of destruction was being directed against the league. He put all the recent misfortunes down to a run of bad luck.

He did guess, however, that the Green Triangle's days were numbered, and he was worried more than he dared admit even to himself. For many years he had played the traitor; for many years he had derived a princely income from the league in addition to his own extensive earnings; and during those years he had been so safe, and there had been no shadow of danger, that he had regarded possible exposure as a contingency unworthy of serious consideration.

But now! Well, now his views were undergoing a change.

He found himself wondering how long it would be before the blow fell—the blow which had always seemed so impossible. For several weeks, Gresswell had been uneasy, and the uneasiness was changing to real alarm.

His position was a high one—a K.C. of untarnished reputation. He was regarded as one of the cleverest men at the Bar, and he knew that a great career was before him, for he was still comparatively young. When he had joined the league, at Professor Zingrave's invitation, his position had been very different. Of recent years, however, he had risen high in his profession, and many times he had cursed the day when he had become a member of the Green Triangle. He was adding greatly to his income by aiding the league, it was true; but he was wealthy now, and he would rather have been without the league's money. He was forced to perform acts which endangered his position, and Gresswell was very ambitious.

He was thinking of himself—solely of himself, and of his future career. The many acts of injustice he had performed did not weigh on his conscience in the least. He was a rogue, troubled with no scruples. But now that the league was no longer of use to him, he resented belonging to it.

What would be the result of exposure?

Gresswell paled when he thought of it. Somehow, dim down in his mind, he had a presentiment that disaster was dogging the Green Triangle, and that the end would not be long in coming. And then? He would be swallowed up with the rest; he would be exposed and disgraced. He—a K.C.—would be sent to penal servitude! Oh, the thought was appalling!

The barrister was pondering deeply as he walked home from the Old Bailey on this particular evening. Again the league had failed. Peter Hayes had been sentenced to death. Not that the murderer did not deserve death. He did, for his crime had been of a particularly brutal nature.

But Gresswell had failed.

"Everything is going wrong!" muttered the barrister fiercely as he walked. "Zingrave will be furious with me, but I did my best. Bah! I am glad the jury found Hayes guilty. The infernal scoundrel deserved death if any man ever did! If I had succeeded in getting him acquitted, I

should have made myself a party to the murder. The league is doomed! There is no sense in my trying to throw dust into my own eyes."

Gresswell's state of mind was a curious one. He wished with all his heart that it was possible for him to break from the league. But once a member always a member. The only release was death.

The barrister was a bachelor, and he lived in a little backwater off Fetter Lane. Turning out of Fetter Lane down an alley, he left the busy bustle of the City behind him. Here, unsuspected by the great majority of the public, was a real gem of Old London.

There was no other outlet, save by the way he had entered. Opening a big door at the end of the seemingly blind alley, he emerged into a wide courtyard, in the centre of which stood a pair of ancient elms.

And, facing him, was a picturesque old building, the face of which was covered with clinging ivy. It was old—very old—but in a state of preservation which was absolutely perfect. And it was divided into many sets of chambers, all occupied by barristers and lawyers.

Gresswell crossed the old-fashioned courtyard with slow steps. It seemed to him as though his troubled thoughts were quietened here. All was subdued and peaceful, and an indefinable air of rest and quietude seemed to hover over this old-world retreat.

But Edmund Gresswell was not to find rest and quietude within the building!

He entered the low porch, and commenced ascending the stairs. His chambers were on the second floor, and there was no lift in this old-fashioned building. During the day a hall porter was on duty, but at this hour he had left, and the chambers were all quiet.

Gresswell reached the second floor, and was about to cross the landing to the heavy open door of his own particular set of rooms, when he paused, somewhat surprised. A man in a long overcoat was waiting there.

"At last!" he muttered tensely. "You've come at last!"

There was something in the stranger's tone and bearing which startled the barrister more than a little. A wild, half-mad look gleamed in the man's eyes, and he was crouching forward, as though about to spring.

"You were waiting for me?" Gresswell asked sharply.

"Yes, I was waiting for you, Edmund Gresswell," replied the other, his voice vibrating with passion. "You don't know me, eh?"

"No; I do not."

"Well, I know you, and I know that you are one of the leaders of the Green Triangle!"

Gresswell started violently.

"Great heavens!" he gasped. "You—you know? Be silent, you fool!"

"Why should I be silent?" snarled the stranger. "I, too, am a member of the league. And I am here to exact vengeance from you for allowing my poor brother to be sent to his death!"

"Your—your brother!"

"My name," went on the other, "is George Hayes."

"Then—then the man who was sentenced to death at the Old Bailey this afternoon— Ah, I understand!" panted Gresswell. "But what is the matter with you? Don't be a fool! I did my utmost——"

"Your utmost!" interjected George Hayes bitterly. "By thunder, you have a nerve to stand there and say that! The evidence against Peter was purely circumstantial, and a clever counsel would have got him acquitted easily. But you allowed the prosecution to win, and now you shall pay the penalty!"

Gresswell started again.

Hayes's voice quivered with deadly menace.

"We can't talk here!" panted the barrister desperately. "Come into my chambers, Hayes, and we will discuss the matter. I will soon convince you——"

"Bah! I will listen to none of your suave lawyer's lies!" snarled the other. "You alone are responsible for my brother's fate, and you shall pay——now!"

Before Gresswell could realise what his companion intended, the man was at his throat. The attack was both unexpected and furious. The barrister was flung to the floor with a thud, and Hayes knelt upon his chest, and pressed his thumbs upon his victim's windpipe.

"You shall be the first to die!" he hissed insanely. "It is only justice! You are my brother's executioner, and I shall be yours!"

Gresswell struggled with the desperation of a dying man.

"Help!" he gurgled frantically. "Let me go, you hound! Let me go! Help! Help!"

Hayes had deliberately intended his attack to be so abrupt that his victim would have no opportunity of making an outcry. Hayes was a big man, with muscles like steel, and he had no fear of the consequences. He knew that he would accomplish his object with ease.

But it is the unexpected that always happens.

Gresswell, by a fluke, managed to ram his knee full upon his attacker's stomach. For the moment, all the wind was knocked out of the man, and his grip upon Gresswell's throat relaxed.

A hoarse shout for help rang through the quiet chambers.

That one shout—and not another sound. For Hayes had gripped the barrister's throat again, with even fiercer intensity. Truth to tell, the man was more than half mad with fury and grief.

Curiously enough, he loved his brother, the condemned murderer. Both were utter rogues, but they were nevertheless capable of affection, and George Hayes had firmly convinced himself that his brother's fate was solely owing to Gresswell's weak defence.

The man had been in the public gallery of the Old Bailey when the dread sentence of death had been passed, and George Hayes, almost insane with rage, had left the court with the fixed intention of avenging his brother by settling accounts with Edmund Gresswell. The fact that his brother was indeed a murderer, and that he richly deserved his fate, was of no account.

"Hang you!" he snarled as he pressed Gresswell down. "You thought you would give the alarm, you dog! Before help can come, you will have breathed your last!"

The barrister's struggles were becoming more feeble. He was totally out-matched, and stood utterly no chance. But his frenzied call for help had been heard.

Even while Hayes was speaking, three doors opened almost simultaneously, two above and one below, and the next second the sound of hurried footsteps plainly reached the infuriated Hayes's ears.

The sound calmed him far more effectively than a douche of cold water would have done. But for that one yell of Gresswell's, he would have completed his work without interruption.

The instinct of self-preservation is always uppermost, and it was forced upon Hayes's brain that if he remained he would be caught in a trap.

With a furious curse, he allowed his fingers to relax their grip upon Gresswell's throat. He leapt to his feet as the form of a man appeared, hurrying down from the first floor. Without waiting a second, the man fled.

He fled downstairs at breakneck speed.

But on the next landing he encountered another of the inhabitants. This was a rather elderly barrister, who occupied the chambers below. Hayes charged with all his strength, sent the unfortunate gentleman flying against the wall, and dashed on.

By the time the alarm was given, Gresswell's attacker had completely disappeared.

The K.C. was able to stagger to his feet. His head was throbbing, and his throat bruised and scratched. Huskily he told his rescuers what had occurred. He told the actual truth, since there was no object to be gained in hiding it. The brother of the condemned Balham murderer had laid in wait for him with a mad idea of exacting vengeance.

Gresswell was helped into his chambers. A stiff dose of brandy restored his dazed wits, and in a comparatively short while he was scarcely any the worse for his startling adventure. His throat, however, was stiff and sore, and he was forced to wear a silk handkerchief bound round it.

For a full hour after he had been left alone, he sat in a lounge chair, frowning to himself, and turning over all manner of wild ideas. He fell to pacing the room, and at last he came to a decision.

"I will see Zingrave!" he told himself firmly. "This is intolerable—this uncertainty! I will leave the accursed league for ever! I am not even safe from attack by my fellow-members!"

The incident had provided Gresswell with a fairly strong excuse for wishing to have done with the Green Triangle, and he shrewdly realised that he must seize his opportunity while it was hot.

Even before the attack by George Hayes, Gresswell had been half decided to approach Professor Zingrave. But now the matter was settled. Since he had been attacked by a member of the league, he had a strong reason for demanding retirement. He would not ask to be severed from the Green Triangle absolutely, but merely say that he wished to undertake no further active work on the criminal society's behalf.

Gresswell could look ahead. He told himself that the league was a sinking ship, and he was determined to render his own position safe before the final plunge came, before he was sucked under and engulfed.

His mind fully made up, he started out at once for Zingrave's house, in Grosvenor Square. He would settle the matter, one way or the other, without delay.

CHAPTER II.

Clifford's Difficulty—The Imprisoned Cat—Vera's Fix.

"WE have every reason to congratulate ourselves, my dear fellow," drawled Nelson Lee easily. "The League of the Green Triangle is weakening rapidly, and I am sanguine enough to predict that it will be upon its last legs before another month has passed. Our campaign has been successful all along the line."

Douglas Clifford smiled.

"I am not so sure about 'our' campaign!" he remarked drily. "Precious little I have done, Lee! The credit belongs to you solely."

"No, no; that is quite wrong!" replied the great detective. "Do not be too modest, Clifford! You have helped magnificently on occasion. Nipper, too—we must not leave Nipper out, or there will be ructions!"

"Oh, Nipper's done wonders, I'll admit!"

Nipper grinned cheerfully.

"The league isn't squashed yet," he said practically. "Time to talk of having done wonders when old Zingrave himself gets the chopper!"

"The most sensible remark that's been uttered for quite a long time!" smiled Nelson Lee. "We mustn't be too confident, for over-confidence is apt to lead one headlong to a nasty fall. And we don't want a nasty fall when we are practically entered upon the last lap."

It was evening, and the trio were seated in Nelson Lee's consulting-room in Gray's Inn Road. At least, the detective and Clifford were seated. Nipper was lounging elegantly upon the table.

Douglas Clifford had called some little time before, and the conversation had naturally turned to the grim work which was being undertaken against the Green Triangle. It was at about this same time that Edmund Gresswell, K.C., was gloomily ruminating on his unsavoury position on his way home from the Old Bailey.

Clifford had not yet referred to a certain matter which was worrying him. He decided to broach the matter at once.

It was Clifford, it will be remembered, who had supplied Nelson Lee with his facts concerning the Green Triangle's secrets. Clifford was a young man, although to look at him one would not gain that impression.

Being in danger from the league, he was forced to adopt a false name and a disguise. He had the appearance of an elderly gentleman, with his iron-grey beard and grizzled hair.

"Have you seen the evening paper?" Nelson Lee inquired, after a short silence. "Our friend, Edmund Gresswell, failed to prove the Ballham murderer's innocence. Both the murderer and his counsel were, as you know, members of the league."

Clifford nodded.

"I am glad the brute is sentenced," he said. "By what I read of the crime, he thoroughly deserved hanging. Gresswell, too, is a pretty complete rogue. Perhaps you will have an opportunity of dealing with him before long. But we mustn't expect things to move too quickly. It is only a short while since Lord Sylvester met his deserts."

The detective nodded.

"Yes, that was a rather exciting affair," he replied. "And it was Nipper who did more than his share of the work at Oldmarket."

Nelson Lee was referring to the case of Sir Terence Brent, Bart., who was to have been ruined by the league through the medium of his racehorse. But Nelson Lee had frustrated the plot. He and Nipper had visited the famous racing town, and many exciting incidents had culminated in the unexpected suicide of Lord Sylvester, the chief mover in the league's scheme.

"But I looked in this evening to ask your advice," Clifford went on, suddenly becoming thoughtful. "It's about Vera."

Nipper chuckled.

"Afraid it's not much use asking the gov'nor for advice about girls," he remarked cheerfully. "The gov'nor doesn't go in for that sort of thing—love-making and all the rest of it! He's a staid old bachelor!"

"You cheeky young sweep!" growled Clifford, colouring slightly. "I didn't ask for your advice, Nipper. You'd better muzzle yourself up, or I shall get to work with my walking-cane!"

Nipper grinned.

"Sorry!" he said, without looking at all sorry. "But I was just saying

"Well, you'd better not say any more!" interjected Nelson Lee sternly. "I may be an old bachelor, but I'm quite capable of giving good advice. What's the trouble, Clifford?"

Clifford hesitated. He had been referring to Vera Zingrave, the step-daughter of the rascally professor.

Clifford had first met the girl over five years before, when she had been barely seventeen. At that time, he had been strangely attracted towards her, for she was possessed of exceptional beauty and daintiness.

Later, and comparatively recently, he had met her again. In spite of himself, in spite of all his knowledge of her stepfather, he had fallen in love with Vera—deeply, madly in love. His common-sense told him that he was acting like a fool; but common-sense, where love is concerned, is invariably relegated to a back seat.

Knowing full well who Vera was, Clifford still loved her. Then he had learned, to his joy, that she was Zingrave's stepdaughter, and that none of his villainous blood flowed in her veins. Moreover, Vera knew absolutely nothing of her stepfather's real mode of life. Pure minded and innocent, she believed that he was nothing more than the famous scientist he represented himself to be.

The girl reciprocated Clifford's love, and was deeply attached to him. By degrees he had told her everything—save the most vital point of all. He had told her his story—how he had fallen foul of the league, how he had been kept a prisoner for five years, and how he had finally made his escape, with Nelson Lee's assistance. Vera knew that Clifford and Nelson Lee were working their hardest in the grim fight against the League of the Green Triangle.

Being aware of these facts, she realised that it was impossible for Clifford to be his own self until the league was finally crushed. It was impossible for him to resume his identity. Therefore she was content to let their affairs of the heart go on in secret. The very moment Clifford was in a position to cast off his disguise, she would be perfectly willing to become formally engaged.

But there was one thing she was in ignorance of. To her the League of the Green Triangle was a myth. Her lover and Nelson Lee were engaged in a deadly battle of wits with the league, but that her stepfather was the actual working brain of the dread organisation was a fact which she never dreamed of. And Clifford was naturally reluctant to make known the appalling facts.

"The present state of affairs can't go on, Lee!" exclaimed Clifford, with a frown. "I feel that I simply must tell Vera everything. It is not fair that she should be left in the dark."

The detective stroked his chin.

"It is a delicate matter," he said thoughtfully. "You must do nothing rash, my dear Clifford. To reveal the truth to Miss Zingrave too suddenly would probably have disastrous effects. Poor girl! She trusts her father, and has no notion that he cares not a snap of the fingers for her!"

"If it suited his purpose, he would have no compunction in killing her as though her life were of no more value than that of a fly. I have not forgotten the affair of that brute, Malcolm Tressider, the South African millionaire. Zingrave was quite prepared to sell Vera to that man, and if we had not intervened, she would have been sacrificed."

"Yes; that was a narrow escape," Nelson Lee concurred. "I agree with you that Zingrave has no affection for his daughter, even though he may affect to care for her. But you want my advice?"

"I do."

"Then say nothing for the present."

"But I want to tell her——"

"Say nothing for the present," the great detective reiterated. "I have an idea that the end will come very rapidly now. It will be time enough

for Miss Zingrave to learn the dreadful truth when it is no longer possible to conceal it. Besides, there is another point!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the girl is highly strung, and she may not be able to conceal the fact that she is aware of her father's secret. And if Zingrave learned that she knew all, I fear that she would be in considerable danger. Say nothing, Clifford."

The young man glanced at his watch.

"By Jove, I must be off!" he exclaimed, jumping up. "I have an appointment with Vera in less than twenty minutes, and I wanted to take this opportunity of being perfectly frank with her."

"Well, I have advised you, and I can say no more."

Clifford laughed.

"I value your advice, Lee," he said quietly. "I will certainly remain silent if you think it would be best. But you must admit that my position is very difficult. Vera knows that I am helping to fight the league, but she does not know that my greatest enemy is her own stepfather."

"It is intolerable!" Nelson Lee agreed. "But to reveal the truth would only cause a terrible upheaval. Miss Vera would be forced to leave her father's house; or, rather, she would certainly leave it of her own accord. And I firmly believe that she would be in great peril afterwards."

Clifford left the consulting-room, accordingly, with the intention of still remaining silent.

He did not know that fate was working in strange paths.

Vera and he had arranged to meet in a little restaurant near Oxford Circus. It was a very select establishment, and was provided with many cosy nooks and corners, where one could be quiet and private for hours on end. The lovers usually met here, and regarded the restaurant with almost affectionate feelings.

Their position was so curious that open courtship was impossible. Clifford was apparently an elderly man, and it was impossible for him to reveal himself—to reveal his true feelings towards Vera—in public. Until the time came for him to re-assume his own identity of Douglas Clifford, he must act with extreme caution. At present he was "Mr. John Merrick," a retired gentleman.

Naturally enough, he arrived at the restaurant ten minutes too early. Vera Zingrave, however, appeared prompt on time. She was looking radiant, and Clifford's heart beat faster as he gazed at her.

What a lovely girl she was!

Perhaps he was prejudiced in her favour, believing, as he did, that she was the sweetest girl on earth; but it could not be denied that Vera was truly beautiful. And she was not only beautiful in face and figure, but her nature was singularly delightful.

Her dark chestnut hair fell in fascinating wavelets over her white forehead, and there were dainty curls about her ears. Her eyes—dark, deep-brown eyes—were wondrously expressive and exquisite. They seemed to contain nothing but purity and laughter, although, on occasion, they could be grave and thoughtful and winsome. A set of dazzling white teeth showed as she parted her perfectly formed lips in a smile of pleasure.

"Forgive me, Douglas!" she murmured, her voice sweet and natural. "I am late——"

"By Jove! How wonderfully adorable you are!" said Clifford impulsively.

"Hush! People will hear you!" Vera exclaimed.

"We're private here," said Clifford. "There's only one table which overlooks this nook, and that's empty. See, darling?"

Vera turned her head, and saw that she and Clifford were indeed quite unobserved—for the moment, at least. And Clifford seized that moment. As Vera turned her head, he bent forward, gripped her tightly to him, and kissed her passionately upon the lips.

"Oh!" gasped Vera, when he released her. "Oh, suppose somebody saw—"

"That's all right!" smiled Clifford. "Nobody spotted us, dearest."

She regarded him with flashing eyes, but he was in no way put out. He could see that she was laughing, in spite of the angry flash in her eyes. Finally, she lowered her eyelids.

"You shouldn't be so reckless!" she said severely. "I'm cross with you!"

"Very cross?" he asked softly.

"Yes."

"What for? For kissing you, or for risking the chance of being spotted?"

Vera blushed a little.

"Well, I'm not cross because you—you kissed me," she murmured. "But think, Douglas! Just suppose we had been seen! You are not yourself. You seem to be almost an old man. And I don't know what people would think——"

Clifford laughed.

"Oh, we can't be bothered with what other people think!" he said gently. "It's not often I get a chance of hugging the girl I love, and so—— Well, I kissed you! That's all! We're still unobserved!" he added pointedly.

She shook her finger at him reprovingly.

"No; we mustn't!" she murmured. "It—it isn't safe, Douglas."

"Suppose we were all alone—would that make a difference?"

"You silly boy!" she said softly. "Of course it would!"

He pressed her hand. There was no question of the love of this couple. Clifford counted himself the luckiest man on earth to have won such a girl as Vera. And the expression in Vera's eyes plainly told him that he had no cause to worry.

Presently, when they were sipping tea, he told her the news. He had much to tell her regarding the league, for he confided everything to Vera. He knew quite well that she would not breathe a word to another soul. Even though her own stepfather was the chief of the Green Triangle, it made no difference. She had given him her word that she would respect his confidence, and that was sufficient.

"My darling, I don't think we shall have long to wait now," he said enthusiastically. "The league is weakening daily, and before many weeks have passed, I shall be in a position to proclaim my true identity, and this wretched disguise will be torn off for ever. Then, sweetheart, I shall claim you!"

She looked full into his eyes.

"Oh, I hope that day will soon come!" she said quietly.

"You darling, for saying that!" he exclaimed; and then his eyes became grave. "I've got something to tell you, Vera."

"Something to tell me?"

"Yes; later on," he replied hesitatingly. "I don't suppose I ought to have mentioned it, but I simply must give you a hint. It is something that will be a blow, dear. But you mustn't worry your sweet little head!"

She looked at him with grave, concerned eyes.

"You—you almost frighten me, Douglas!" she murmured.

"What an ass I am!" he said. "I didn't mean to frighten you, sweet-

heart. It's nothing! At least, the blow may not be so severe as I imagine. But I can't tell you now, Vera. Promise me you won't question me!"

She looked puzzled.

"Yes, I promise. But just answer me this question," she said. "Is this—this blow in any way connected with you and I? Oh, you know what I mean, Douglas! Does it affect us? Will there be any change——"

"No, no!" he interjected quickly. "Good gracious! I don't mean anything like that! My love for you will never alter, and I know that I hold yours securely. No; this thing I have to tell you has nothing to do with us personally."

"Well, I sha'n't bother!" said Vera smilingly.

He seized her hand again, and pressed it tightly. Her concern had been clear proof of her love, and Clifford felt very happy. Now that he had paved the way, too, the shock might not be so severe when the revelation had to be made.

Soon afterwards they parted, for it was impossible for them to spend the whole evening together, except on very rare occasions, when opportunity permitted. To-night Vera was dining at home, for Zingrave was entertaining several guests.

They were not arriving until late, however, and so Vera had plenty of time in which to dress. When she arrived home, she took her things off, and then descended to have a word with her father. She met the butler in the hall.

"Where is father, Barson?" she inquired.

"I think the master is in the laboratory, Miss Vera," replied the butler. "He was there ten minutes ago, I know."

"Thank you, Barson!"

Vera tripped lightly down the corridor which led from the hall to the laboratory. The latter was an addition to the house proper, and had been built on to the main building. This corridor ended in a big oaken door, another door, leading directly into the laboratory. Occasionally, Zingrave found it necessary to speak very privately, and with both the doors closed the laboratory was perfectly safe from eavesdroppers.

Vera found both the doors unlocked, for there was nothing of a private nature in the laboratory. Both the doors were fitted with springs, so that they closed automatically, for Zingrave had a great dislike for doors being left half-open. Vera, therefore, found herself in the laboratory, with the two doors closed upon her; although, of course, she could open them at a touch of the handle.

"Oh, father's not here!" she murmured to herself.

Barson had certainly been wrong, for Professor Zingrave was not in the laboratory. Vera thought that her stepfather had probably gone into the library for something, and she accordingly turned to the door again. But as she did so, she paused.

Quite distinctly the cry of a cat had come to her ears. She looked round, rather surprised, for Zingrave was not a great lover of cats, and did not usually keep them in his scientific workshop.

As Vera listened, she heard the sound again.

She walked into the centre of the apartment and paused; and now, quite plainly, the plaintive feline cries were proceeding from a cupboard against the far wall. The door was closed.

"Oh, it must be poor Toby!" Vera told herself. "The silly little thing! Of course, that door is fitted with a latch, and it must have blown to!"

With a smile on her lips, she crossed to the cupboard, turned the handle,

and opened the door wide. As she did so, she saw that the cat had hastily backed away towards the back of the cupboard, which was rather deep.

Vera did not guess that the cat had been deliberately locked in there by Zingrave himself. The professor, in fact, intended performing a little experiment on the cat that night, and he had made sure of the animal by locking it in his laboratory.

"You poor little thing!" exclaimed Vera tenderly.

She stepped into the cupboard to take the cat into her arms. Instantly, however, the cupboard door swung to, and closed with a soft click. Vera found herself in total darkness, but the cat was in her arms.

She laughed merrily, and pressed her hand upon the door panel; but the door did not budge an inch. Vera started, and caught her breath in a trifle.

"Oh, dear," she murmured, "what a silly thing I am! I'm locked in!"

She stared before her, unable to realise her position for a moment. Then, all in a second, she remembered that she was quite alone in the laboratory, and that both the doors communicating with the house were closed.

She commenced to thump upon the door, but very soon ceased.

"Oh, what's the use?" she asked herself. "Nobody could possibly hear me in the house, even if I banged with a hammer! What an absurd predicament to be in!"

There was no reason for Vera to be alarmed, however. As a matter of fact, she was more amused than annoyed. She knew that the professor would visit the laboratory before long—probably within a few minutes.

She would then, of course, be released at once.

But until somebody entered the laboratory, she would be forced to remain in the cupboard. It was certainly aggravating, but Vera was a good-tempered girl, and she seated herself upon a pile of old rugs which lay in one corner.

"We're locked in, Toby!" she murmured, with a silvery laugh. "That's right! Sing away! You ought to be pleased, you old thing! I came here to rescue you, and got myself into the same fix!"

The cat was purring contentedly, and settled himself with evident satisfaction in Vera's lap. Minutes passed, and no sound broke the stillness. It seemed as though Vera were to be kept waiting for some little time.

The purring of the cat and the peaceful silence had due effect, and Vera very soon began to feel drowsy. Hardly knowing it, she leaned back, closed her eyes, and went off into a light doze.

The fact that Vera was asleep within that cupboard was going to cause an amazing sequence of exciting events. The little incident had been quite trivial; but it is generally little incidents which lead the way to vital issues.

CHAPTER III.

Gresswell's Demand—Vera Learns the Truth—At Last.

PROFESSOR CYRUS ZINGRAVE let himself into his house by means of a latchkey, and in the hall he came face to face with Barson, the butler.

"Oh, Mr. Gresswell has just called, sir!" said the butler respectfully. "He came about five minutes ago, and as you weren't in he said he'd wait."

"Very well, Barson."

He handed his hat and stick to the man, and passed into the library. Here, Edmund Gresswell was standing smoking a cigarette, with a worried

frown upon his brow. Zingrave's expression was grim, but his voice was as musical as ever when he spoke.

"I was half expecting you, Gresswell," he said gently. "Come! We will go to the laboratory. We can talk in private there."

"I was about to suggest the same thing," said the barrister. "I have a very serious matter to discuss, professor."

Zingrave gave his companion a keen look, but said nothing further. Then he led the way down the corridor to the laboratory. Each of the two communicating doors was fitted with a small brass bolt, and these were shot in turn after the two men had passed through. Zingrave guessed that league matters were to be discussed, and it was essential that absolute privacy should be maintained.

As a general rule, no affairs connected with the League of the Green Triangle were discussed outside of the Governing Chamber of the league's headquarters, the Orpheum Club. But when occasion demanded, it was quite safe to talk in the laboratory.

As the two men passed in, Zingrave switched on the full electric lights, and then crossed the room to the far end.

"We can talk here without fear," he exclaimed quietly. "Well, Gresswell, what have you got to say? The League of the Green Triangle will want a full explanation from you concerning the result of the Hayes trial. As Chief of the League, it will be my duty to——"

"Oh, don't adopt that tone!" interjected Gresswell gruffly. "How on earth could I prevent the man being sentenced to death? I did my utmost, but no barrister on earth would have convinced the jury of Hayes's innocence in face of such evidence. Moreover, Hayes deserved no mercy."

As Gresswell was speaking, he turned and glanced at the cupboard door, which was close to him. He started a little, and turned to Zingrave.

"I thought I heard a sound in that cupboard!" he exclaimed sharply.

The professor smiled.

"It is nothing!" he replied. "I locked a cat in there this afternoon, and I suppose our voices have caused it to become restless. Well, my opinion regarding Hayes's fate is totally different to yours. You seem to forget, Gresswell, that Hayes was one of the most valuable men in the league."

"I don't forget it," Gresswell replied. "But you evidently consider it a perfectly simple matter for a barrister to get a murderer acquitted when the evidence for the prosecution is exceedingly strong. I may be considered a clever counsel, but I have my limits. And I have not come here to discuss Hayes's fate. My object, although connected with Hayes, is entirely a personal one."

The professor regarded his companion steadily.

"Well," he said smoothly, "go on!"

Gresswell pointed to his neck.

"You see this muffler?"

"Yes."

"I don't usually wear mufflers, do I?" went on Gresswell.

"Get to the point, man!"

"That is what I am doing. I have donned this silk handkerchief in order to conceal several ugly bruises upon my throat," said the barrister. "Less than two hours ago, I was brutally attacked on the landing outside the door of my own chambers. I was attacked by George Hayes."

The professor elevated his eyebrows.

"This is quite interesting!" he said. "And who was the man? Who was George Hayes?"

"He was the brother of the man who has to-day been sentenced to death,"

Gresswell replied. "He also is a member of the Green Triangle, and he swore to kill me for having failed to save his brother. But for the merest of flukes, I should have perished."

Zingrave frowned with evident annoyance.

"George Hayes!" he exclaimed grimly. "I shall remember that name. Mr. Hayes will receive serious punishment, Gresswell. Have no fear of that! We cannot possibly allow our ordinary workers to lay hands upon any member of the Governing Circle. You may remember, some months ago, a man attacked Sir Roger Hogarth. His punishment was swift and abrupt," added the professor softly. "The man received his death-wound in a telephone-box at Charing Cross Station."

"I remember it distinctly," remarked Gresswell. "But I do not wish George Hayes to receive any such dire punishment. And I am not here to complain about his attack. I have called to see you, Zingrave, because I wish to leave the league!"

The professor was in the act of lighting a cigar, but he held his hand, and fixed his strange eyes upon Gresswell's face with such an expression of concentration that the barrister was visibly affected.

"Do you realise what you are saying?" asked Zingrave suavely.

"Yes, fully."

"I do not think you do! You know perfectly well that when a man has pledged himself to serve the league, the only release is death. A Governing Member, such as yourself, is bound to abide by his oath."

Gresswell looked uncomfortable.

"The circumstances are exceptional," he declared. "On the league's behalf, I undertook to defend a callous murderer. Through no fault of my own, I failed; and immediately afterwards I was nearly done to death by the murderer's brother! What might happen in the future? I demand to be released! You are the Chief of the League, and it is within your power to release me!"

Zingrave's eyes flashed.

"You are talking like a fool!" he said sharply. "Because a half-insane man happens to attack you, you come to me and make a proposal which you know is out of the question. Supposing I granted your request! Supposing you left the league! In a few years, you would be able to destroy all evidence that you were ever once a member. You would become an outsider, and all our secrets would be in your keeping!"

"I would pledge my word——"

"Such a pledge would be valueless. In after years, we should be constantly in fear of betrayal," said Zingrave. "But to betray us now, you must betray yourself, and it is by such means that treachery is obviated. No, Gresswell; I cannot give your suggestion even a second's consideration."

The barrister breathed hard.

"The league will be non-existent in less than a year!" he said hotly.

"Ah! So you are pessimistic!" the professor exclaimed. "Upon my soul, Gresswell, there is undoubtedly something the matter with you to-night! I freely admit that we have had a run of bad luck, that most of our recent schemes have fallen through; but I have a great idea in my mind for the biggest coup the Green Triangle has ever attempted."

"It will fail!" Gresswell snapped. "Oh, yes, you can call me pessimistic, if you like! But I am not suffering from pessimism. I foresee that disaster lies ahead. Only recently the league was to make a vast sum by acquiring some valuable property belonging to a young Irish baronet. The plot was to make a racehorse lose——"

"There is no necessity to go over that!" Zingrave cut in. "It was a

dismal failure, I must confess. And that was not the worst, for Lord Sylvester was sacrificed solely owing to that failure."

"The Governing Circle is scarcely more than half its former strength," Gresswell continued. "The best men have been weeded out—Sylvester, Dudley Foxcroft, Sims-Jameson, Sir Gordon Hyde—all the really able men have met with unexpected fates. 'There is a curse upon the league!'" added the barrister fiercely. "A curse! I might be the next one to go!"

Zingrave lit his cigar before replying.

"And so," he suggested evenly, "you are anxious to leave the sinking vessel before you are sucked into the maelstrom of disgrace? To be plain, in fact, you wish to emulate the excellent example of the rats who invariably and proverbially leave a doomed ship?"

"You put it with infernal bluntness!" said Gresswell. "But you are wrong—totally wrong! I do not wish to leave the league entirely. My desire is merely to retire from active work. I will still attend the league meetings——"

"It is impossible!" rapped out Zingrave testily. "In any case, this is a matter to be discussed at a meeting of the full Circle. You are a member of the Green Triangle, Gresswell, and you must remain one. There is no release."

Gresswell growled out an oath.

"If that is your decision," he said hotly, "I will tell you mine! I shall refuse to undertake any work for the league! If I am forced, or if I am threatened, I shall only be all the more determined. My demands are reasonable, and I have a perfect right to retire from active work if I wish to do so!"

To the barrister's surprise, Zingrave broke into a soft laugh.

"Don't lose your temper, man!" he chuckled amusedly. "I dare say we can come to a satisfactory arrangement."

"You mean that?" asked Gresswell with eagerness.

"Certainly! I never make statements I do not mean."

Had Gresswell been a little more clear-headed, he would have detected a curious glint in the professor's eyes, and a note in his voice which was full of subtle menace. He noticed neither of these signs, however, and extended his hand.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed. "I thought you would not prove harsh, Zingrave."

A few minutes later, Edmund Gresswell took his departure. The professor accompanied him to the front door of the house, after giving him to understand that the matter would be fully discussed at the next Circle meeting. Then Zingrave retraced his steps slowly to the laboratory.

Here, still puffing at his cigar, he paced up and down, with a fierce gleam shining in his eyes.

"The fool! The fool!" he muttered. "Does he think he is to be given his freedom thus easily? There is only one release from the Green Triangle, and that is death. Gresswell is causing trouble, and he shall be made to pay for it!"

There was nothing genial about Zingrave now. His brow was wrinkled, his eyes grim, and his mouth set in a thin, cruel line. The mask was cast aside, and the villainous scientist was revealing his true self.

Bang! thump! bang!

With an intake of breath which was almost a gasp, the professor twirled round and stared at the cupboard on the other side of the laboratory. As he did so, the thumping upon the panels was repeated.

"Great heavens!" panted Zingrave, utterly taken aback.

A flood of startled thoughts rushed through his brain, but he did not give them time to formulate themselves. In three strides he reached the cupboard door, pressed back the knob of the latch, and swung the door open.

Vera stood there, pale-faced, and with glittering eyes.

"Vera!" Zingrave gasped amazedly.

She stepped into the laboratory, and seemed to shrink from him. Then she faced him steadily, but she was trembling in every limb.

"I have heard all!" she exclaimed, and her voice was almost unrecognisable. "I have heard everything!"

Zingrave staggered.

"How—how did you get into that cupboard?" he demanded hoarsely.

"I shut myself in by mistake, and went to sleep," replied Vera in a dull voice. "The first words I heard upon awakening were those in which Mr. Gresswell said that you were the Chief of the Green Triangle!"

"By James!"

"Oh, father, what does it mean? What does it mean?" cried Vera piteously. "You—my stepfather—the chief of the biggest gang of criminals in the world! I—I thought it was a joke at first; but then, as I listened, I knew that it was the dreadful truth. Oh, I see many things now that have puzzled me before. No; don't come near me! Don't touch me!"

Vera shrank away as Zingrave took a step towards her.

The professor shrugged his shoulders, and stroked his long black hair. He had recovered his composure rapidly, and was now perfectly cool and calm. In a way, he was almost glad that this had happened. Sooner or later, the revelation had to be made, and Vera had found out the truth for herself. Well, there was nothing to be afraid of. He had already decided how he should act in such an emergency as this.

"You are a clever girl, Vera, and I will not pretend to deny your charges," he said quietly. "Yes, I am the Chief of the League of the Green Triangle. But it need make no difference to you——"

"Need make no difference!" Vera cried. "Oh, I feel as though I were going mad! The Green Triangle is a terrible organisation, composed solely of rogues and murderers! And you are the league's chief!"

"Precisely!" said Zingrave coolly. "Don't be foolish, Vera! You have discovered my secret, and you must act sensibly. You are not affected in any way. You will continue living with me——"

"Never!" Vera cried passionately. "Do you think I will keep your secret? You are my stepfather, but I intend to go to the police at once!"

The professor smiled amusedly.

"You will not go to the police!" he replied.

"I am going now!" exclaimed the girl, with dreadful intensity. "Oh, you coward—you coward! If you dare to stop me——"

"I have no intention of interfering with your movements in the slightest degree," said the professor, stepping nearer to the distracted girl. "You are free to go where you please, but you will not go to the police!"

There was something in Zingrave's voice which caused Vera to shudder, and she crouched back as though struck. Her stepfather's eyes were fixed upon her, and for a moment she found it impossible to think clearly. It seemed to her as though he was influencing her will. Then, with a little cry, she drew herself upright and set her teeth.

"I am going!" she whispered huskily. "I am going to the police!"

"And I say that you are not—you dare not!"

"Dare not!"

"That is what I said," returned the professor. "Let me see whether my words prove true or not. I warn you that if you do carry out your

threat, you will receive nothing but ridicule for your pains. The police are at liberty to come as soon as they like. Your word will not weigh a fraction, for I shall treat the whole thing as an absurdity. But, as I said, you dare not carry out your threat!"

Vera listened to her stepfather's voice in a dull kind of way, and it appeared to her that his voice was sounding from the dim distance, and to her distorted mind his figure looked like that of a ghoul.

A stifled little cry rose in her throat. She was utterly incapable of further speech. She fled to the door, passed out with insteady gait, and went to her own bedroom.

She scarcely knew what she was doing, but there was one fixed intention in her mind. She would not stay in this house another second!

Every article of furniture, every object, seemed to be repulsive and horrible, and contaminating to the touch. Her stepfather was, self-confessed, the biggest criminal in the whole of England!

The shock was appalling. In a dazed fashion, the girl now knew that this was the blow which Clifford had hinted at. He, of course, knew the truth, but had feared to tell her. She had now found out for herself, and was nearly out of her mind with grief and horror.

Less than five minutes later, attired in a walking costume, and carrying merely a small handbag, Vera Zingrave left her stepfather's house in Grosvenor Square--never to return!

Fate had taken the unsavoury task out of Clifford's hands, and Vera knew the worst.

CHAPTER IV.

At Nelson Lee's Rooms—Vera Leaves—The Motor-cycle Shadower.

VERA hailed a taxi at once, and gave the driver directions to make with all speed for Douglas Clifford's flat.

Out of all the chaos of her agonised mind, one thought stood out clearly. She would seek advice from the one she loved! She would pour forth her tale into Clifford's ready ear, and would do exactly what he had advised. She felt that she could not trust herself to do anything without the hand of her lover to guide her. In this terrible crisis, it was only human that Vera should turn to the one who was dearest to her in all the world.

The unconventionality of her visit to Clifford's flat did not even strike her. The circumstances were so critical that such a triviality as convention was flung to the four winds.

She needed guidance. She needed the strong will of her lover to advise her how she should act. Her stepfather a criminal! Oh, the thought was paralysing!

The taxi seemed to pull up at Clifford's flat almost before it had started. So confused were Vera's thoughts that she had no knowledge of the passage of time. Now that she had actually arrived at her destination, however, she pulled herself together with an effort, and stepped out of the vehicle.

Telling the taxi-driver to wait, she entered the building, and with steady step went to Clifford's door. It was still comparatively early in the evening, and so there was nothing unusual in her movements.

The door was opened by Clifford's butler, Foster,

Vera's brain was acute now.

"I must see Mr. Merrick at once!" she said in a low voice.

"I'm sorry, miss, but Mr. Merrick's out just at present," replied Clifford's man.

And he went on to state that his master had gone round to Gray's Inn Road, to visit Mr. Nelson Lee. Vera was inexpressibly glad to receive that information, and her taxi was soon bowling towards Gray's Inn Road.

True enough, she found her lover in the detective's consulting-room alone with Nelson Lee. Both were surprised to see her, and Clifford decidedly alarmed, for the pallor of the girl's face and the expression of horror in her eyes plainly told that something terrible had happened.

But Nelson Lee was the first to reach Vera's side.

"My dear Miss Zingrave," he exclaimed. "Please take a seat! Dear me! I am afraid something is seriously amiss!"

Vera had staggered somewhat, and she now allowed herself to be guided to a chair. Clifford bent over her tenderly.

"Vera," he murmured, "what has happened? Tell us!"

The girl passed a hand over her brow.

"I know all!" she murmured in a scarcely audible voice. "My father—the League of the Green Triangle! I know who my father really is!"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Clifford.

And Nelson Lee caught his lower lip between his teeth and clenched his hands.

"The truth out at last!" he exclaimed tensely. "Well, perhaps it is better. The end is drawing near, and Clifford will take care that Miss Vera comes to no harm."

He had murmured the words to himself, for Clifford was anxiously bending over his loved one. And presently Vera smiled wanly, and sat up. She flushed a little, and held Clifford's hand tightly. Somehow, at that moment she looked radiantly lovely.

"I'm so sorry!" she said in low tones. "I am afraid I have been weak. And it is terrible of me to come here."

But Nelson Lee protested.

"My dear young lady, pray do not apologise!" he said quickly. "You have acted very wisely in coming straight here. The situation is a painful one, and we can advise and comfort you."

"Rather!" added Clifford. "By Jove, you are a brave little girl!"

"I'm glad—glad you didn't have to tell me, Douglas!" murmured Vera. "It is awful, but now that I know the terrible truth, I— Oh, thank God he is not my real father!"

"Amen to that!" said Douglas Clifford fervently.

She was stronger now. The strength of the two men had affected her splendidly, and she lost the dread sensation of panic which had at first threatened to completely prostrate her.

"I—I will tell you how I heard," she said presently. "Oh, I believe Providence took a hand in to-night's work! It was all accidental—all so unexpected. I had gone into my stepfather's laboratory——"

And Vera, in a voice which momentarily grew stronger, told her story. Nelson Lee and Clifford listened in silence, and with great interest. When she had done, she was flushed of face, and thoroughly self-reliant. Her calmness had returned, and she felt that the shock was not half so dreadful as she had at first supposed. Perhaps Clifford's close proximity had something to do with her rapid recovery.

"I can speak openly now," she said quietly. "Dad and I never got on very well together. I mean, we were not as some fathers and daughters are. He was always busy, always hard at work on scientific—— But, oh, I know now why he was so often away from the house!"

"Of course!" said Clifford tenderly. "We knew all along, Vera; but we daren't tell you. He was not harming you in anyway, so we thought it best

to let matters go on as they were until it was absolutely necessary to speak."

"I understand fully," Vera said. "But I can never return now! I can never live with my stepfather again!"

"Perish the thought of it!" said Clifford promptly. "To tell the truth, Vera, I have been uncomfortable all the time. But now—well, we'll soon make some arrangements until——"

Clifford paused, and Vera flushed slightly.

"Let us talk of the present," exclaimed Nelson Lee pleasantly. "I think you said, Miss Zingrave, that Edmund Gresswell visited the professor?"

"Oh, yes! He wants to leave the league, I think."

"H'm! Gresswell evidently guesses that the end is within sight," remarked the detective. "But he will find that it is no easy matter to bark out of the league! Once a member, always a member!"

"But the professor said that the matter could be arranged," said Vera.

"I have a shrewd suspicion that Zingrave only assured Gresswell upon that point in order to throw dust in his eyes. What do you say, Clifford?"

"Eh?" ejaculated Clifford, who had been regarding Vera with affectionate intentness. "Oh, yes, certainly! Of course, it was all bluff. Gresswell can't quit the league except in one way—and we all know what that way is!"

Nelson Lee looked grim.

"Perhaps the professor was thinking of something of that nature," he exclaimed. "Since Gresswell has revealed his attitude, it will be evident to Zingrave that the barrister is no longer heart and soul with the Green Triangle. And a man in that state of mind might quite possibly turn traitor, provided he saw a means of escape for himself. I certainly think that Gresswell has signed his own death-warrant!"

"Oh, how terrible! How terrible!"

"It seems terrible to you, Vera, naturally enough," exclaimed Clifford. "But I have told you much concerning the league, and you knew that the chief was a cold-blooded scoundrel. As you are now aware, the chief is none other than Professor Zingrave. It is best to be perfectly plain, and I tell you openly that your stepfather has caused the deaths of more men than I should like to count."

Nelson Lee frowned a little at Clifford's words, for he did not wish Vera to be worried further. But Clifford's plain speaking seemed to have quite the opposite effect upon the girl. She stiffened somewhat, and her eyes flashed.

"I am glad—oh, so glad that I know!" she said quietly. "I can bear anything now. My stepfather is dead to me, and I hope with all my heart that you will soon bring him to justice."

Nelson Lee paced up and down for a few moments in silence. Then he came to a halt in front of Vera's chair.

"To be frank, I am rather worried about you, Miss Vera," he said. "I, too, will be straightforward. There is no sense in denying that you are in considerable danger. You are no longer in ignorance of the truth, and I am sure that the professor will not allow you to do exactly as you like. I think you are quite safe for a few days, but I strongly advise you to be very careful. Follow my instructions exactly, and take no notice of anything else which may occur."

"Such as what, Mr. Lee?"

"Well, I cannot exactly say," replied Nelson Lee. "But I am speaking in general terms. Be constantly on your guard until some arrangements can be made for ensuring your safety. But, as I said, I fancy no move will be made at present. Zingrave, too, must make plans."

"I have already decided where I shall go to-night," said Vera. "I think you know, Mr. Lee, and you, Douglas, that I am a great friend of Lady Dorothy Calton. She is a dear old lady, and she lives at Regent's Park. She will be only too delighted to give me a temporary home."

"But how will you explain matters?" asked Clifford. "You cannot, of course, tell her the real state of affairs!"

Vera smiled.

"Lady Dorothy is quite different from most women," she said. "She never asks questions, and I shall merely say that I have quarrelled with my stepfather, and that I have left his house. She will be quite satisfied with that, and will be very sympathetic. Afterwards, of course, we can make other arrangements."

Nelson Lee opened his mouth to speak, but hesitated.

"Pardon me if I seem inquisitive," he said at last, "but are you entirely dependent upon the professor? What I mean is, have you any private means of your own?"

Vera nodded, with a glad look in her eyes.

"Yes, I have quite a fortune invested for me, and it is in the hands of a famous firm of solicitors," she replied; adding, as she saw Clifford regarding her fixedly: "Oh, the money was not invested by my stepfather, so I know it is perfectly clean. It was left to me by my aunt, who died several years ago."

"Well, it's satisfying to learn that," Nelson Lee remarked. "Now, Miss Zingrave, let me advise you to take a taxi to Lady Calton's without delay. I am more than glad to see that you are bearing up with wonderful courage, and a good night's rest is essential. The hour is getting rather advanced, and if you leave it much longer, you will find Lady Dorothy in bed!"

Vera rose to her feet and prepared to depart. Her face was still pale, but not so pallid as before, and she had recovered her composure completely.

"I sha'n't attempt to thank you, Mr. Lee," she said simply. "But you have cheered me up more wonderfully than I can express."

"Haven't I done anything?" asked Clifford smilingly.

The look she bestowed upon him was quite enough to tell Clifford that he had been mainly responsible for her recovery from the shock.

Clifford accompanied Vera down to the street, and hailed a taxi for her. At first he insisted upon seeing her to Lady Dorothy's, but Vera would not hear of it. She declared that it would be unwise, for if he were seen at the other end, a wrong construction might be put upon her story.

The taxi bore her away, and the last glimpse Clifford had of her was a smiling face and a waving hand. But when the taxi turned into Holborn, Vera lay back among the cushions and sought consolation in her handkerchief. She sobbed quietly, for it was impossible for her to maintain her composure now that she was alone.

The taxi whizzed along smoothly; but quite suddenly the driver applied the brakes, and pulled towards the kerb.

A muffled-up figure stepped out from the shadow of a doorway, crossed the pavement, and entered the taxi before it had actually come to a standstill. The door slammed, and the vehicle jerked into rapid motion again.

The muffled-up figure, in truth, was that of Professor Zingrave himself, and he was now in the taxi with Vera! Evidently the scoundrelly scientist had decided upon a plan of action already, and Vera was caught in the net!

But a keen observer, had there been one near the spot at the time, might have noticed a rather significant fact. A youth on a motor-bicycle had been riding fairly closely behind the taxi-cab. When the vehicle had come to a halt, the youth had halted also.



With a final tearing of wood the massive steel safe burst away and slithered down the sloping floor with terrific force and speed.

Crash!

It was all over in a second. The lower wall of the cabin, strong as it was, could not withstand such a terrific onslaught. The safe cut clean through the wall as though the latter had been made of paper.

—(See page 38.)

And now the taxi was again speeding on its way, and the motor-cyclist shadower was in close attendance.

CHAPTER V.

Nipper's Story—Martin Caine Suggests a Plan—A Surprise.

THE following morning, as Nelson Lee was about to go in to breakfast, there was a violent ring at the bell, and a few moments later Douglas Clifford literally tore into the consulting-room and faced the great detective.

"Hallo! Hallo!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "What on earth is the trouble my dear fellow?"

Clifford gasped for breath.

"Something terrible has happened, Lee!" he burst out hoarsely. "I have just come from Lady Calton's, and Vera is not there! She has not been seen there at all!"

"It's all right!"

"All right!" exclaimed Clifford frantically. "Are you mad, Lee? Vera hasn't been to Lady Calton's at all! Don't you understand?"

"Yes, I understand fully. But there is really no need to get so excited," replied Nelson Lee. "I expected something of this nature, and so your very natural concern does not come exactly as a shock."

"But—but Vera——"

"I know exactly where Miss Vera is," interjected the detective. "Things went amiss last night, but I took precautions—and I am very thankful that I did so. Professor Zingrave has made his daughter a prisoner."

"A prisoner!" gasped Clifford.

"Precisely! But she will not remain a prisoner long if I can help it. As I told you last night, I had an idea that Zingrave would not lose much time in acting."

Clifford sat down abruptly.

"Vera a prisoner!" he exclaimed dully. "How terrible!"

"I am not so sure that what has happened is not all for the best," replied the detective. "I was positive that the professor would act sooner or later, and uncertainty is always very trying. Having played his card without delay, the professor has shown his hand, and we now know exactly what we are doing. Had Zingrave waited, he would probably have acted with such elaborate precaution that we should have been outwitted."

"But you say that Vera is a prisoner! Where? Where? I thought that she would be safe now that the truth was out!"

"My dear Clifford, I am afraid you have been too sanguine," Nelson Lee interrupted. "I was quite positive that Miss Vera was in considerable danger. Although I did not give voice to my actual fears, I was nevertheless more than alarmed. Think, man! Miss Vera, knowing all she does, at liberty! Was the professor likely to let that state of affairs go on? Certainly not. I knew that prompt action would be taken, but I freely confess that I did not think the league would get busy last night. You had better realise, Clifford, that we are up against a very stiff case. I, myself, realised it from the very first."

Clifford looked rather blank.

"I—I hardly know what to say!" he exclaimed dazedly.

"Then sit tight, and let me do the talking," went on the detective. "To tell the truth, I am rather pleased that Zingrave lost no time. Nipper was

on the track, and the lad was entirely successful in his efforts. I know exactly where Vera is, and if it is impossible to rescue her, we can, at least, safeguard her from danger."

At this moment Nipper himself entered the consulting-room.

"Hallo, guv'nor!" he exclaimed. "What's the programme? Oh, you're here, Mr. Clifford! Heard the news?"

"No, I haven't!" said Clifford. "At least, I've only heard half!"

"You had better relate the other half, young 'un," said Nelson Lee. "Mr. Clifford is very anxious and impatient."

"Right-oh!" Nipper said promptly. "My yarn is pretty short. Last night, Mr. Clifford, the guv'nor left you alone with Miss Vera for a few moments. He came out to me and instructed me to follow the young lady's taxi-cab to its destination, and to see that no harm came to her.

"Well, it was a jolly good thing I did. For the taxi came to a stop fairly soon, and I eased up, too. What I saw told me clearly enough that the taxi wasn't an ordinary one. It was a league 'bus,' placed in readiness in Gray's Inn Road for you to hail. Well, when it came to a stop, I kept my peepers open, you can bet. And I spotted old Zingrave himself nip into the taxi!"

Clifford stared.

"Zingrave himself!" he exclaimed. "Well—go on!"

"I don't pretend to know what happened in the taxi," pursued Nipper. "But I followed it again, being ready to dash forward at any second to the rescue. But the taxi drove straight to the London docks, and Miss Vera got out of her own accord, and went with the professor to one of the quays."

"By Jove!"

"The pair of 'em went aboard a smart yacht which was moored there—the Ocean Queen, belonging to Sir Roger Hogarth," said Nipper. "I knew at once that mischief of some sort was afoot——"

"You say that Miss Vera walked aboard of her own accord?"

"Yes, sir. I expect Zingrave had been threatening her, or something like that," replied the lad shrewdly. "Said that if she made a sound he'd throttle her. Anyhow, I thought I'd better not chip in. I hung about the docks for a couple of hours afterwards, and saw no more either of Zingrave or of Miss Vera.

"But I learned that the Ocean Queen is sailing to-night for a pleasure cruise in the South Atlantic, with Sir Roger Hogarth, and several guests. As I couldn't do anything further, I came home and reported. That's all, sir."

Clifford drew a very deep breath.

"And a good 'all,' too!" he exclaimed. "Vera taken aboard a steam-yacht! Good heavens, what does it all mean, Lee?"

"I cannot guess," replied the detective grimly. "But I do not intend to leave Miss Vera to the professor's tender mercies. Rescue may be impossible, but when the yacht sails both Nipper and I will be on board—in readiness to protect the girl. In addition, I shall probably be enabled to ram home another coffin-nail, by dealing with still another Governing Member."

Clifford paced the consulting-room agitatedly.

"I am worried, Lee," he said—"I am dreadfully worried!"

"Of course you are. But don't put yourself out seriously," said Nelson Lee quietly. "After all, things might have been far worse. We know, at least, where the girl is, and we sha'n't allow Zingrave to have everything all his own way."

Clifford was persuaded to stay and have some breakfast. But his appetite was poor, and he had grown silent and thoughtful. Nelson Lee felt concerned for his friend, but he assured him that everything would turn out satisfactorily.

As soon as the meal was over, Clifford departed, saying that he was going home, and that he would call round again during the day.

Nelson Lee and Nipper lost no time in formulating a plan.

"We simply must manage to get aboard the yacht," the detective declared, some little time after Clifford had gone. "That is essential, Nipper. And the one man who can help us effectively is Martin Caine."

"How can he help, guv'nor?"

"Well, it must be evident to you, Nipper, that stowing ourselves away on the Ocean Queen would be worse than useless. Therefore we must be on board as members of the crew—open and straightforward. We can then keep our eyes on Miss Vera with no difficulty. And Caine can do the trick."

"How, sir?"

"I don't know how—that is for him to decide," replied Nelson Lee crisply. "When he learns the urgency of the case I know he will put his best efforts forward to assist our enterprise."

Accordingly, a short time later, the detective was seeking out Mr. Martin Caine. This gentleman was one of Nelson Lee's most faithful followers—but it also happened that he was a Controlling Agent of the League of the Green Triangle. While apparently loyal to the villainous league, Caine was actually working against it. He was assisting Nelson Lee and Clifford in their campaign, and had been doing so from the start. He was a traitor—but a traitor of the right sort. He was using his wits and energy in order to defeat scoundrelism.

He and Nelson Lee met but seldom, for it was a very risky position. Had the Governing Circle of the League even suspected Caine's treachery he would have been instantly and mysteriously done to death.

But when he met the detective the pair of them were closely disguised, and they took elaborate precautions. Martin Caine was very thoughtful when he learned what was required of him. But, after a somewhat lengthy discussion, he agreed to do his best. It so happened, he declared, that he needed the assistance of a man and a boy who had experience of the sea. This set an idea working in his brain, and he immediately set off in pursuit of his object.

It was still early in the forenoon, and Caine—after casting off his disguise—made his way to the London docks, and boarded the Ocean Queen. There were obvious signs of activity round and about the yacht, and even the most ignorant "landlubber" would have seen that the vessel was preparing for departure.

Five minutes after stepping over the gangway, Caine was in conversation with Captain Dunster, the skipper on the Ocean Queen. Captain Dunster, being a member of the League of the Green Triangle himself, knew Caine quite well to speak to.

"Well, what's your trouble to-day?" he inquired genially. "I don't suppose you've come aboard just to bid me good-bye, have you? We're sailing to-night, you know."

"So I understand," said Caine. "What's the little game?"

"Don't know. I've got my orders, and it isn't healthy to be too curious," replied the captain grimly. "Sir Roger will be aboard, of course, and several guests. We've got a young lady down in one of the state-rooms already. I reckon she's a guest by force! But, as I was saying, what's your trouble, Caine?"

Martin Caine thoughtfully lit a cigarette.

"Well, I've got orders that a certain job's got to be done down by the Thames mouth," he replied—and he was speaking the truth. "I need two men who have a pretty decent knowledge of the sea—landsmen won't do at all. But I'm hanged if I can lay my hands on anybody quite suitable for the game. A man and a boy would do."

"All very interesting, but where do I come in?" asked Captain Dunster. "I don't see that it'll help you to bung your troubles down my throat. I don't carry men about with me in my waistcoat pockets!"

"No; but you have got men on this ship," replied Caine pointedly. "There are a pair among your crew who will suit my work down to the ground—Jim Hunter and the boy Whitney. I want you to let me have that pair."

The skipper swore.

"Be reasonable, Caine!" he exclaimed. "I am sailing to-night, and I can't leave port shorthanded."

"I am not suggesting that you should. I will send along two substitutes, who will do their work on board this craft equally as well as Hunter and Whitney; but they're utterly no use for the job I have in hand. You see, captain? I merely want to arrange a swap with you."

The skipper looked dubious.

"I'd like to oblige you, Caine, but I've got my ship to think about," he replied. "As a rule I only make alterations at Sir Roger's orders. He's my owner, and I have to be careful——"

"But you're master of your own ship, aren't you?" asked Caine smoothly. "A captain wouldn't be a captain unless he had command of his own vessel. Of course, if you haven't got the power to do what I ask, I'll leave it at that!"

Captain Dunster pursed his lips.

"I'll show you whether I've got the power—whether I'm skipper of my own craft!" he growled. "I'll do what you want provided you assure me positively that you won't leave me in a hole at sailing time."

"I promise to keep my part of the bargain."

"Good enough. Hunter and Whitney ain't particularly bright sparks, so they won't be much loss. Maybe your chaps will be just as good. But you must have them report themselves before five o'clock this afternoon."

"They will be aboard by three."

Caine was smiling inwardly. His object had been achieved, and he was quite confident of complete success. When the two new hands went aboard the other two would come to him and report themselves for duty. As he actually had work for them to do the whole plan would pass off with perfect smoothness.

Hunter and Whitney themselves would have no say in the matter whatever. They were members of the League of the Green Triangle, and had to obey orders without question. Probably they would be only too pleased at the change.

Certainly, Captain Dunster never suspected that anything was wrong. Martin Caine was a trusted controlling agent, and it was out of the question to suppose that he had any object—save the one he stated—in making his proposition.

He remained on board the Ocean Queen some time longer, and informed the skipper that he would provide the two new hands with a certain little object which would prove their genuineness. If they were unable to produce the identification sign upon demand, Dunster would know that they were impostors. Moreover, they would be provided with a password.

Caine meant to do the thing thoroughly. There must be no slip, and the captain must have no cause to become suspicious.

And the plan worked without a hitch.

In the afternoon two individuals appeared upon the quay and gazed with interest at the neat lines of the Ocean Queen. One was a man, and the other a youth, and they were both rather roughly attired and of a seafaring aspect.

"That's the craft, mate!" said the man in a gruff voice. "Come on; let's get aboard!"

The man wore a short, stubbly beard of a ruddy hue, and his hair was a similar colour. The lad by his side had a face almost as red as a carrot, and a deep scar marred one of his cheeks.

In a very short time they were interviewing the skipper. They gave the password without hesitation, produced the secret object which Caine had arranged as a sign—it was merely a small triangular piece of tin, painted green—and proved, beyond doubt, that they were the genuine articles.

The captain was not exactly impressed by their appearance; but as they looked quite as useful as the two who were to leave, there was nothing to grumble at.

The new-comers were informed that they were to proceed for'ard, and were to take their orders from one of the yacht's officers. As they were walking along the deck they saw Jim Hunter and the youth Whitney hurrying down the gangway to the quay.

"Them two seem mighty pleased!" remarked the lad with the carrot-coloured face. "I reckon they're pleased to get ashore. Anyhow, I guess we're all right!"

"Right as ninepence!" replied his companion heartily.

And thus Nelson Lee and Nipper were on board the Ocean Queen in a perfectly open and straightforward manner. They were members of the yacht's crew and were free—to a certain extent—to move about the vessel as they pleased.

They would be able to keep an eye upon events. It had been impossible to rescue Vera, and so this course had been adopted. Moreover, Nelson Lee was rather inclined to think that everything had worked out for the best.

He knew that Vera would come to no harm—he and Nipper would see to that! And it was quite possible that Sir Roger Hogarth himself could be swept into the meshes of the net. Sir Roger was the most powerful Governing Member in the league; next to Zingrave himself Hogarth was first. And Nelson Lee would have scored a triumph indeed if he succeeded in dealing with the rascally baronet.

Towards evening all was bustle and commotion, and when it was nearly dusk two big motor-cars rolled up alongside the quay and deposited Sir Roger Hogarth and the guests who were to accompany him on his cruise. Nelson Lee and Nipper were momentarily idle, leaning against the rail, aft.

The detective gripped Nipper's arm softly.

"Do you see?" he murmured into the lad's ear. "Edmund Gresswell is among the party! I don't know what the game is, but I believe Zingrave intends to kill two birds with one stone. We know that both Miss Vera and Gresswell are now against the league, and we can be sure that this cruise is not going to be merely a pleasure one!"

Nipper nodded.

"I've got a kind of feeling that there's going to be a whole heap of excitement," he said.

And there was something in his voice which told his master that he

was not altogether averse to such a prospect. When he looked into Nelson Lee's face he saw that the detective was frowning slightly.

"What's up, guv'nor?" he whispered.

"I am thinking of Clifford!" murmured Nelson Lee in reply. "We had no opportunity of telling him of our plans. He left my rooms this morning and we could not find him when we went to his own flat."

"Oh, Mr. Clifford will know that everything is all right."

"I'm not so sure of that. Don't forget, young 'un, that this case is of exceptional interest to him; he would have given half of his fortune to be allowed to accompany us. And yet, when I thought he would have been eagerly awaiting information, he was nowhere to be found. I am uneasy, Nipper."

"It's certainly a bit queer——"

"Hush, my lad, somebody's coming! We must be careful."

Nelson Lee and Nipper drifted apart, and very soon they were too much occupied to think of Douglas Clifford. They were kept busy at work until the Ocean Queen was well on her way down the river, on the top of the tide.

It was quite dark when the yacht warped out of dock—and had, indeed, been dark for some little time. Sir Roger Hogarth, the ship's owner, was entertaining his guests in the saloon, below; and the decks were deserted save for those members of the crew whose duty lie there.

Nelson Lee did not find an opportunity of speaking with Nipper again until fairly late. Then the two strolled on deck, for'ard, the detective enjoying a cigarette. It was really their watch below, and their time was their own.

"Well, we shall soon be in the Channel, young 'un," remarked Nelson Lee, leaning over the rail against one of the yacht's lifeboats, which was slung inboard, hanging from its davits.

"Yes, and now we've got a minute to ourselves, sir, we can have a little jaw," murmured Nipper. "It's dark here, and we're quite alone. I want to ask——"

"Hist!"

Both Nipper and Nelson Lee twirled round, surprised. Neither of them had uttered that soft sound, for it had emanated from the lifeboat, close against them. And there, in the dim gloom, they saw a face peering at them from beneath the white canvas covering of the boat.

Nelson Lee thrust his face forward quickly.

"Clifford!" he exclaimed, in soft, amazed tones.

And Douglas Clifford it undoubtedly was!

CHAPTER VI.

Coo Cheek—Waiting and Watching—Nelson Lee Realises the Truth.

"GREAT Scott! This is a fair knock-out!"

Nipper was almost too astonished to speak, and he uttered the words in a gasp of sheer breathlessness. The next moment Douglas Clifford had wriggled nimbly from beneath the boat's tarpaulin, and was standing before Nelson Lee.

For the first time since he had known Clifford, the detective was furiously angry with him. What was to be the result of this wild escapade? It was impossible for the stowaway to remain undiscovered; and he would be the cause, probably, of the whole scheme being ruined.

Nelson Lee looked about him quickly, and clenched his fists.

"What mad idea is this?" he muttered angrily. "Couldn't you leave this matter in my hands, Clifford? Am I not to be trusted? Just when everything was smoothly settled, and——"

Clifford gripped the detective's arm.

"I couldn't stay behind, Lee!" he said. "I—I was desperate, and I stole on board just before the yacht warped out of dock. I nipped up a rope and concealed myself in this lifeboat. I—I didn't know you were aboard."

"Surely you could rely on me?"

Clifford gulped.

"I was reckless with anxiety," he muttered brokenly. "Oh, I was a fool, I know! But Vera is on this ship, and—and I thought—— Oh, I don't know what I thought! Forgive me, Lee! But Vera—my little Vera——"

Clifford almost choked, and Nelson Lee softened at once.

"Yes, I understand, my dear fellow," he said gently. "Perhaps I was hasty to judge you so harshly. Well, I'm glad to see you, but it's infernally awkward. What the deuce shall we do with you?"

"I've spoiled everything, I expect," Clifford exclaimed bitterly. "I'm sorry, Lee, but I only thought of Vera; I only thought of my little girl being taken away by these league scoundrels. I was a fool not to know that you and Nipper would be quite alive to the situation. Thank Heaven you are on board! All my fears are at rest now, and I realise what a mad idiot I am."

"How on earth did you recognise us—in these disguises?"

"I didn't recognise you. But you both came here and started speaking in your ordinary voices, so I knew two things at once. That you were on board, and that you were alone and unobserved. So I seized the opportunity to reveal myself."

"H'm! We shall have to think of some——"

"Somebody's coming!" ejaculated Nipper suddenly. "My stars! It's the skipper himself and—and Zingrave! Yes, the other chap's Zingrave!"

"Heavens!" Clifford muttered between his teeth.

He gazed round him hastily, and was about to dive for the lifeboat again, when Nelson Lee stopped him. The detective muttered a few words to him, and thrust something into his hand. There was no time for making plans; no time for Clifford to hide himself.

"Well, it is a surprise to see you, mate!" exclaimed Nelson Lee, in a disguised voice, and in rather loud tones. "Fancy you appearin' on this craft—— Hallo, here comes the skipper! You'd better report."

"Yes, I will. Just what I was goin' to do, in fact," said Clifford easily.

All in a moment he had become cool and calm. He was dressed for his part in blue reefer coat and peaked cap, and had clipped his beard until it was sharp-pointed and totally different.

Captain Dunster had heard the words, and he hastened up, Professor Zingrave in the rear, smoking a cigar. The skipper stared at Clifford rather aggressively.

"Who the thunder are you?" he demanded. "You're not one of my crew! What are you doing on this craft?"

Clifford touched his cap.

"Orders, sir!" he said respectfully.

"Orders!" rapped out Dunster. "Whose orders? Not mine!"

Clifford drew something from his pocket, and handed it to the captain. It was a little piece of metal, shaped into a triangle, and painted green. Dunster became somewhat less aggressive as he took the league sign.

"My agent ordered me to come on board, sir," went on Clifford. "Said

as how I was to hold myself in readiness to do what I was told. Don't know the reason for it; but it ain't my place to be curious. My agent——"

"Your agent?"

"Yes, sir—Mr. Caine."

"Ned Goodwin's one of our best chap's, sir," put in Nelson Lee. "This is Ned Goodwin, sir. I've worked with him many a time; but I didn't expect he'd be a shipmate on this trip."

The captain didn't reply for a moment. Professor Zingrave had heard nothing of the conversation, for he had strolled off across the deck. It was not good policy for these working members of the league to know that he was connected with the society. To all intents and purposes, Zingrave was merely a guest of Sir Roger's.

"Oh, so Caine ordered you to come on board!" exclaimed the skipper, at last. "Well, Caine's a fool! As you're shipped, however, you'll have to stay on board. Report yourself to Mr. Jakes, the second officer."

Dunster did not have a single suspicion. Never for a moment did he dream that all was not right. To begin with, this stranger had produced the secret sign of the league—the green triangle. He had spoken one of the league's most trusted controlling agent's name with the utmost ease; and he was well-known to the disguised Nelson Lee—whose credentials were absolutely above suspicion.

It was all so simple that there was no reason for doubt. The very size and extent of the league was responsible for the ease with which this bluff was carried out. For it was impossible for Dunster to know every man in the league. And, having been convinced of the stranger's genuineness, Dunster did not bother himself further.

What would he have said could he have known that the trio were none other than Nelson Lee, Nipper and Douglas Clifford—the Green Triangle's worst enemies?

But he did not know, and he did not suspect.

So, by sheer, unadulterated cheek, Clifford was accepted on board the Ocean Queen as a trusted league member. The threatened peril was over, and Nelson Lee was very glad, now, that the young man was with him.

Clifford went off at once, as ordered, to report himself to Mr. Jakes. He could hardly realise that he had escaped exposure, and that he was in no danger. But he did realise—fully—that he had the detective to thank for his salvation.

Nelson Lee learned, before long, exactly how things stood. By noon of the next day he knew how many guests there were, and that the yachting-party were bound for the South Atlantic on a pleasure cruise. Apparently, the only object of the trip was one of pleasure.

But the detective was convinced that there was some deep motive in this sudden departure of the Ocean Queen from British shores. Vera Zingrave and Edmund Gresswell were on board—and they were there as prisoners. That fact was a positive one in Nelson Lee's mind. They did not seem to be prisoners, it is true; but it was equally true that there was no escape for them.

Nelson Lee guessed that Gresswell had been forced on board. Not actually carried, or with a revolver behind him—but forced, all the same. Possibly he had been told that unless he sailed on the yacht he would be mysteriously killed without warning. And this, as a matter of fact, was what had actually happened.

Gresswell was no fool. He fully understood the league's power, and he knew, too, that he had acted unwisely in unburdening himself to the professor. He had shown his true colours; he had shown that he was no

longer faithful to the league. And so, rather than submit to violent death, he had boarded the yacht. Under the circumstances he could have done nothing else.

Vera, too; she had been treated in a precisely similar fashion. When Zingrave had entered her taxi, he had put the matter to her plainly, and she had perforce to agree to his terms. She knew the true villainous character of her stepfather now, and she dared not ignore his threats.

So she went aboard the yacht quietly, and without fuss. Somehow, she had a feeling that she would not be left alone and unprotected. Nelson Lee and her lover were fully aware of the situation, and would certainly come to her aid.

That they had done so was unknown to her at present; but she did not worry. She had a simple, trusting confidence that all would come right.

The detective found that the party consisted of the two "prisoners," Professor Zingrave, Sir Roger Hogarth, Prince Yoni-Saka, and Dr. William Northrup—the latter being a well-known physician. Nelson Lee knew that he, too, was a Governing Member of the League of the Green Triangle.

When Vera appeared upon deck she looked a trifle wan and careworn, and her usual sunny, captivating smile was absent. Her eyes had lost their delightful expression of girlish simplicity, and were grave and serious.

Clifford saw her, and he longed to reveal himself. Indeed, he had the very greatest difficulty in holding himself in check.

Nelson Lee realised that Clifford would probably act recklessly, and so the detective took the first opportunity of having a word with Vera, and acquainting her with the facts. Once she understood that she was being closely guarded she would be easy in mind, and Clifford would remain cautious.

But it was three days before Nelson Lee's opportunity arrived. It was very dark after dinner that evening, and the detective saw Vera leaning against the rail quite alone. She did not seem to be well to-day, and Lee thought it a good time to tell her of the facts.

Accordingly, he approached her, and in a few words related what had happened, and informed her that he and Clifford were watching over her constantly—to say nothing of Master Nipper. Vera was overjoyed to hear the news, and the dull, heavy expression seemed to vanish from her eyes.

After that she seemed for a time altogether merrier; but the voyage apparently did not agree with her, for she became quite pale and thin. It was curious, too, that Edmund Gresswell was looking actually ill.

The days passed, and the warmer regions of the South Atlantic were reached. The Ocean Queen did not touch any port, but kept to the open sea. The hours of daylight were now sunny and glorious, and the evenings simply delightful.

But both Gresswell and Vera were becoming more pale and wan every day. Clifford was anxious, but he could do nothing. Nelson Lee assured him that the change in the condition of the prisoners was brought about by the knowledge of their position. But, at the same time, the detective was troubled with uneasy doubts.

One delightful morning the barrister's appearance was alarming. Pale and haggard, he appeared on deck with his eyes deeply sunken, and his hands shaking as though with ague. And Vera, although nothing like so ill, was nevertheless displaying the same mysterious symptoms.

Gresswell sank into a deck-chair, and his hands hung limply at his sides. Presently Sir Roger Hogarth came along and stood chatting to the obviously ill barrister. But Gresswell scarcely answered a single word, and his eyes were closed and his lips twitching. Nelson Lee, from the other side of

the deck, watched with knitted brows. Gresswell's condition, he knew, was not altogether due to his state of mind.

Vera, too, seemed to be somewhat worse that morning. She was comparatively well, it is true, but a totally changed girl from the vivacious young lady who had met Clifford in the restaurant near Oxford Circus so often.

It happened that Nelson Lee was on deck again a couple of hours later. Gresswell was crossing the deck to the main companion, and he was swaying uncertainly as he walked. Suddenly he lurched, pitched forward, and fell with a thud to the deck.

Nelson Lee seized his opportunity—the opportunity he had been awaiting for days past—to get to close quarters with the sick man.

He ran forward, and was the first to kneel by Gresswell's side.

"By James!" muttered Nelson Lee. "What is this?"

There was a little foam on the fallen barrister's lips, and his face was leaden. His breath was hard and forced, and dangerously irregular.

The next minute Nelson Lee was thrust aside, and Dr. Northrup and Sir Roger lifted Gresswell and carried him below.

But Nelson Lee was sure of one thing. Gresswell was not suffering from any natural ailment; he was not a victim of fear and terror. He was being poisoned—slowly and deliberately poisoned!

That evening, just before dinner, Dr. Northrup made the grave announcement that Edmund Gresswell, K.C., had passed away without recovering consciousness.

The barrister was dead!

The unexpected shock of the thing was a terrible blow to Nelson Lee. But the blow was as nothing compared to the dread realisation which dawned upon his mind. He and Nipper were alone on deck, quite to themselves.

"Gresswell is dead!" murmured the detective grimly. "I know—positively know, young 'un—that the poor man was fiendishly murdered!"

"Good heavens!" breathed Nipper, aghast.

"Do you not realise what it means? Northrup clearly stated that Gresswell has been suffering from a strange, unknown disease, which he cannot diagnose, but which is deadly. And Vera Zingrave, the doctor declares, is suffering from the same fatal complaint!"

Nipper went white.

"Then—then——"

"Gresswell has been poisoned—murdered!" said Nelson Lee tensely. "And Miss Vera is said to be suffering from a strange disease. The truth is, my boy, Miss Vera is also being slowly poisoned, and her death may occur at any hour!"

The horror of that realisation was appalling.

— — —

CHAPTER VII.

Making Plans—Discovery—In the League's Hands—Hogarth's Scheme.

NELSON LEE found no opportunity to have a word with Clifford, and hoped that the young man had not guessed the real terrible meaning of Gresswell's sudden death. The detective himself was aghast, and sorely troubled in mind.

He learned that Gresswell's body would be buried the next morning. As the yacht was at sea, it was obvious that the burial would have to take place at sea.

The whole vile plot was clear to the detective now.

Gresswell and Vera had been forced to take this trip because it was necessary, for the good of the league, that they should both die. Zingrave cared not a snap of the fingers for his stepdaughter—he had made that plain long since. And his villainy even went to the length of murdering her.

But the cunning of the scheme was horrible. By slow poisoning it could be made to appear that the victims were suffering from a disease. Members of the Ocean Queen's crew might suspect otherwise, but there would be no proof. Both bodies would be buried at sea, and Dr. Northrup—a physician of some repute in the West End—would certify that both deaths were natural. There could not possibly be any proofs forthcoming afterwards that the two had died by foul means.

In accordance with the doctor's announcement, Gresswell was buried at dawn the following day. It was a solemn ceremony, and Nelson Lee took care to be present. When it was all over the air seemed to be cleared a little, and the yachting party, although still grave and serious, were very relieved. Zingrave and Hogarth, in fact, were privately congratulating themselves that the first victim was accounted for. Gresswell would tell no tales now!

Nelson Lee did not worry himself much about what had occurred; it was the prospect of that which was to follow which troubled him more than he cared to admit. Gresswell had been a scoundrel, anyhow, and had thoroughly deserved death. It had certainly been a terrible death for him to die, but he only had his former associates to thank for that.

The thought of Vera almost made Nelson Lee frantic. He was sure that Clifford had not realised the awful significance of Gresswell's death; but Clifford would have to be told the truth, for immediate action was absolutely necessary.

The detective was intensely relieved to see that Vera was looking a little brighter when she came on deck after breakfast that morning. But Nelson Lee was not deluded. He guessed that the girl's death was not going to be brought about until two or three days had elapsed. There was a chance, however, that the murderers would do their foul work during the next twenty-four hours.

It was utterly impossible to allow the awful thing to go on.

But how was action to be taken to prevent it?

Nelson Lee did not know, but he racked his brain for some feasible plan. During the day he managed to get hold of Clifford for a few moments in private, and he told the young man to meet him that evening at the rear of a deckhouse, on the forward deck. Nipper would also be there, and the trio would hold a confabulation.

The hours seemed to drag heavily that day. It was glorious weather, and the heat was almost oppressive. The sea lay like a placid pond all around, with scarcely a ripple upon its surface. The Ocean Queen was moving very slowly.

When the three conspirators gathered together at the agreed-upon meeting-place all was pitchy darkness, for there was no moon, and the stars were hidden by a haze. Both Nelson Lee and Clifford were off duty, but Nipper was supposed to be working. He had, however, stolen away, for it was imperative that he should be present at the discussion.

The spot was a very quiet one, unobserved from any point, and in case of a sudden surprise the trio would be able to disperse without arousing suspicion. Moreover, the place was practically safe from eavesdropping.

In as few words as possible, Nelson Lee acquainted Clifford with the facts—for they were facts now, and not suspicions. Clifford, who had been intensely anxious regarding Vera, had certainly not dreamed that poison

had been the cause of Gresswell's death, and that poison was undoubtedly being administered to the girl.

"It's devilish, Lee—devilish!" said Clifford hoarsely.

"No words are sufficiently strong to describe the full horror of the situation," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "But we must not get into a panic. Panic is the one factor which will ruin everything if we give way to it. It is certain that Miss Vera will share the same fate as Gresswell if we do not act——"

"She may be dying even now——"

"Now, now! What did I say?" put in Nelson Lee sternly. "For Heaven's sake keep cool, my dear fellow! The girl is in no danger—no immediate danger, I mean. In fact, she was looking much brighter to-day than she has for a whole week. And it is quite plain, therefore, that the doses of poison, whatever they are, have been temporarily suspended. It may be a week before the end comes."

"That will never come!" Clifford said fiercely.

"Oh, yes, it will," replied the detective. "The end will come, but not the end these scoundrels anticipate. This lull in the operations, as it were, has provided us with the opportunity we want. By hook or by crook Miss Vera must be rescued from her vile murderers."

"But how's it to be done, guv'nor?" Nipper asked eagerly.

"Heaven alone knows, my boy—for I don't!" replied the detective gravely. "But we must not despair. We can only do our best. The odds are terribly against us. We are but three against a whole horde. Every man on this ship is an enemy—every man, save ourselves, is a member of the league. As you know well enough, we are in the very midst of a hornet's nest! But we have tricked our enemies so far, and there is no reason why we should not trick them to the end!"

Clifford bent a little closer.

"To use force is out of the question," he murmured, now deadly cool. "We are all armed, I know, but if we attempt to gain possession of the ship we should very soon be overpowered. Whatever we do must be done quietly and in secret."

There was a long silence.

"I have been turning over ideas in my mind all day long," Nelson Lee said at last, "and it seems to me that we have but one chance. I admit it is a chance against overwhelming odds, but we must not look upon the black side."

"What do you propose, sir?" breathed Nipper.

"In brief, we must get the girl away from this ship this very night! We must all escape and trust to luck to get away before the alarm is given."

"But how can we leave the ship?" asked Clifford blankly.

"We can steal down to Miss Vera's cabin—fortunately it is some distance from all the others—and warn her to prepare herself," replied the detective.

"That will be Nipper's task. Meanwhile, you and I, my dear fellow, will be preparing a boat in readiness for the escape. The yacht is practically stationary, and to launch a boat will be a simple task."

Clifford was dubious.

"Perhaps it is a simple task," he replied, "but what of the watch on deck? We cannot hope to launch a boat unobserved or unheard."

"I admit that you are right," replied the detective, "but during those last few minutes we must take risks. It is impossible to make settled plans, because we do not know what will happen. But two of us can hold the brutes at bay with revolvers while the other lowers the boat. It will be a desperate dash for freedom, I grant you, but we are all of proved courage,

and we shall sell our lives dearly. There is nothing else to be done—we have no choice!”

“But I was thinking——”

There was a sudden rush of feet, and the next instant the trio was surrounded by dim forms.

“Collar them!” rapped out the skipper’s sharp tones. “By thunder, we’ve dropped on something here!”

Nelson Lee and Clifford were too startled to speak for the moment, and Nipper almost felt sick.

“Beaten!” he roared frantically. “Oh, guv’nor, let’s fight like the dickens——”

But Nipper, game as he was, was not allowed to fight. In less than two minutes the three were securely grasped and then marched off without ceremony to a large cabin below. Here Professor Zingrave was waiting with Sir Roger Hogarth. The professor was looking grim and cruel, and a furious light gleamed in his eyes—a fiendish light which could not be mistaken.

“The prisoners are bound?” he asked. “Good! Leave them to us, Dunster. I will ring when I want them taken away!”

Nelson Lee, Clifford and Nipper were left standing against the woodwork of the cabin, and the captain and the other men made their exit. Clifford was as white as a sheet, and his chest was heaving with emotion.

Nipper, too, was white; but Nelson Lee remained perfectly calm and seemingly unemotional. He appeared to be perfectly indifferent to what had occurred. Yet, in truth, the famous detective was far more upset than his two companions.

Discovery had come before they had been able to take any action. It was not even possible to attempt the forlorn hope which the detective had suggested.

Professor Zingrave faced the trio.

“So!” he exclaimed, with deadly calmness, “you are spies! You are conspirators on this yacht! By heavens, you shall pay dearly——”

“Hang you!” rapped out Clifford furiously. “Don’t start gloating over your triumph! We’re in your power, but only by the merest fluke——”

“No, not by a fluke,” interjected the professor. “The captain was keenly on the alert to-night, and he noticed the three of you gathered together, obviously in secret. Accordingly he crept forward behind the deckhouse, overheard much of your conversation, and—— Well, this is the result!”

As Zingrave ceased speaking he stepped forward and proceeded to drag the disguises from the prisoners.

“My old friends, Nelson Lee and Nipper!” he exclaimed with keen satisfaction. “Oh, yes! I knew your identity before, for Dunster overheard sufficient to tell him that. But I must admit this gentleman is a stranger to me,” went on the professor, tugging at Clifford’s beard, which was entirely his own. “Not false, eh? Well, I don’t know you, but it is sufficient that you are one of this infernal detective’s confederates.”

“By thunder, if I had my hands free——” choked Clifford.

“I am afraid it is futile to indulge in useless fancies!” interjected Zingrave bitingly. “You are prisoners with no hope of escape. In due course you shall receive the punishment you richly deserve. It is, of course, a waste of breath for me to say that you will never sight land again!”

Nelson Lee did not utter a word. His thoughts were so bitter that he dared not trust himself to speak. What would have been the use. This one-sided interview would only have been painfully prolonged.

Promising to resume the conversation very shortly Zingrave rang for the three prisoners to be taken away. He made it quite clear that when

they were again brought before him it would be for the purpose of listening to their death warrant.

When the trio had been removed Zingrave lit a cigar and seated himself. Sir Roger Hogarth, who had been so far silent, broke into conversation.

"You're mighty cool about this affair, Zingrave!" he growled. "But I think there's decided cause for alarm. Nelson Lee knows the secret of this trip——"

"Supposing he does? Of what value is the knowledge to him? In a few hours, Hogarth, all three spies will be at the bottom of the sea," replied the professor. "And, while we are about it, we will include the girl. Our original plan must be forsaken."

"But how is it to be done?"

Professor Zingrave stroked his long, black hair.

"The matter requires careful thought," he returned. "To attempt the same treatment as Gresswell received is out of the question. It would be too slow a job to finish them off one after another—and certainly too dramatic to deal with them in one swoop. We must think out a plausible scheme. If necessary we must not hesitate to sacrifice this very yacht!"

"But, good gracious——"

"Of what value is the yacht?" Zingrave interjected. "In any case, the vessel is heavily insured, and you would lose no money. Moreover, the fact that Nelson Lee and Nipper were disposed of would be ample compensation for the loss."

Sir Roger Hogarth thumped the table.

"By James, an idea!" he exclaimed tensely. "As a matter of fact, the Ocean Queen is over-insured. If she goes to the bottom there will be no loss, but a huge profit. Why should we not rid ourselves of our enemies and make money at the same time?"

"An excellent suggestion," Zingrave said drily.

"There are explosives below, in the forward hold," went on the other tensely. "It would be a simple matter for us to leave the yacht, and to set a time-fuse which will destroy it and send it to the bottom—together with the three prisoners and the girl. We are within easy distance of the regular steamship routes, and would be picked up without trouble. I was speaking to the wireless operator only half-an-hour ago, and he had then been in communication with a large liner to the southward. An S.O.S. message sent out at the last moment——"

"Yes, yes! I see your idea exactly," Zingrave interrupted. "It is quite feasible and possible. I can foresee the whole sequence of events quite clearly. We can escape from the yacht by means of the motor-launch and steer for safety and rescue. Who will suspect foul play? Your name is a power in the land, Sir Roger, and three members of the crew will be reported to have perished in the disaster, and my own step-daughter will also be named as one of the victims. Who, for a single moment, will entertain the slightest breath of suspicion?"

"Oh, there will be no risk—not the slightest," said Sir Roger. "But it is a terribly drastic plan, and will mean much inconvenience——"

Zingrave waved his hand impatiently.

"We must not mind inconvenience," he broke in. "Think of the advantages we gain. Not only will the object of this trip be accomplished, but Nelson Lee and Nipper will be finally settled with, and the insurance on the Ocean Queen will cover every expense of the trip. Our need at the present moment is desperate—therefore the only way is to adopt desperate measures!"

"And when do you propose to carry out the plan?"

"This very night!" rapped back Zingrave crisply. "A more ideal night

could not be wished for. Northup and the Prince are playing billiards; we will call them in, and then make final plans. By morning our enemies will be at the bottom of the Atlantic!"

CHAPTER VIII.

The Explosion—A Terrible Predicament—Fate—Finis.

"WE must resign ourselves to the miserable truth, Clifford," said Nelson Lee bitterly. "We are trapped—hopelessly trapped. There is no escape for us now!"

Douglas Clifford set his teeth.

"Well, if Vera is to die, it is better that I should die with her!" he exclaimed in dull tones. "What have we done that fate should be so unkind? This nest of scoundrels is——"

Clifford's sentence was cut short by the sudden opening of the cabin door. The trio had been left in a small stuffy cabin for three or four hours, and they knew that a couple of sentries were on guard outside. It was also clear to them that Zingrave and his fellow-rogues had been discussing their fate.

For the most part the prisoners had not spoken much. Their feelings were too awful for rational conversation. It was better to remain silent, and hardly anything had been said at all.

Now the doomed three were roughly hustled out of the cabin, along a brilliantly-lit passageway until they came to the captain's own cabin—a large apartment, well furnished.

They were thrust into this without ceremony, and the door was slammed upon them, and they heard two bolts shot.

The prisoners were only bound by the wrists, and Clifford started forward with an exclamation.

Vera was in the cabin! The girl was lying in an easy chair, looking decidedly ill. But she started up now, with a glad cry, and moved forward to meet her lover.

"Douglas!" she murmured pitifully. "Oh, my sweetheart!"

Clifford could have cried out aloud with the agony of his mind, but he restrained himself and strove to remain calm. Vera lost no time in removing the bonds from her three companions, and then Clifford took the girl in his arms, heedless of the presence of Nelson Lee and Nipper. They instinctively felt that they were going to die, and no power on earth could keep them apart.

"My darling!" breathed Clifford. "You look ill——"

"I am all right, Douglas!" she murmured. "I am feeling better to-night than I have felt for days. And, oh, I am so glad to have you with me, my loved one!"

Nelson Lee and Nipper stood on the far side of the cabin, and the detective took stock of his surroundings. He was quite cool now, perhaps a little pale, but ready to seize the faintest shred of hope.

Not that he had the slightest spark of hope within him. Zingrave would never have allowed his victim to be unbound if there was any chance whatever of their getting free.

A glance told the detective that the door was an exceptionally strong one; moreover, it had been provided with extra bolts on the outside. The skylight had been battened down and covered with a steel hatch—so that escape by that means was out of the question. The cabin was bare so far as any heavy implement was concerned. There was no object which could be used as a hammer or an axe.

That one glance told Nelson Lee that he and his companions were in a trap.

But why had they been placed here? What was the object of the move? Nelson Lee was not morbid, but he had been anticipating something quite different—a rap on the head and a plunge into the ocean, heavily weighted. Apparently, however, the professor had something of a totally different nature in mind.

The detective's eyes shifted their gaze to Clifford and Vera. The lovers were still close together, and Vera was resting her arms upon Clifford's shoulders.

Something seemed to rise up in Nelson Lee's throat and choke him.

"Oh, the horrible devilry of it all!" he muttered thickly. "You and I, Nipper, are accustomed to grave perils. But that poor girl——"

"I—I feel like blubbing, guv'nor!" choked Nipper.

"I wish to Heaven I knew——"

Boom-oom!

The cabin shook and quivered, and the whole vessel heeled over drunkenly. From forward, and evidently deep down in the hold of the ship, a booming explosion had sounded. It died away like rolling thunder, and all was silent again.

"So that is to be our fate!" breathed Nelson Lee between his teeth.

"What was it?" said Vera in a frightened voice. "Oh, what was it?"

"Nothing, sweetheart!" murmured Clifford softly, although he knew very well that his words sounded hollow.

But Vera smiled bravely.

"I know what it was," she exclaimed very quietly. "They are going to sink the ship, and we shall all——"

"Don't, little girl—don't!" pleaded Clifford.

Nelson Lee gripped Nipper's arm fiercely. The detective felt, at that moment, as he had never felt in all his life before. He had been in many traps, many perils, but this was the most terrible of them all.

Locked in a cabin which was as secure as a cell in Dartmoor Prison—a cabin below decks of a sinking yacht! What would the end be?

There could be only one end. There being no possibility of escape the vessel would plunge to the bottom, carrying her living cargo with her. A more terrible predicament could scarcely be imagined or conceived.

Nelson Lee did not deceive himself for a second. Unless a miracle happened he and these with him were doomed—and the age of miracles had passed. It was utterly useless to attempt to escape, for such an attempt would only end in failure.

The League of the Green Triangle had beaten him at last!

Already the Ocean Queen had begun to settle down by the bows. The floor of the cabin had assumed a decided angle. And, from far below, came the unmistakable sound of rushing, roaring water. The explosion had evidently caused a terrible gap to be rent in the vessel's side, and the end would be swift in coming.

The situation was appalling, but there was nothing to be done. It was obvious that the murderers had left the yacht, for all was quiet save for that dull roar.

Presently it became difficult for the doomed quartette to keep their feet on the sloping floor. They clung to the wooden partition of the cabin and waited—waited for the end which seemed inevitable.

But Fate—kindly Fate—was to take a hand in the game after all!

Without warning, a tearing, rending sound filled the cabin, and Nelson Lee gazed swiftly upwards—to the highest level of the floor. He and the

others were naturally at the lower end of the cabin, and the opposite flooring was now almost on a level with their heads.

A huge wooden cabinet was tearing itself away from the upper partition, to which it was fastened. But Nelson Lee did not know one important thing. The cabinet was, in reality, a heavy steel safe, built over with wood in order to make it an article of furniture. The great weight of the safe was proving too much, and it was wrenching itself away.

The very list which the yacht was assuming proved to be the doomed quartette's salvation! Zingrave had overlooked the safe; but how could he have guessed that such a thing as this would occur?

With a final tearing of wood the massive steel safe burst away and slithered down the sloping floor with terrific force and speed.

Crash!

It was all over in a second. The lower wall of the cabin, strong as it was, could not withstand such a terrific onslaught. The safe cut clean through the wall as though the latter had been made of paper. A huge gaping hole was left, three feet across, and four feet high. Yet, when reviewed calmly, there was nothing extraordinary in the incident. The safe had been unable to remain fixed, and had, therefore, slithered downwards. It was the most commonplace incident imaginable.

"By James!" roared Nelson Lee suddenly, electrified into life. "Providence has come to our aid! See, there is a way of escape!"

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Clifford fervently.

The escape from the sinking yacht was exciting enough, but it was attended with absolute success.

A small, collapsible boat was found on deck. It was impossible to launch one of the big lifeboats, owing to the darkness and the list which the yacht had assumed. The bows of the Ocean Queen were completely submerged; so it was possible to lay the collapsible boat directly into the water, and row safely away.

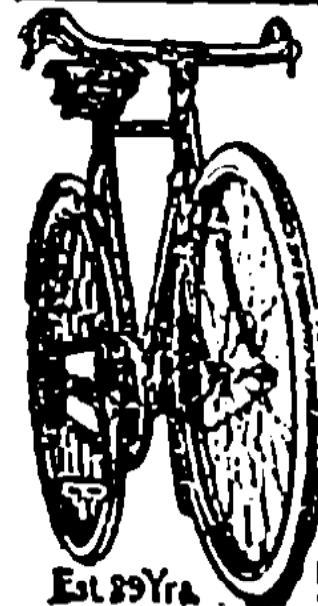
The end came with appalling swiftness. Scarcely had the boat got more than a couple of hundred yards away when there was a hissing roar, plainly indicating that the water had reached the boilers. A minute later the yacht lifted her stern completely out of the sea and plunged to the bed of the ocean.

The four survivors were picked up soon after dawn by a British tramp steamer, bound for Cardiff. Lee arranged with the captain to report nothing whatever of the incident.

The skipper demurred at first, but succumbed to the promise of a liberal reward. He was to land his passengers at the first port he called at, and to make a report that he had witnessed the sinking of the Ocean Queen, and that there had been no survivors whatever. It would be a false report, but it was all in the cause of justice.

For in this way Nelson Lee gained a big advantage of the league. Zingrave thought that he was dead; but he was very much alive, and quite

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ready to strike the fatal blow which would mean the end of the great criminal organisation. The detective realised that the League of the Green Triangle was now more than ever doomed.

And Vera?

The girl picked up wonderfully on the homeward voyage. The doses of poison which had been secretly administered to her had not been sufficiently large to have any real effect. It had been Zingrave's plan to kill her by inches, as it were, enlarging the doses of poison towards the end. The fact that Nelson Lee and his companions had been discovered had been, to tell the truth, the means of saving her life. By the time she stepped ashore from the tramp steamer, Vera was healthy and well again.

Everything had turned out for the best.

And Professor Zingrave fondly imagined that all the advantage lay with him. He and the crew of the Ocean Queen had been picked up by a large liner bound for Liverpool, and had declared that the yacht had struck a derelict, and that four lives had been lost in the disaster. There was nothing to disprove the report, for the fact that the victims had escaped was kept a dead secret.

While Zingrave was congratulating himself upon his success, Nelson Lee was preparing for the final coup.

The end was in sight at last.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!

“WHEN ROGUES FALL OUT,”

or, “The Case of the Delaval Diamonds.”

A GRAND LONG COMPLETE STORY
OF NELSON LEE AND NIPPER.

IN A FORTNIGHT'S TIME!

Nelson Lee v. The Green Triangle.

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, and the fish being disposed of in port, and the *Bonnie Jean* safely moored up the canal, the lads go ashore.

They are invited to the house of a Dutchman—one Jan Daxter. Suspecting no foul play, Hal and Ben accept the invitation. They enter a room in company with the Dutchman, who, after excusing himself to the lads, goes outside. The chums hear the key of the door turned. They are prisoners, and at once connect Neil with it. (Now read on.)

The Chalk and the Sjambok.

THE boys glanced around sharply. They were not alone. Two other Dutchmen nearly as big as their host, and quite as sunburnt, came forward. Quick as a flash, without warning, one of them pinioned Hal's arms behind him and drew a slip-noose round his wrists, binding them tight. The man who had brought them in leaped at Ben.

He received a stinging blow under the chin for his pains, but it did not stop him. He was too big and heavy. The third man came to his aid, and, in spite of his struggles, Ben was trussed up securely as his mate.

"By George!" cried Ben. "This is treachery! You beef-faced ruffian, you'll have the British consul on to you before you're much older. What d'you mean by it?"

The big Dutchman—he who had brought the boys to the house—rolled a cigarette and lit it with great care.

"These," he said to his two comrades, in Dutch, "are the brats I told

you of. I should have preferred the captain or the mate; but they gave me no opportunity. There are not many English in the city just now."

"We have three altogether," said the second man. "Enough to go on with. Are the brats fed?"

"Of course they are!" retorted the first. "You know my rule, Piet. Not even an accursed Englander goes from my house empty. That marks the difference between the avenger and the mere ruffian."

"See here!" he said in English, turning fiercely upon the boys. "Do you know who I am? I am one whose mission is to humiliate and disgrace any one of your accursed nation who falls into my hands. Night and day I pray for the downfall of Britain. I abhor, I spit upon the whole race of you dogs of Englishmen!"

His face was transformed into the countenance of a perfect demon of hate; his small red eyes gleamed viciously. The suave, well-bred man of the restaurant, the host of the luxurious dinner downstairs, was gone, and a human tiger seemed to be in his place. Yet, after that one outburst, he was calm and quiet again, yet looked all the more dangerous.

"Are you a madman?" said Hal contemptuously. "What harm has our nation done to yours? The Dutch we've met so far have been decent enough to us. At any rate, you're the first I've met who is blackguard enough to invite a man to his house and kidnap him."

"You will sing a different note before I have done with you," said the man, blowing a cloud of smoke through his nostrils and smiling evilly. "As for the Dutch, I like them little better than your own breed, though they are of my blood. They failed us in our need. But I am a Boer of the Transvaal, and your villainous country trampled mine into the dust."

"Besh," said Ben. "There was no trampling about it. It was a fair fight, an' we won. We an' the Boers are good friends now, an' both pullin' together. They don't bear malice—why should you? Besides it happened fourteen years ago."

"Enough," said the big Boer, his lips curling viciously from his yellow teeth. "I was not one of the hands-up brigade. When I hate I hate to the end—as I am going to show you. Bring the prisoners out!"

A knock sounded at the door at that moment, and the Boer stepped across the room, unlocked and opened it, and in strode Haggart Neil and his son Simon. Haggart showed his yellow teeth in a grin of malicious triumph as he saw the prisoners, and the boy at his side burst into a shrill, cackling laugh.

"Ye're in for it now, ye sneakin' beggars!" cried Simon. "I wouldn't be in ye're shoes for a thousand pounds!"

"Hech! It does a man's eyes good tae see it!" muttered Neil, rubbing his hands together. "Ay, these are the looms, Deventer. Get to work on them!"

The two boys were so flabbergasted that they could only stare for a moment.

"You!" cried Ben at last. "Ay, we might ha' known it! If there's any dirty work doin' on the North Sea coasts, Neil the Wrecker is always at the bottom of it! So Neil an' you are goin' shares, eh, you Dutch swabs? Birds of a feather! A pretty pair you make!"

"Captain Haggart Neil is not exactly a friend of mine," said Deventer suavely, "but now I am under a very great obligation to him. He has done me to-day as good a turn as any man I ever knew in my life. As a reward, he will share in the sport, though only as an onlooker at first. I shall give myself the pleasure of attending to you personally."

(Continued overleaf.)

"I don't know what you think you're going to do," said Hal bitterly; "but I'd rather it was you than that gaolbird there, anyway."

"Ye copper's spy!" hissed Neil furiously. "Ye'll sing another tune in a minute! Set them where we can see it done, Jan! Watch now, Simon, an' see half o' our debt paid!"

"Clear the centre there," said Deventer to his men; "give me room, and stand back."

"You saddle-coloured brute!" said Ben in a rage, as he and Hal were dragged out into the middle of the room. "You shame of your country! You'll suffer for this!"

The Boer unhitched a snakey-looking black whip from a nail on the wall, and cracked it before Ben's face with a noise like pistol-shot.

"The sjambok," he said, "the national whip of my country. It is made of rhinoceros-hide. If you open your lips again, or fail to obey a single order, I will flay you alive with it. So be careful!"

"By George, I believe you!" said Ben, who had a bitter tongue when aroused. "I've heard there were scum among the Boers who would flog a prisoner if his hands were tied safe, and by the look o' you, you're one of them. I s'pose you run this swell house on the money you cleared out with when the fighting began. I bet that lunch was paid for out of the Boers' Widows' Fund! But, if it wasn't poisoned, I'll make you wish you'd let the Bonnie Jean's crew alone!"

The Boer, turning yellow under his tan, raised the sjambok, as if to cut Ben across the face; then, biting his lip, he lowered it.

"I'll attend to you last," he said smoothly, "and reserve you my best efforts. We will begin with the third prisoner—the one taken last night. Bring him out!"

One of the Dutchmen left the room, and returned, pushing before him a pale, furtive-looking man of about thirty, with a scared face and shifty eyes.

"Another of your charming countrymen!" said the big Boer to the boys. "He is very much alarmed, as you see, and has already denied his nationality."

"Bet he has," muttered Ben. "He's got half-breed written all over him. Don't tell me that's a Britisher!"

"He will afford less sport than yourself, I fear," said the Boer. "But he is partly English, and a British subject, at any rate. He will serve as an object lesson. Piet, set up the blackboard."

A large board, just like the ones used in mathematical classes, was put on its easel. Then, for the first time, the Boer pointed out to the boys a small flagstaff in a corner. From its truck hung the Transvaal colours, and underneath them the Union Jack.

"The man's mad!" muttered Ben aghast.

"Here is the flag of my country," said the Boer, "and beneath it, in its proper place, the emblem of your accursed nation! I tear it down and rend it to pieces, and spit on it—thus, and thus, and thus! See, I trample it in the dirt! Presently you shall do the same. I have plenty more!"

Hal, who up to now had remained silent, quietly taking in the situation, blazed into fierce wrath at this. He was even more angry than Ben. But he set his teeth and waited.

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