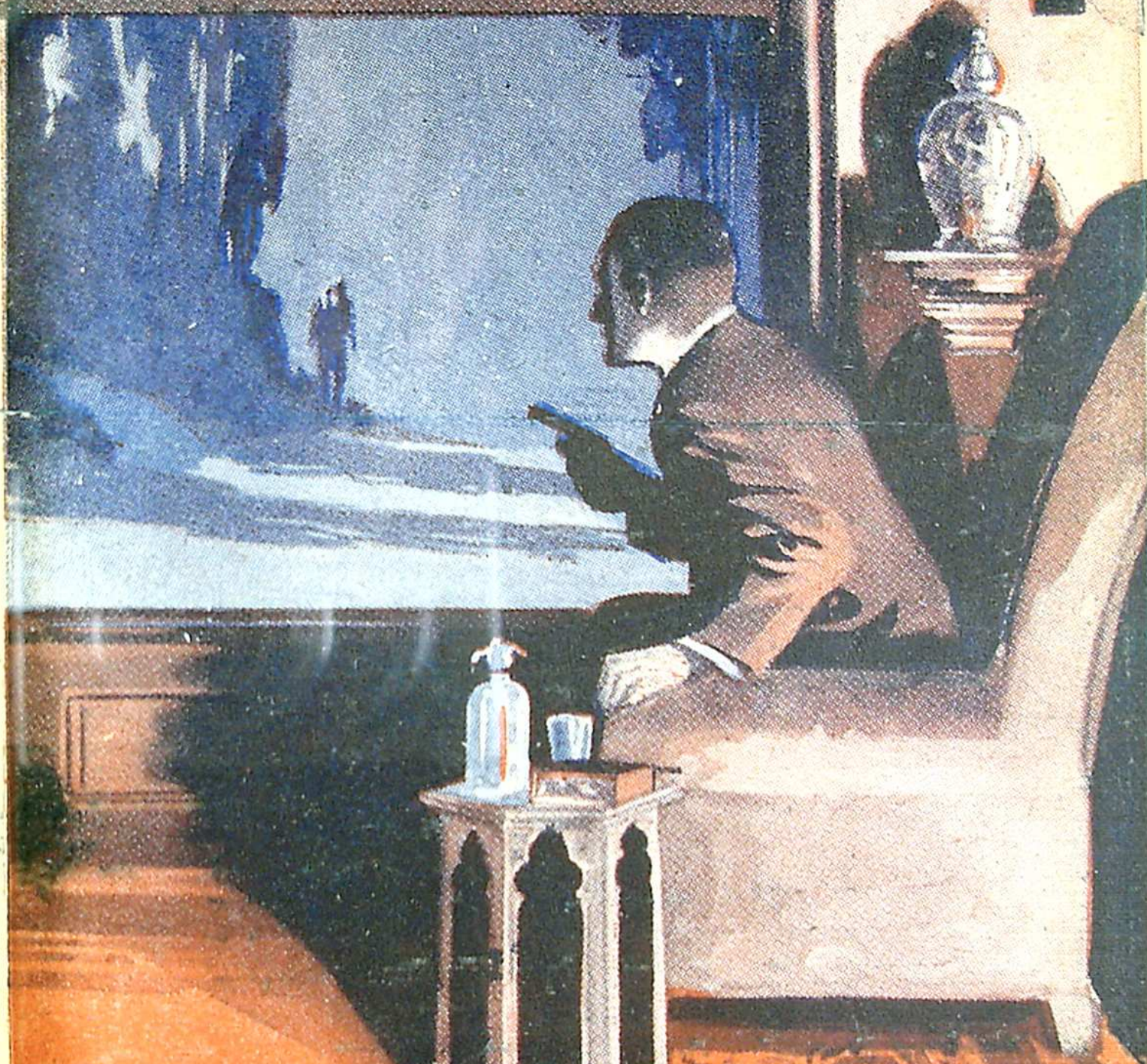


# NELSON LEE

LIBRARY

1<sup>d</sup>

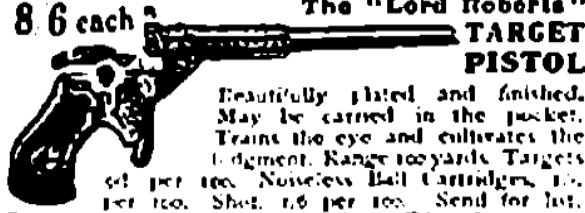


THE CASE OF

## THE DUPLICATE KEY.

A TALE OF NELSON LEE, AND NIPPER.

8/6 each



The "Lord Roberts" TARGET PISTOL

Beautifully plated and finished. May be carried in the pocket. Trains the eye and cultivates the judgment. Range 100 yards. Targets

6d per 100. Noiseless Ball Cartridges, 1s per 100. Shot, 1/6 per 100. Send for list.

Crown Gun Works, 5 Whitall St., Birmingham.

100 CONJURING TRICKS. 57 Joke Tricks, 6 Puzzles, 65 Games, 20 Jokes, 10 Magic Pranks, 7d. P.O. the 2/- HUGHES & Co., Station Road, Harlow, BIRMINGHAM. Sneezing Powder, 6d. Box.

100 Comic Recitations, 7d. 14 Conjuring Tricks, 7d. Ventriloquism, 7d. 74 Card Tricks, 7d. Way to Dance, 7d. Boxing, 7d. Thought Reading, 7d. Any three, 1/6. All post paid—G. Wicks & Co., Stockton, Rugby.

SNEEZING POWDER Blown about sets everybody sneezing. Causes screams of laughter. One large 6/- package and two other wonderful medicinal Novelties 7d. (P.O.)—Ideal Co., Cleveland.

PAIN'S REAL GOLD SHELL RINGS, 5/-

No. 1 Ring, Dress, Set 12 Diamonds. No. 2 Ring, Gent's Signet (Ring, Lady's Signet), also Wedding, Keeper, Knot, and Buckle Rings, all 5/- each, post free. Satisfaction or money back. For size of this in piece of card to go over knuckle tightly, or write for Size Card and Free Catalogue.—PAIN'S PRESENTS HOUSE, Dept. 33, HASTINGS.



30 DAYS' FREE TRIAL.

Packed Free. Carriage Paid. No deposit required. MEAD

Coventry Flyers.

Warranted 15 Years. Puncture Resisting or Dunlop Tyres, Brooks Saddles, Coasters, Speed Gears, &c.

From 10/- Monthly.

Prompt delivery. No advance in price. Write today for Art Catalogue and Special Offer. Riders Agents Wanted.

MEAD CYCLE CO., Dept 72H, 11 Paradise St., Liverpool.



IF YOU WANT Good Cheap Photographic Material or Cameras, send postcard for Samples and Catalogue FREE—WORKS JULY ROAD, LIVERPOOL.



VENTRILOQUIST'S Double Throat; fits to f of mouth; astonishes and mystifies; sing like a canary, whine like a puppy, and imitate birds and beasts. Ventriloquism Treatise free. Sixpen each. Four for 1s.—T. W. HARRISON, Dept. 262, Pentonville Rd., London, N.

ARE YOU NERVOUS?

If you are nervous or sensitive, suffer from involuntary flushing, nervous indigestion, constipation, lack of self-confidence, will power, or mind concentration, I can tell you how to quickly acquire strong nerves and mind concentration which will give you absolute self-confidence. No drugs, appliances, or belts. Send at once 3 penny stamps for particulars of my guaranteed cure in 12 days.—GODFREY ELLIOT-SMITH, 47, Imperial Buildings, Ludgate Circus, London.

"Somewhere In France"

IS THE TITLE OF

A Wonderful New War Film

Whatever you do, don't miss seeing this wonderful three-reel picture story by Ruby M. Ayres. It is "released" this week by The Regal Films, Ltd. A charming love romance, a daring rescue, a sensational "escape," a fight between armed cars and a bomb-dropping Taube, are only a few of the features of this gripping three-reel

Regal Film

Ask Your Picture House Manager

to Book it

AT ONCE!



# THE CASE OF THE DUPLICATE KEY

*A Story of Nelson Lee and Nipper.*

## CHAPTER I.

The Milano Night Club and its Proprietor—The Arrival of Nelson Lee.

THE Milano Night Club was unusually full.

That is to say, the place was unusually crowded for the Milano.

It was a most exclusive and expensive club, and known to comparatively few people in the great world of London.

Its proprietor, a sallow-skinned, bearded Italian, with keen, yet shifty black eyes, was never anxious for advertisement. There were many things that went on at the Milano that it would not have been well for the police to know.

For instance, after ten o'clock, clubs are by law prohibited to supply intoxicating liquors to their members; but this was a regulation that Signor Capitelli—that was the name the owner of the club was known by—thought far too paltry to trouble about.

True, after ten, champagne-corks ceased to pop, the sparkling wine ceased to flow, the glasses and bottles were deftly cleared away by the attendants. But for the sum of eighteenpence you could purchase a cup of China tea or coffee, and—well, it depended upon the word you whispered to the waiter who served you whether you found your drink generously flavoured with whisky, brandy, or other spirit.

Yet, after all, this was a minor offence to what went on in the smaller apartments, which were situated off the long, gorgeously-decorated club-room, overlooking a side street near Leicester Square.

In the former, roulette, poker, baccarat, and a host of other games were played nightly often for excessively large stakes, and by a secret arrangement with a certain number of the gamblers, when a "pigeon" was "plucked," Signor Capitelli generally managed to secure at least a third of the "feathers."

No. Signor Capitelli hated the idea of receiving a new-comer to his club. When one did manage to get enrolled, the Italians always saw in him a private detective or a plain-clothes man from the C.I.D., and for quite a long while he would be anxious, and keep a furtive eye upon his guest: for, apart from the illegal practices that took place at the club, the Italian went in fear of the law for other and deeper reasons.

Could a member of the police from almost any important country in the civilised world have seen Signor Capitelli minus the false black beard and moustache that adorned his pale, not unhandsome face, it was a hundred chances to one that they would recognise him, and know him by one of the many aliases under which he had lived continuously a life of crime.

A Scotland Yard man would have addressed him by the title of Count Stefani, and recognised in him head of one of the most dangerous and subtly clever band of international criminals in existence known as the League of the Twisted Snakes, an organisation whose operations were mostly carried on from Rome, where their headquarters were believed to be situated.

In Paris, Petrograd, and New York, the police would have known him by the same name, as also would have been the case in his native land. Italy had for several years been decidedly too hot to hold him, hence his migration to England and the setting up of the Milano, from which he was able to engineer and successfully carry out his plans for preying upon society.

It was almost dawn, but the frequenters of the club seemed to care little for that. Of a certainty many of them would awaken in the morning, after a short spell of rest, with light pockets, heavy heads, and a fixed determination never to partake of "China tea" at the Milano in the future.

But in all probability, after a cocktail or so, they would once again look upon the world through rose-coloured spectacles, and at nightfall their footsteps would wander once more in the direction of the gay, brilliantly-lighted club-rooms.

Away from the long, general apartment, with its numerous mirrors and tastefully-sculptured statuettes, its hosts of small tables and luxurious settees, where the soft laughter of women mingled with the deeper mirth of the young bloods who were out for the night, a party of four were assembled in one of the gambling-rooms.

They presented a striking contrast to each other. The tall man in evening attire with the small, exquisite diamond blazing from his glossy shirt-front, was the count himself. He was taking no part in the play that was in progress between the other three, seeming content to watch on.

Of the players, the stout, bull-necked individual whom, if one might judge from the piles of sovereigns and the rolls of notes before him, had been having all the luck, was known as Colonel Meyer, although whether he had any right to that title was a matter of doubt, whilst it was fairly certain that he was one of the most accomplished sharpers who ever handled a card or shook a box of dice.

The man who sat directly opposite him was called Cecil Fitzmaurice by his friends, and his appearance hid a multitude of sins. He was almost as clever at palming an ace as the worthy colonel, although the inexperienced would have laughed at the idea of his being capable of such a thing, when they took in his inane, dude-like look, his straw-coloured hair, which he parted precisely in the middle, and his monocle which he always kept idiotically screwed in his left eye.

The fourth member of the party looked haggard, almost desperate, as he fished in his breast-pocket and pulled out a roll of notes, to count them with tremulous fingers.

He was not more than twenty-two or three, good-looking enough, save that his face bore unmistakable signs of dissipation. The chin was just a trifle weak, the lips a little incapable of determination, yet the eyes were good and steadfast in their gaze.

This was Sir Alec Prendergast, and there were those who said that he had made of himself the biggest young fool that could possibly be imagined.

Two years ago he had succeeded to his father's title and fortune, and he had instantly set about making ducks and drakes of the latter at a speed that had at times almost alarmed his easy-going self.

It had been a bad day for young Prendergast when he had made the acquaintance of Cecil Fitzmaurice, for that ostensibly brainless dude, under

his veneer of drawing idiocy, was one of Count Stofani's gang, and, seeing in Sir Alec a likely dupe, he had introduced him into the mysteries of the Milano.

Night after night the baronet had gone there to gamble. He had won at first. The count and his accomplices had seen to that. Then the luck had turned, and Sir Alec had risen again and again from the little green-topped table a more than heavy loser.

The gambling fever had gripped him. Every man, more or less, has the love of the glory of uncertainty in his veins. It is that which has made Old England what she is to-day. The love of chance has taken our soldiers and sailors recklessly into battle, and more often than not brought them victoriously through. But victory was a thing that Sir Alec seldom knew.

Vainly, desperately, he had striven to regain his losses, increasing his stakes and playing feverishly, frantically. But always at the end of a week's play it was the accomplices of the count who won—ay, and who won in thousands of pounds from the man they were cheating!

The baronet leant across the table, the notes held in his hand.

"I'm sick of this game, colonel!" he said thickly. "I've lost five hundred of my own money, and you've got back two thousand of the amount you've lent me."

"My dear old chap," the bull-necked man protested, making a gesture with his chubby hands, "pray don't speak of the little service I have rendered you."

"I wasn't doing so," Sir Alec answered bluntly. "I was merely mentioning the amount I'd lost."

"Yaas, dash it all, I pwesume you are out of pocket to-night, Prendergast!" Cecil Fitzmaurice drawled, looking up and squinting at the baronet through his monocle with the air of one who had just realised the fact.

"Hang it, man, for weeks I have always been out of pocket!" Sir Alec exclaimed. "I'm just realising what a fool I have been!"

"After all, my friend, it is the fortune of war, egad!" the colonel murmured. "Are you throwing up the sponge for to-night?"

"No!" the baronet answered, with something like anger in his eyes. "I've five hundred here, and I am going to try to double it, at least. Colonel, I'll throw you for it!"

The sharper nodded.

"Right-oh!" he said, collecting up the dice and dropping them into the little ivory box. "Throw away, and good luck to you!"

He pushed the box across to Prendergast; the latter took it up, shook it, and, with a twist of his wrist, sent the three dice rolling out upon the table.

"Eleven!" Fitzmaurice drawled. "Wather wotten! What?"

The colonel smiled and curled his iron-grey moustache with a swift, jerky action that was characteristic of him.

"Wonder if I can beat it?" he murmured.

He threw, then laughed loudly as he saw that the three fives were displayed.

Sir Alec stifled something that sounded like an oath, and tossed the roll of notes over to the man who had beaten him—this time fairly enough.

He rose to his feet.

"I am going home," he said. "The air in this place stifles me!"

"Stay! Egad, sir, but I'll give you a sportin' chance!" the colonel said. "Let's throw again for a couple of thou. You can give me an I O U if you lose."

"Done!" Sir Alec Prendergast said between his teeth; then he uttered a startled exclamation as an arresting hand was laid upon his shoulder.

"Don't be a fool, Prendergast!" a quiet voice said; and, swinging round; Alec found himself facing a tall, lean man of apparently about sixty, who was, to the best of his knowledge, a perfect stranger to him.

"What the deuce is it to do with you?" he asked hotly.

The stranger shrugged his shoulder ever so slightly and drew forth a cigarette-case.

"You had really much better come away," he answered coolly.

"What does this unwarrantable intrusion mean, signor?" Count Stefani—or Capitelli as he was known in the club—asked, his black eyes glinting with mingled anger and fear. "How did you gain admittance? You are not a member of the club!"

"I am not," the other returned, still perfectly at his ease. "But I have borrowed a card of membership, and, as you see, it got me in all right."

"I demand to know whom you are?" the count hissed, stepping forward menacingly.

"Certainly," the intruder murmured, with a smile—a very dry smile—upon his lips. His hand went up, and beard and moustache were whipped away, revealing a pale, intellectual face, clear-cut of feature, with finely-chiselled lips.

"I am Nelson Lee," he said calmly. "You may have heard of me."

Count Stefani uttered a cry and reeled back as though he had been shot, whilst the podgy hand of Colonel Meyer dropped suggestively to his hip.

Sir Alec, too, allowed a surprised exclamation to escape him, and all four men repeated the name.

"Lee, why have you come here?" Sir Alec asked.

"To attempt to enforce the advice I have repeatedly given you about this place, Sir Alec," the famous detective replied. "You remember the promise I gave to your father before he died?"

A hot flush sprang into the young nobleman's white cheeks, and he hung his head with shame.

"I've made an ass of myself!" he said huskily.

"I am inclined to agree with you," Nelson Lee said drily. "You will come away with me now?"

"Stay!" Count Stefani had advanced again, his lips snarling away from his white teeth, his eyes narrowed with passion. "My friend will leave when he desires. He is not a child to need watching over by a spying, money-grabbing inquiry agent!" he snarled. "You have gained admittance to my premises by false pretences, signor! I have a mind to call my attendants and have you bundled into the street—kicked out, as you deserve!"

"I shouldn't try it," Nelson Lee retorted; and there was a touch of grimness in his manner. "I might be tempted to take revenge by giving the police a hint or so!"

"Bah! There is nothing that goes on here that is not—what do you English call it?—above board!"

Nelson Lee very carefully lit the cigarette he had selected from his case.

"It doesn't look like it," he said, waving his hand towards the table, with its array of money, cards, and dice. "However, the fact of gambling going on would not be so bad were the play fair."

Colonel Meyer came swaggering round the table, his great hands clenched.

"Sir, do you dare to suggest that your precious friend has been cheated by us?" he asked aggressively, sticking his bullet-head forward.

"I do more than suggest it; I know it, when I find Sir Alec playing with such a man as you, Jem Lowther, alias Captain Weller, alias a score of other names," Nelson Lee retorted. "Oh, you may start! I know you

well enough, in spite of that heavy moustache you have grown. Stand away from that door!"

"By heavens, you meddling cur," the sharper cried, the veins on his forehead swelling and standing out like whipcord, "before you go you shall be taught a lesson!"

He swayed forward, his hands going up, his heavy-jowled face very ugly in expression.

"I'll show you that it's unhealthy to pry into other people's affairs!" he rasped.

He lashed out savagely at Nelson Lee's head, but the blow never got home. The detective stepped nimbly aside. Then just what happened the colonel never rightly knew.

Something that felt to him like the kick of a horse struck him between the eyes, and he went staggering backwards, his legs badly mixed up with a chair. But before he could fall he was gripped about the waist, swung kicking and struggling over Nelson Lee's right shoulder, and finally sent with a crash upon the table, sending the cards and dice, the notes and sovereigns, in all directions.

One of the pseudo-soldier's feet caught his fellow-conspirator a heavy blow in the mouth, and the dude-like Fitzmaurice, with a yell of surprise and pain, flung up his arms and pitched backwards with his chair.

Quite coolly, Nelson Lee took Sir Alec Prendergast's arm and propelled him past the astonished Count Stefani.

"Good-night, gentlemen," the detective said.

Then the door slammed behind him and, as the count leapt forward, he heard the key turned in the lock.

## CHAPTER II.

### The Hawk—What he Overheard—Nelson Lee Receives an Invitation.

**W**ITH a string of oaths, the Italian pounded upon the panels with his fists. Fitzmaurice painfully and slowly picked himself up, whilst Colonel Meyer slid heavily and dazedly from the table, bringing down a further shower of coins and paper money.

The burly sharper was in such a state of rage as to be positively inarticulate for the moment. He mouthed and shook his ponderous fists in the air.

"Let me go after him!" he choked at length. "Stand away, count! I'm going to break down the door! I'll have his life or——"

"Silence, you fool!" Count Stefani advised fiercely. "We don't want everyone in the other rooms to know what has happened! I'll send the Hawk after him as soon as someone lets us out."

"But he knew me," Colonel Meyer said—"knew me, although it's quite five years ago since we had that trouble with him in Italy! Supposing he has also pierced your disguise! That would mean——"

"Hush!" Stefani warned, holding up his hand. "Ah, he evidently left the key in the door."

This seemed to be so, for they heard the click of the lock, and a waiter, a crowd of men and women at his back, confronted them as the door was flung open.

"What is wrong, signor?" the man asked, a rather frightened look in his eyes.

"Nothing, Henri," the count answered, with an expressive gesture—"only our friend had allowed the good wine to get into his head. I must follow him to see that he comes to no harm. Will you come, colonel?"

Meyer emerged from the room, pushing his way hurriedly through the assembly before the door, and averting his head in order to hide the dark bruise he felt certain was already beginning to make itself seen between his eyes.

The two men went hurriedly along a corridor, entered the club-room, passed through, and gained the stairs leading down into the hall.

Once there, Stefani went straight to a cubicle in which a man in uniform, somewhat resembling that of a commissionaire, was reading an evening-paper.

The Italian snatched the news-sheet from his hand, and the fellow hurriedly stood up.

"The man with the grey beard and Sir Alec Prendergast?" Stefani asked, assuming that Nelson Lee had again donned his disguise before passing the doorkeeper. "They have passed you?"

"Yes, signor. I let them out only a few seconds ago."

The count swore under his breath.

"What name did the grey-haired man give you?" he asked.

"Lord Crashmer. He carried his card of membership."

"Perdition! He was an impostor—a detective! You are an utter idiot, Jake!"

"Pardon, signor! He was like Lord Crashmer, from what I remember of him. He has not been here for some months."

"He was no more Lord Crashmer than I!" Stefani exclaimed angrily. "He was Nelson Lee!"

"Nelson Lee!" The attendant's fresh-complexioned face lost some of its colour.

"Note this!" the count ordered. "The real Lord Crashmer is not to be admitted here again! Send the Hawk to me! He's in one of the smaller rooms, I expect."

"Very good, signor."

The man hurried away, and the count and Colonel Meyer entered a room upon the left of the hall. It was furnished as an office, and was the apartment wherein the Italian and his numerous accomplices carried on the business connected with the club and thought out their nefarious plans.

The colonel dropped moodily into a chair, bit the end from a cigar, and lit it jerkily, causing it to burn all down one side.

The count seemed to have regained his natural sang-froid. He coolly waited until the door opened, to admit the individual for whom he had sent.

The latter was a curious specimen of humanity. He was so thin that his cheek-bones seemed in imminent peril of bursting through his parchment-like skin, whilst his clothes hung in creases upon his spare frame.

Just what his age was it was difficult to determine. He might have been anything from thirty to sixty. His deeply-lined, wizened face favoured the latter, yet he was clean-shaven, and the fact that his raven-black hair was only streaked in places with grey gave him an appearance of comparative youth.

His eyes were bright and unwinking. The nose was beak-like, the mouth beneath it—well-nigh hidden—curiously curved, and with grey lips. His stooping shoulders added to the bird-like aspect, and it was not hard to realise why he had been given his nickname of the Hawk.

His real name was James Elkington, and he was one of the most skilful crackmen in London.

The count had discovered him about a year previously, and had at once seen that the Hawk would be a valuable addition to his gang. He had therefore induced him to throw in his lot with him, and since then James Elking-



ton had added no small sum to the coffers of the band of which Count Stefani, alias Capitelli, was the head.

"Is Nelson Lee known to you?" Count Stefani asked, coming to the point at once.

The Hawk started slightly, and a venomous look of hatred sprang into his piercing eyes.

"Who doesn't know him?" he asked in a strange, rasping voice. "He nearly had me once, and I had to bolt, leaving the swag behind—nearly five thousand pounds' worth of shiners."

"Does he know you by sight?"

"No, thank goodness. I was masked when I had the brush with him."

"Excellent!" Stefani murmured. "I want you to shadow him."

"Shadow him!" The Hawk's eyebrows went up in amazement. "What the dickens for?" he asked.

"Because he has been prying about here this very night!" Colonel Meyer put in. "He——"

"Allow me to give the Hawk his instructions, please!" Count Stefani cut in, a little coldly. "Look here, Elkington! Nelson Lee has been here to-night to rescue a young fool from the benevolent hands of Meyer and Fitzmaurice."

"The deuce he has!" the Hawk exclaimed, with a whistle.

"Yes. That fool Jake let him in under the impression that he was member. Nelson Lee surprised us in one of the card-rooms, and after Meyer here had been indiscreet enough to attack him, Lee flung him on to the table, calmly walked out, and locked us in.

"For all this, I don't care a rap!" he continued, ignoring the manner in which Meyer was scowling at him. "The question is this, the thing that it is imperative that we find out at once, is whether Nelson Lee has pierced my true identity."

"And if he has?" the Hawk suggested, fingering his smoothly-shaven chin.

"If he has," Count Stefani answered in a low voice, "we are all in the gravest danger. Nelson Lee must be silenced! That is all."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Take the car and drive for all you are worth to the rooms of Sir Alec Prendergast in Elm Place, Kensington. You've been there in the past, I think?"

"Yes."

"Good! You know your London well, and by going by the quickest route you ought to arrive there far sooner than a taxi, supposing Nelson Lee and his friend take one, as it is safe to assume they will. They are almost sure to go to Sir Alec's home, as Lee seems inclined to read him a lecture on the error of his ways. By hook or by crook, you must overhear the conversation that passes between them."

"And if Lee says anything that will lead me to think he knows whom you really are?"

"Report to me here with the utmost speed. I will arrange matters after that," the count said meaningly, a sinister light in his eyes.

The Hawk swung round upon his heels. He was essentially a man of prompt action.

"I'll get off at once," said he.

The belated taxi that Nelson Lee and Sir Alec Prendergast had secured in Leicester Square pulled up outside the block of flats in Elm Place, Kensington, wherein the wayward young baronet resided.

Count Stefani had been right in thinking that a cab was the first thing the detective and his young friend would seek. When they had left the club, they had made their way into Leicester Square, and Nelson Lee had hailed the vehicle as it was humming towards home, promising the chauffeur double fare in order to obtain his services. During the journey the two men had practically been silent.

Nelson Lee had sat haunched up in his corner, his cigarette held listlessly between his lips, his eyes half closed, as was his custom when he was thinking deeply.

Sir Alec, on his part, had been going over the events of the last few weeks, inwardly reproaching himself for allowing such men as Colonel Meyer and Cecil Fitzmaurice to make a fool of him and rob him. Yet he had asked himself, had he really been cheated as Nelson Lee appeared to believe?

If such were the case, the sharpening had been remarkably well accomplished, for never once had he suspected that the play of either of his opponents could be questioned.

"Here we are!" Nelson Lee said, as he opened the door.

"You will come in and have a whisky-and-soda?" Sir Alec asked.

"I want to come in—certainly!" the detective answered. "But I don't think I'll partake of anything in the way of stimulant. It is getting light, and will soon be time for an early breakfast."

Sir Alec shuddered perceptibly.

"It's a meal I somehow don't trouble about lately," he said.

Nelson Lee paid the driver, and the two men entered the small front garden, which was almost hidden from the street by evergreens and miniature bushes.

Sir Alec opened the front door with a key, and as they passed into the hall neither of them noticed the dark figure that glided down the street upon the opposite side of the road.

The Hawk had so far succeeded in carrying out Count Stefani's orders. He had rushed hither in the Italian's car, garaged it, and for the last ten minutes had been hanging about in the shadows cast by tall buildings at the end of Elm Place.

A light sprang up in the room that the Hawk knew was Sir Alec's study. The cracksman had once taken the erring baronet home after a carnival night at the club. Thus he knew that the young man's rooms were situated on the ground floor, and was familiar with their interior.

The Hawk darted noiselessly across the road, then, with the stealth of a cat, he slipped into the front garden and crouched down beneath the window-sill.

The atmosphere was close and oppressive—a fact that favoured the cracksman. Sir Alec almost immediately pulled down the window at the top, and to his satisfaction the Hawk found that he could hear the nobleman's voice quite distinctly as he remarked upon the heat.

Within the room, Nelson Lee had seated himself by the table, whilst Sir Alec, after drawing the blind, moved over to the sideboard.

Nelson Lee watched him as he splashed some spirit into a glass and added some soda.

"I suppose you are going to impress upon me what an idiot I have been, Lee?" the young man asked, as he seated himself opposite the detective.

Nelson Lee lifted his shoulders, as he lit a fresh cigarette, after pushing his case across the table towards his host.

"I intended doing something of the kind, Sir Alec," he admitted. "But" he smiled—"you seem to be fully aware of the fact already."

"I am!" Sir Alec agreed. "I'm a double-barreled fool—a weak-minded fool. But your visit to the club has opened my eyes to-night. By Jingo,

you did slam the colonel! I shouldn't have thought you'd got the strength to sling a chap of his bulk about."

Nelson Lee's fingers almost unconsciously wandered to his biceps.

"The strenuous life I lead keeps me fit," he answered. "Since the outbreak of the war, there has not been much rest for Nipper and I. We have both been hard at it, working for our country, and when there has not been a spy to run down, there are always plenty of other cases to keep us on the move. Sir Alec, I want to talk seriously to you.

"Two years ago, I was beside your father's deathbed. It was just after you had got into that scrape at Oxford, and he had paid up for you. Pardon me for speaking plainly, but we both realised then that you were a trifle hot-headed, and reckless of consequences. Your father knew it, and he asked me to do my utmost to advise you—to do all in my power to prevent your frittering away the comfortable fortune he left you.

"I have done my best, but you have been blind to reason. In the course of my work I have heard very dark rumours about the Milano. I have repeatedly sought to induce you to keep away from it, but without result until now.

"I am glad I got in to-night and surprised you with the men who have posed as your friends, for, as you heard, I recognised at least one of them. He is one of the worst sharpers in London—a man who could not play fairly if he tried.

"I hate to be theatrical, but I am rather glad that I sunk to the melodramatic to-night, for, although I did not recognise the dark-bearded fellow, who was standing watching your play, I am fairly certain that he knew me, and received something of a shock. Take it from me, you have been frequenting a den of crooks, and have been robbed left and right by them. My one wish is that you will keep away from it in future, and that matters have not gone too far."

"Too far!" Sir Alec groaned, and seemed to wilt in his chair. He buried his face in his hands.

"Too far!" he looked up, and laughed a horrible, mirthless laugh. "I am on the brink of ruin," he said hoarsely.

Nelson Lee elevated his brows.

"Is it so bad as that?" he asked regretfully.

"Yes. Oh, I assure you I am not exaggerating!" the baronet answered. "Lee, I have told you I have been a fool, but you cannot realise to what extent I have gone. I am in debt all round. I'm in the hands of the money-lenders. I owe debts of honour at my clubs. Unless I make good almost at once, I shall be posted as a defaulter."

"These men at the Milano?" Nelson Lee asked, his eyes narrowing. "What do you owe them?"

"Something like three thousand, all told. I am in a hole! I cannot prove that I have been cheated. I must pay, or they will blacken my name all over London. But, I have one resource that I can fall back on—my mother's pearls."

"The famous Prendergast necklace, of course?" the detective suggested.

"The same. It will break my heart to part with it, for it is the only thing I have to remember my poor dead mother by. But it will have to go."

"How much would see you through?" Nelson Lee asked thoughtfully.

"Twenty thousand—ay, quite that. Perhaps a little more."

Nelson Lee was silent for a moment, then he leant forward over the table.

"Supposing I were to lend you this amount?" he asked. "You would give me your word of honour to reform—to work to retrieve your fortunes?"

Sir Alec flushed.

"I mean to run sensibly in the future," he said. "But I couldn't think of accepting this sum from you."

"Why?"

Sir Alec ruffled his hair and looked uncomfortable.

"I—oh, I couldn't do it, Lee!" he protested. "That is, unless—unless—"

He hesitated, seeming at a loss for words.

"Unless what?" the detective prompted.

"Unless you would fix matters up on a business basis. Twenty thousand pounds is no small sum, and it would not be fair to accept it unless you were willing to receive some security and a reasonable interest."

"I require neither from a friend," the detective answered, a look of almost indignation in his eyes.

"Supposing you held the pearls?"

"No," Nelson Lee protested firmly. "I could not think of such a thing. And as for entertaining the suggestion of interest, Sir Alec—well, it is almost an insult. I was your father's friend. I am seeking to prove myself yours."

"I am sorry," Sir Alec said contritely. "Let us say no more about the matter. I will raise money upon the pearls through a moneylender."

"You are fully determined?"

"Yes. I believe that in a few weeks there may be a chance of my redeeming them. I hold a number of shares in the Bolivia Silver Mines, and I have recently received very good news regarding the company.

"Then will you be advised by me?" Nelson Lee asked. "I know of a man who will lend you this money. Unlike many of his kind, he is as straight as a die, and he will deal honestly and leniently with you, should you find yourself in a fix. Just how much is the necklace worth?"

Outside in the little garden the Hawk pressed nearer to the window. His bird-like countenance was alight with greed, and he held his breath as he waited to catch the baronet's reply.

"The necklace's value has been estimated at between a hundred and a hundred and fifty thousand pounds," Sir Alec said.

"Then there should be no difficulty in getting a loan for double the sum you require, if you think fit," the detective answered. "Norman Warner—the man to whom I referred just now—will advance you the money at once, upon receiving the pearls. But, it will be necessary for you to go to his private house at Clapham, as since the war his business has decreased and he has given up his London office."

"I suppose he is quite safe?"

"As safe as the Bank of England," Nelson Lee said, with conviction.

"He is good for any amount within reason. As for his foregoing the London place, that is really nothing. Many would-be clients are on active service, and naturally things have not been so brisk with Norman Warner of late. He has had trouble, too, in finding clerks, so, having already amassed a comfortable fortune, he closed his office and now carries on a somewhat smaller business at his private residence, with the help of a secretary.

"I thank you for your advice, Mr. Lee," the young man said; and the Hawk heard the two men's chairs scrape back, as they rose to their feet. "I shall get the necklace from my bank as soon as it is open in the morning."

The cracksmen waited to hear no more. He stole silently from the garden and made off in the half-light.

A few minutes later, Nelson Lee quitted the house, and he was fortunate in securing a taxi, which was just depositing four revellers outside a house that was their destination.

Nelson Lee told the chauffeur to drive him to his house in Gray's Inn Road, and during the journey he fell into a reverie, from which he did not rouse himself until he realised that the cab had stopped.

After paying the man and entering the house, he made his way to his consulting-room. As he flung open the door he ducked sharply—and with good reason.

An Indian club had come whizzing through the air, and it struck one of the panels of the door with a force that at once convinced Nelson Lee that he had narrowly escaped a cracked skull.

He stood for a second or two gazing at the figure of his assistant, who was standing, attired in his shirt and trousers, holding the other club, and looking distinctly discomfited in the centre of the room.

"I'm—I'm sorry, sir," Nipper said, his eyes wandering to the split door. "It sorter slipped out of my hand."

"I should think it did, my lad," the detective said drily.

"I'm jolly sorry, guv'nor!" Nipper said again.

"I'll warrant you are not half so sorry as I should have been, had it hit me, Nipper," Nelson Lee remarked. "What on earth are you doing up at this hour, fooling with these things?"

"I woke early. I believe all the giddy cats in the neighbourhood have been having a beastly concert. The row they were kicking up was awful, sir. I threw a boot at 'em, but only broke a window, and did no good."

"Humph, Mrs. Jones will be on your track to pay for the breakage."

"Oh, no, guv'nor! It was next door's window, so it's all right." Nipper replied calmly. "Should I waltz round and get some breakfast, sir?"

"Yes," Nelson Lee answered. "By the way, did any letters come by the post last night?"

"Only one, sir," the lad replied, stepping to his master's desk and picking up an envelope.

The detective took the epistle and opened it; then his brows lifted, and he gave an exclamation of mild surprise.

"What a coincidence!" he murmured. "An invitation from Norman Warner to attend a reception, to celebrate the golden wedding of his parents. I wonder if I can find time to go?"

And as he sank, a trifle wearily, into his well-worn easy-chair, the detective little dreamed how Fate was leading him into one of the strangest and most baffling cases of his long and adventurous career.

### CHAPTER III.

#### The Hawk's News—And More News—Count Stefani's Resolve.

**T**HE Hawk knocked upon the door of Count Stefani's office, and entered before the Italian could murmur the formal "Come in!"

The criminal was alone now, both Colonel Meyer and Fitzmaurice having left the club.

Count Stefani looked up sharply as the Hawk advanced into the room, and at once knew that the cracksmen had something of importance to communicate. His hideous face was the picture of excitement.

"Well?" The count half rose from his chair. "You have found that Lee——"

"No," the Hawk interrupted, guessing the question that was trembling upon his chief's lips. "He doesn't know whom you really are. I have something far more pleasant to tell you."

Count Stefani remained silent as the Hawk hesitated, as though waiting to see the effect of his words. The cracksmán stopped to light a cigar before he continued. He felt that it was worth keeping his companion waiting for the information he had to depart; he would be far more impressed when he heard what he had to tell.

"Did you know that young Prendergast was the owner of a pearl necklace valued at anything from a hundred to one hundred and fifty thousand pounds?" he asked slowly, as he seated himself and examined the end of his weed to make certain it was burning evenly.

The count evinced no surprise.

"I was aware of the fact," he said quietly, after a pause. "They are the renowned Prendergast pearls. If it had not been for that meddling detective who came here to-night, the young fool would have gambled them away in time."

"Take heart, my friend," the other said. "You may have an opportunity of laying your hands upon the actual jewels far more quickly."

The master criminal leant forward eagerly, his pale face tense with excitement.

"Explain yourself!" he said sharply.

The Hawk laughed.

"I rather imagined I should arouse your interest," he grinned. "Have you heard of a Norman Warner?"

"A moneylender—yes. A very peculiar man for one following such a calling.

"Precisely," the Hawk agreed. "Very honest and above-board in all his dealings; recommended by Nelson Lee, detective, to impecunious noblemen. Lives in Clapham, and——"

"Oh, stop fooling!" the count snapped. "What have you discovered?"

"That Sir Alec Prendergast proposes this morning to pledge his heirloom with Norman Warner, upon the advice of Lee."

"The dickens he does!" Stefani exclaimed. "And you think——"

"That there ought to be some way of diverting the pearls from Warner to ourselves," the Hawk answered. "When such valuables are in transit——" He shrugged.

"We have usually been able to hatch some plan in the past," he concluded.

Count Stefani bit at his nails, and a deep furrow appeared between his dark brows. He opened his lips to speak, but ere he uttered the words that were trembling upon his tongue, there came a rap upon the door.

"Come in!" the Hawk commanded.

The door opened to admit the attendant, Jake.

"Monsieur Orloff is here, signor," he announced.

"Orloff!" The count darted a significant look at the Hawk. "I wonder if he has succeeded?" he muttered. "I'll see him at once, Jake."

The man disappeared to almost immediately return to usher in a rather short man, of foreign appearance, possessing a neat imperial and a pair of upturned moustaches.

Save that his eyes were very alert and keen, there was nothing to suggest the description of person he was. But appearances were ever deceptive. Paul Orloff had once been a member of the Russian Secret Police, until a false step had brought dishonour to him, and placed him in terrible danger of ending his days in Siberia.

He had fled from Petrograd and joined the League of the Twisted Snakes, a matter of four to five years ago. He was invaluable to the criminal

organisation in the capacity of an inquiry agent. Should a member seek to betray the band, Orloff was placed by the count upon the man or woman's track.

With bloodhound-like persistency, the little Russian would stick to the scent once he obtained the slightest clue, and upon no occasion had he failed to place the misguided member within reach of the vengeance of the league.

The penalty followed swiftly then. It invariably took the shape of death, but the band were not particular as to the means employed. A woman would be found floating down some dark river; a man, perhaps, discovered with a knife between his shoulders, lying dead in a side street or alleyway. There were a score of deaths that could be indirectly placed at the Russian's door, and had he dared to open his lips, he could have explained many of the unsolved crimes that had startled the world during the last few years.

For the past fortnight Orloff had been employed in endeavouring to trace the whereabouts of a woman who had fled from the society in Rome.

She was no less a person than the wife of the leader and organiser of the league—Count Stefani.

She was an American girl, named Cynthia Meadows—or rather, that had been her maiden name prior to the cunning scoundrel Stefani getting her into his clutches. She had been very young, scarcely out of her teens, when the debonair villain had wooed and won her; and until after her marriage the unfortunate girl had had no inkling of the true character of the count.

She had been fascinated by his handsome face, his courteous, gentle manners; but she had been sadly disillusioned once she was free of American soil.

Stefani had terrified her into assisting him in his crimes. He was a student of hypnotism, and found in his young wife an excellent medium. Once she had submitted her will to his, she had been as clay in his hands—easily moulded, and compelled to do his bidding.

She had stolen and swindled for him for a period of two years. Then Fate had willed that the great British detective, Nelson Lee, should come to Italy and take interest in a bank robbery that poor Cynthia had participated in, in company with other members of the league.

The keen brain of the detective had been pitted against that of Count Stefani; and Nelson Lee had come very near to breaking up the gang.

Cynthia and some half a dozen men had been arrested at the instigation of the British investigator, and Count Stefani and the rest of his accomplices had been obliged to fly to keep their liberty, also to change the whereabouts of their headquarters.

Cynthia had gained a remission in her sentence, without the knowledge of Count Stefani, thus when she had left the gaol, he had not been at hand to meet her, as would have been the case had he known that she was to be released.

The girl, whilst in captivity, had suffered with a severe attack of brain fever, and this illness seemed to have relieved her of much of the spell that her husband had cast over her.

Always horrified, and repelled by the thought of dishonesty, she had gone to a friend who was staying at a hotel in the Via del Corso, and with her assistance had fled to England, for the time being completely covering her tracks.

A few weeks previous to the opening of our story, however, one of Stefani's band had sworn that he had seen Cynthia crossing Bond Street. He had lost sight of her in a crowd that had gathered around the victim of a street accident; but the information had made the count determined to

trace his wife. She was a valuable asset to his numerous conspiracies, and he had sworn to find and drag her back to the life of dishonour and shame from which she had fled.

He had thus ordered the Russian, Orloff, to leave no stone unturned to trace her, and, now, as he saw the gleam of satisfaction in his hireling's eyes, he felt fairly certain that at last he had succeeded in his mission.

"You have found her?" he said eagerly.

The Russian inclined his head.

"It is not my custom to fail, excellency," he said, in a modulated, cultured tone.

"And where is she?" the count asked.

"She is occupying the post of private secretary to a gentleman who resides in Clapham," Orloff answered.

"His name?"

"It is Norman Warner. He——"

"Norman Warner!" The count and the Hawk repeated the name as one man; and both sprang to their feet.

"You—you are sure of this?" Stefani asked, drawing a long breath.

"Of a certainty, excellency!" Orloff stated, with assurance.

"Then, by my life," Stefani cried, swinging round upon the Hawk, his face working with excitement, "the Prendergast pearls are as good as in our hands!"

"I rather thought we should find a way," the Hawk answered, smiling. "Somehow, the luck is always with us, count."

#### CHAPTER IV.

#### The Deal—The Love of Norman Warner—A Voice from the Past—A Strange Interview.

**A** GENTLEMAN to see you, sir."

Norman Warner looked up from the letter he had been writing at his desk as his butler appeared, carrying a salver.

Used though he was to receiving calls at unusual hours, Warner was a trifle surprised by the arrival of a visitor, for it was only just after ten o'clock, and he had but recently finished his breakfast and retired to his study.

Norman Warner, however, was never known to refuse to do business. It was one of the rules that had gained him such absolute success in his profession.

In plain words, Warner was a moneylender, yet he had never been a usurer. As Nelson Lee had said, when he had given advice to Sir Alec Prendergast, Norman Warner was as straight and honourable as a man could wish to be.

In many ways he had proved himself a blessing to society. Those in financial difficulties came to him, and, provided they could show a reasonable security, their troubles were at once lifted from their shoulders by the receipt of the loan they required at a very fair rate of interest.

Warner, many would have said, was something of a phenomenon. He was a moneylender with a heart. He never pressed a client who was in genuine distress; and it had been whispered that more than once Warner had lost his capital because he had taken pity upon some man or woman who had borrowed of him, and through sincere ill-fortune had found themselves unable to repay.



He could not have been more than thirty years of age, yet strenuous work had whitened his raven-black hair at the temples. He possessed a frank, open face, lit by serious blue eyes. It was a strong face, and a good one—a countenance that at once made him a man to be trusted.

Norman Warner stretched forth his hand and took the slip of pasteboard from the butler's tray.

"Sir Alec Prendergast," he said, stroking his chin reflectively. "I seem to have heard of him." He looked up. "Show him in, Wilkins," he ordered.

The butler withdrew, and a few seconds later Sir Alec Prendergast was ushered into Warner's presence.

The moneylender rose and bowed, then indicated a chair by the side of his desk, and sank back into his own.

"What can I do for you, Sir Alec?" he suggested, tapping with his pen upon the blotting-pad.

Sir Alec hesitated, seeming a little ill-at-ease.

"The truth is," he blurted out at last, "I'm in a terrible fix!"

Warner smiled reassuringly.

"My dear Sir Alec," he murmured, "most people are who come to me."

"Er—yes; I suppose so," the baronet agreed. "Look here, I want a loan of twenty-five to thirty thousand pounds—er, at once. I'm in a position to offer the best security."

Warner nodded.

"Then the little matter should be quite easily negotiated," replied he.

"I have brought these," Sir Alec said, placing a leathern case upon his knees. "They are the Prendergast pearls."

He snapped open the lid of the case, displaying to the view of the moneylender a magnificent necklace.

Warner took up the costly jewel and examined it. He was a judge of precious stones, and his face expressed genuine admiration as he fingered the necklace with the manner of an expert.

"You propose to offer me this as security?" he suggested.

"Exactly!" Sir Alec answered. "Er—you will fix up the business, Mr. Warner?"

"Certainly!" the moneylender replied. "I will give you my cheque at once. Indeed, should you desire, you can have more upon such security as this. I am always fair with my clients, Sir Alec, and never deceive them. You may go up to fifty thousand, if you require it."

The nobleman was tempted for a moment; then he shook his head.

"No!" he said firmly. "It will only be more to repay when the time comes. If you will loan me thirty thousand pounds upon the necklace, it will satisfy me perfectly."

"Very good! I will draw you a cheque. By the way, when do you wish to redeem the necklace?"

"In about three months, I should think."

"We will say six, which will give you plenty of grace, then," Norman Warner said. "I'll prepare an agreement."

With a word of excuse, he turned to his desk and drew a printed form from a stationery case.

For the next few seconds, the silence in the room was only broken by the scratching of Warner's pen.

"Will that be satisfactory?" he asked, turning and handing the agreement to his client.

"Why, you've only charged me seven per cent. interest!" Sir Alec exclaimed.

"Precisely! That is adequate. I will call my secretary to witness your signature."

He rose and moved to the door of an inner room.

"Miss Meadows," he called, "will you come here for a moment, please?"

Sir Alec heard a chair moved, whilst the clicking of a typewriter ceased. Then there entered the room one of the most beautiful women the young and impressionable nobleman could ever remember having seen.

Cynthia Meadows—as she was known here—was tall and graceful of figure, but it was her face that sent the blood racing through Sir Alec's veins with astonishment and admiration.

It was a patrician's face—a clear oval, crowned with a mass of dead-black hair of wonderful abundance, alluringly arranged. The complexion was dark, with a faint flush of pink in the delicately rounded cheeks. The eyes, under beautifully pencilled brows, were of a wistful brown, with strange golden lights in their depths, whilst the mouth was red, sensitive, and clean-cut.

Just for an instant Sir Alec could only sit and stare; then a wave of shame at being so suddenly taken aback swept over him, and he rose hastily and bowed.

"I want you to witness this gentleman's signature, Miss Meadows," Warner said, indicating the chair he had just vacated. "Sign here, please, Sir Alec."

The baronet leant forward and affixed his signature at the foot of the document. Cynthia Meadows added hers as witness, and the deal was completed.

Sir Alec shook hands with Warner, bowed to Cynthia, and wished them "good-morning." The moneylender saw his client to the door, and returned to the study, where he found his secretary standing gazing down in admiration at the necklace, which had been left lying upon the desk.

"Are they not beautiful?" she said, turning with a start as Warner entered.

"They are indeed," he agreed. "Will you enter the particulars of the agreement in the day-book?"

The girl nodded, and seated herself before the desk. She secured a book from one of the drawers, and set to work with her pen.

Norman Warner stood, his hands clasped behind his back, looking down upon the bowed head. His expression had undergone a great change now that he was alone with his secretary. A curious tenderness had crept into his frank blue eyes. His lips were parted as though in admiration as he gazed upon that slender figure before the desk.

The girl looked up, and Warner averted his head almost guiltily, the blood rushing into his cheeks.

"Can you tell me the number of this agreement, Mr. Warner?" Cynthia asked. "You appear to have omitted it."

"How careless of me!" Warner muttered, as he drew a chair beside that of the girl. "Let me see!" He groped in a drawer for a ledger. "It will be 34,789," he said. "Better put it there—under the date."

He leant forward to point to a certain column in the book before the girl. As he did so, she half-turned, and a wisp of her beautiful, luxuriant hair, which had wilfully struggled from behind one of her delicate ears, swept across the young man's face.

The blood rushed to Warner's head then. The dainty perfume of Cynthia's glorious tresses assailed his nostrils. For a second—just one brief second—her eyes looked into his, and he forgot his surroundings, forgot the girl was his employee, forgot all save the great love that for months had been in his heart.

Before Cynthia quite realised what was happening, Warner's arms were about her, his lips were seeking hers.

"Cynthia, my darling," he breathed, his voice vibrating with emotion. "I love you! I love you!"

With a little, strangled cry of dismay, the girl fought to break free.

"Oh, don't!" she pleaded, and there was something very like horror in her eyes. "Mr. Warner, you forget yourself!"

In a moment Warner had released her, and had risen to his feet. His head was drooping, and his cheeks were hot with shame.

"Miss Meadows, I—I am sorry," he said huskily, "but"—he took a step forward and leant over her chair—"I could not keep my secret locked in my breast any longer. I love you—love you as I never dreamed it possible for a man to love a woman!"

He was speaking quite quietly now, and every word he uttered was earnest and sincere.

"I am so sorry I frightened you," he said contritely. "Will you forgive me?"

The girl rose too, and now the long lashes were raised from her eyes.

"There is but little to forgive," she said gently. "But you must never speak of love to me again!"

Warner caught his breath, and an expression of pain sprang into his eyes.

"You—you mean that you can give me no hope?" he asked, in a low voice.

"Would that I could!" she said quickly. "Dear, dear friend, rather than cause you suffering, I would sacrifice my right hand! Oh, you cannot understand!"

She turned away, a choking sob preventing her further utterance.

"Cynthia," Warner exclaimed, taking her hand, "you are mysterious—baffling. You speak as though you love me, yet hint at some great barrier between!"

"There is a barrier that keeps us apart, Norman," she answered quietly, almost unconsciously using his Christian name. "There is a page in my life that makes me unfit to be the wife of a good, honourable man like you. Were you to discover the truth concerning my past, you would recoil from me in disgust and horror."

"Impossible!" Norman Warner cried. "Dearest, you are magnifying some trifling indiscretion until in your eyes it appears a crime. Tell me everything! Let us see if we cannot remove the obstacle you say stands in the way of our love."

"We can never do that—yet!" the girl answered sadly. "It is the one great obstacle—the greatest barrier of all!"

Norman Warner understood her then. He drew back, dropping her hand, seeming to suddenly grow drawn and haggard, whilst Cynthia sank into a chair and hid her face in her hands.

"You are married—married already?" Warner faltered hoarsely.

"Yes," Cynthia answered between her sobs. "Now, can you understand?"

The door was opened sharply, after a formal tap upon the panels, and the butler entered. Hurriedly Warner stepped to his desk, controlling his features to the best of his ability, whilst the girl averted her head to hide her tears.

"A message addressed to Miss Meadows," the servant announced stolidly, attempting to cross over to the girl.

"I will take it, Wilkins," Warner remarked, quickly barring his progress.

"It is all right. You may go."

Cynthia looked round, her tear-dimmed eyes evincing surprise.

"For me?" she asked.

Warner handed her the envelope. It appeared to have been delivered by a messenger, for it bore no stamp, and only the name, "Miss Cynthia Meadows," was written upon it.

The girl wonderingly opened it, then gave a violent start, her lips parting as though she were stricken with fear or astonishment.

She seemed oblivious of Warner's presence as she stared at the short message upon the sheet of notepaper that had reposed in the envelope. Yet it seemed to be nothing to cause her alarm, for it merely read:

"Dear Madam,—The costume (Style 432/2) would be rather too inferior to satisfy your tastes, it being one of our ready-made 30s. modes. Style 431/1 at 40s. or 697/2 at 52s. would suit you, I think.

"The set of furs (Style 680/1) would be 30s., carriage free. The other prices you require are Style 46/1, 4s.; Style 311/2, 30s.; and Style 574/2, 36s.

"Please quote numbers when ordering for reference purposes.—Yours, etc.,  
"(Mrs.) M. MARSHALL."

She crumpled the letter in a small, trembling hand, and unsteadily gained her feet.

"I—I do not feel well," she faltered, pressing her hand to her temple. "Will you excuse me from further work to-day?"

"Certainly!" Warner answered. "Can I do anything for you—get you anything?"

"No; I thank you," Cynthia answered, and it seemed an effort for her to speak. "I only want to lie down. My head is aching."

Warner stepped to the door and solicitously opened it for her, but to his utter surprise Cynthia stepped over to a bookcase and drew from one of the shelves a National Edition of "Nuttall's Standard Dictionary" ere she quitted the room.

He watched her as she mounted the stairs; then, with a puzzled shake of his head, he returned to the study.

He took up the Prendergast necklace, which had been lying on his desk, also a bunch of keys. He inserted one of the latter in the lock of a massive safe that was built into the wall, and from somewhere in one of the upper rooms came faintly the ringing of electric bells.

He deposited the valuable necklace in one of the drawers of the safe, re-locked the latter, and hung the bunch of keys upon a hook fitted in the side of his desk. He stood leaning against the mantel, wondering what there could have been in the seeming everyday message to cause the girl he loved such acute agitation. But it was not long before he was brought out of his reverie in a startling manner.

There came a dull crash overhead, and instinctively Warner knew that it came from his secretary's room. He spun round on his heel and made for the door.

At the foot of the stairs he almost collided with a startled servant. It was the housekeeper, a motherly old lady, who had been in the employ of Warner's family for many years.

"Lawks a mussey, sir!" the woman said. "Did you hear that upstairs? What can it be?"

"I fear it is Miss Meadows," Warner answered quickly. "She is not well this morning, and went to her room a few seconds ago. Will you go up and ascertain what has happened?"

"That I will, sir! Poor lamb, she must 'ave fainted!"

The buxom lady went puffing up the stairs, and Warner stood at their foot in an agony of dread.

The housekeeper entered Cynthia's daintily-furnished bedchamber; then she gave a sharp cry of dismay and apprehension.

The slim form of the secretary was stretched at full length upon the floor. In her hand was clasped the note she had received and upon the bed the dictionary lay—open.

The housekeeper knelt beside the girl and raised her head. Cynthia was grey to the lips and her eyes were glazed, yet filled with an awful fear.

"A voice from the past!" she moaned feebly. "A voice from the past!" Then her head fell limply to one side, as she fainted a second time.

The lights in the windows of Norman Warner's house, which was situated upon the outskirts of Clapham Common, had died out one by one; and save for the dark figure that leant against the gate leading into the drive, there was no sign of life.

The man was muffled up in a long dust coat, the collar turned up about his throat. A slouch hat was pulled well forward over his eyes, so that scarcely any portion of his face was visible.

From afar off came the notes of a clock as it began striking the midnight hour, and the man straightened his body and peered through the gloom towards the house.

The last stroke of twelve died away and once again the silence of the night was broken:

A minute passed—two—three, and the man fidgeted impatiently.

Came a rustling in the bushes by the side of the drive, and the watcher tossed away the end of the cigarette he had been smoking.

A form in white—a slim, girlish form—came slowly into view and advanced hesitatingly towards the gate.

The man opened it, took a couple of sharp strides forward, and gripped the newcomer by the wrist.

"So we have found you at last!" he hissed. "I thought you wouldn't dare ignore my note. Listen, I have much to say to you!"

With a brutal wrench, he had dragged her into the shadows cast by the bushes. Then he began to whisper in her ear, slowly at first, then tensely, eagerly.

"You will do this?" he asked at length.

"No!" the girl cried. "A thousand times no! I have left you and your gang for all time! I will have no hand in this affair!"

"You know the penalty for disobedience where the orders of the League are concerned?" the man asked.

"Yes, I know well enough. But you may kill me here and now rather than I will betray the one friend I have in the world.

A knife flashed wickedly in the darkness. It was raised menacingly above the woman's breast.

"You will alter your decision?" the man asked threateningly.

"No! Strike if you wish to murder me! I am not afraid!"

The man laughed harshly and returned the knife to his pocket.

"Look into my eyes!" he ordered authoritatively.

"I won't!" the girl cried, struggling to break free. "You shall not place your horrible spell upon me again. I——"

She struggled frantically, tearing at his hands with her nails and attempting to strike him in the face. But he held her in a grip of steel, and slowly her resistance ceased and he released her.

He passed his hands before her face, then said in an almost coaxing voice:

"Go! The Key! You will obey me!"

He slipped something into her hand; and obediently she turned and retraced her steps the way she had come.

A quarter of an hour elapsed, then once again the girl moved slowly from the shadows and confronted the man. She was quite pensive now and moved like one who was walking in her sleep.

He stretched forth his hand and took the object he had handed her before she had returned to the house. Then as she slowly turned to wend her way back to the house, the man swung round and hurried away in the darkness.

## CHAPTER V.

### The House Party at Norman Warner's—The Recognition—Nelson Lee's Promise.

**F**ESTIVITIES at Norman Warner's house had commenced.

It was the night of the anniversary of his parent's golden wedding, and already a great number of guests had arrived, whilst others were continually being ushered in and received by old Gregory Warner and his silvery-haired, pleasant-faced wife.

Norman Warner could boast of a very select circle of friends; some of them, in reality, his clients, others whose acquaintance he had made during his leisure hours.

True, he was a man of business; but all who knew him were wont to look upon him with liking and respect, and even the most fastidious could not find fault with the mansion to which they had been invited.

It had the necessary number of bedrooms, furnished in the best taste, the hall formed a spacious room in itself, whilst the reception rooms, which communicated by folding doors, were large, lofty, and magnificently designed.

In these latter apartments, the doors of which had been flung open so as to form one long room, a gay scene was in progress. Black-coated civilians and officers in their khaki uniforms chatted vivaciously with elegantly attired women and girls.

A captain of the Hussars, who was an accomplished pianist, had already set the ball rolling, and was before the grand piano at the far end of the room, accompanying a dark, handsome girl as she sang an old and thrilling love ballad.

Norman Warner, who stood near his father and mother, ought to have felt that it was good to live as he gazed upon the smiling faces of his many friends, yet there was an air of unmistakable sadness about him to-night. He looked careworn and thoughtful, whilst there were dark marks about his eyes that suggested lack of sleep.

Norman, if the truth be told, saw nothing of the scene that was going on around him. Before the eye of his brain was the sweet, wistful face of the girl whom he loved, yet knew that he could not make his wife, because she belonged to another.

He was wondering why Cynthia had been so palpably agitated at the receipt of the letter that had seemed to be nothing more formidable than a quotation from a modiste. He asked himself, too, what had come over her during the last two days. She had gone about her work like one who was obsessed by a great, haunting terror—a fear that was filling her heart and wrecking her in health and spirit.

He had attempted to induce her to give him her confidence, but to no avail. She had asked him to trust her, and her eyes had mutely pleaded with him not to cross-question her. So Warner, like the chivalrous gentleman that he was, had swallowed his curiosity and held his peace. There was also another matter that was troubling him; but more of that anon.

"Mr. Nelson Lee; Mr. Nipper!"

With a glad exclamation, Warner roused himself and turned towards the door as he caught the names of the famous detective and his young assistant, who had been firm friends of his since they had been successful in clearing up a somewhat complicated case on his behalf.

"My dear Lee, I did not dream you would come!" Norman cried, as he warmly shook the detective by the hand.

"Have I disappointed you so often?" Nelson Lee asked, with one of his rare smiles, as he returned his friend's grip.

"You beggar, you know you are incorrigible!" Warner returned. "I have invited you here time after time, and all I have received is a very short note politely refusing on the plea of pressure of business."

"I assure you my excuses have been true ones, Warner," the detective said. "It is seldom Nipper and I are slack. We haven't been absentees from your pleasant little gatherings from choice."

"Well, I'm jolly glad to see you at last, anyway," Warner replied. "And Nipper, too, looking not a day older than when I saw him two years ago."

"I am afraid you're wrong there, Mr. Warner," the young detective said gravely. "People tell me that I've aged terribly of late. You've no idea of the worry and brain-fag that falls upon a prince of detectives like—ahem!—myself. I actually found a grey hair the other day, yet a few months ago the gov'nor called me a bright lad."

"Oh, you're still bright enough, Nipper!" Warner laughed.

Nipper screwed up his face and appeared to give the matter great thought.

"Well, perhaps I am," he said, with almost an air of relief. "But then I ought to be bright, for father died of Bright's disease and mother used Sapolio."

"You'll never make him take life seriously, Lee," Warner said. "But let me take you to your host and hostess to pay your respects. I do not think you have met my parents, have you?"

For the next quarter of an hour the detective and his assistant found themselves busily engaged in shaking hands and chatting with acquaintances. They were immensely popular wherever they went, and were known to a great number of the moneylender's guests.

"Thank the stars that's over, gov'nor!" Nipper murmured as he and his master succeeded in leaving the crush and seated themselves in an alcove. "What I hate about these giddy shows is the coming in part. Instead of all this receiving and bowing business, I should like to be able to sorter waive my hand to the chaps and girls I knew. You see what I mean, gov'nor?"

Nelson Lee glanced affectionately at the well-set-up lad by his side. Nipper looked remarkably well-groomed and handsome in his suit of evening clothes. His eyes were sparkling, his cheeks flushed with pleasure he found in his environment.

"I fear I don't quite follow you, Nipper," the detective said.

"Oh, I should like to come with a breezy air, sir," the assistant explained. "Now there's Sir William Trenley over there. I know him, therefore, I should just prance in, smack him on the back, and say 'Cheer-oh; Billy, how goes it! Then there's Lady Maria in the stiff-backed chair,

the old geezer whom we regained the diamonds for. In her case, I should blow her a kiss, and——"

"Good heavens!" Nelson Lee explained, in a low tone. "If you greeted Lady Maria like that, my lad, she would be seized with a fit upon the spot, whilst I feel certain that if you smacked Sir William upon the back, he would swallow his false teeth.

"M'yes, p'r'aps you're right, sir. Still, the mode of entry I've explained would save a lot of trouble, wouldn't it? If Sir Billy swallowed his beastly teeth—— My word, sir! Look!"

"What is the matter?" Nelson Lee asked, for his assistant's tone had suddenly changed and his young face had set hard.

"The woman over there, guv'nor!" Nipper breathed excitedly. "It's Cynthia Stefani, the girl who was in the bank robbery at Rome! The woman who got lagged with the Twisted Snakes lot!"

"What!" Cool man though he was, Nelson Lee started badly and sat bolt upright in his seat. He was no longer the indulgent guardian who had listened to the light chatter of his ward. He was the detective again, the human sleuth-hound who had made himself the terror of criminals throughout the civilised world.

Nelson Lee's keen grey eyes travelled swiftly in the direction Nipper was cautiously pointing; and, as he looked upon the slender figure of the girl in question, he knew that his assistant had made no mistake.

Cynthia was coming towards them, the lights lending additional splendour to her masses of black hair.

She was dressed in some gossamer-like material that suited her to perfection and fell sheerly away from her gleaming, white shoulders. There was something about her clear-cut face—its aspect of distinction, perhaps—that irresistibly held the gaze, and even the matter-of-fact detective, unsuspectably though he might be, realised that she was a queen amongst women.

The girl came straight towards the alcove and seemed about to pass without noticing its occupants. Then she happened to turn her head, and, although Nelson Lee attempted to draw back into the shadows, he was too late.

Cynthia's eyes met his, and the detective heard her catch in her breath with a choking, sobbing sound. She reeled, as one about to swoon, then, partly recovering herself, she gasped:

"You!"

For a second she stood like a figure of stone, her hand clasped to her heart, but she started and tried to recover her composure as Norman Warner approached.

"Let me introduce you, Miss Meadows," Warner said; and Nelson Lee and Nipper rose to their feet.

"We have met in the past, Mr. Warner," the girl said faintly.

"Why, yes; we met in Italy some years ago," Nelson Lee explained blandly. "I am delighted to renew our acquaintance, Miss—Meadows."

Nelson Lee took the hand the girl held out to him, and bowed over it. As he raised his head, his gaze met hers, and he saw that there was agonised entreaty in her eyes.

"It is a surprise to learn you are old friends," Warner exclaimed; and he darted a curious look at the detective, only to find that his expression was sphinx-like. "You will have much to talk about—doubtless pleasant memories to recall. I see my mother is beckoning me. You will perhaps excuse me."

He bowed to Cynthia, and moved across the room.



The girl faced the detective again; she was trembling, and white to the lips.

"I must see you alone, if only for a few moments," she said unsteadily. "Will you follow me into the conservatory? We shall not be interrupted there."

Nelson Lee inclined his head. His manner was almost cold, for he looked upon Cynthia as a bad and dangerous woman, little knowing that at heart she was pure and honest, and in reality only the dupe of an unscrupulous villain.

The detective watched her as she moved slowly away, making for where two skilfully-carved statues, festooned lights suspended from their sculptured fingers, marked the entrance to their place of meeting.

"What's the game, gov'nor?" Nipper asked, in a whisper, his hand upon his master's sleeve. "Why is she here?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"It is hard to say, lad," he answered. "I cannot quite understand the look she gave me. She was mutely imploring me not to give her true identity away; there was little doubt of that. Yet, we have learnt in the past how dangerous are the gang of which she is a member, and, unless she has some good explanation for her presence here, I feel it my duty to warn Norman Warner of the kind of woman he is harbouring in his home."

"I'm bursting with curiosity, sir," Nipper said. "I will bet she is up to some jiggery-pokery business."

"I will join her, Nipper," his master returned. "I, too, am anxious to hear what she has to say for herself."

He slipped away, and passed into the heated atmosphere of the conservatory. Passing through the long line of pungently-scented, rare and tropical ferns and blossoms, he came upon Cynthia seated in the gloom at the far end of the place.

The girl rose quickly to her feet. For a second or two they stood silently facing each other. Then Nelson Lee spoke.

"So we meet again, Mrs. Stefani," he said; and there was nothing in his voice to tell the girl anything as to his feelings towards her.

"After all this time," Cynthia said, in a low, strained tone. She took an impulsive step forward and laid her hand upon the detective's sleeve. "For Heaven's sake, don't give me away!" she pleaded passionately.

"How is it that I find you here?" the detective queried coldly.

"I am Mr. Warner's secretary," the girl explained. "Mr. Lee, you look upon me as a criminal—a wicked, unscrupulous woman—an ex-gaol bird. But I swear to you that I have left the old life, and am doing my utmost to keep honest."

The detective regarded her keenly; and his expression softened as he saw the tears that were glistening in her eyes.

"You give me your word of honour that you have left your old associates—that you have ceased to participate in their plans?"

"Yes; save that I saw my husband two days ago."

"You saw Count Stefani! Then he is in London?" he asked, his tone betraying unwonted excitement—for him.

Cynthia inclined her head.

"He is in London. More than that I cannot tell you. Bad man though he is, he is my husband," the girl said simply.

"You will not tell me his whereabouts?" Nelson Lee queried.

"I cannot betray him—I dare not!" Cynthia answered, darting a furtive glance over her shoulder, as though she expected to find someone at her back. "Oh, do not think I am still helping him! Please believe me! I dare not put my full confidence in you. To betray the league means death." She shuddered. "A swift and terrible death!" she whispered hoarsely.

Nelson Lee was silent for a moment; there was a look of pity upon his alert, clever face.

"Somehow, I feel sorry for you," he said quietly. "Believe me, had I had the opportunity, I would have given you a chance to lead a better life, instead of seeing you flung into an Italian prison. But the arrest was made by the official police, as you know, and I had no say in the matter."

"I know," the girl said softly. "I believe you have a heart, despite the hard things that evildoers say of you."

"A detective can still be a man, Mrs. Stefani," Nelson Lee answered. "But you say you have seen your husband? Has he succeeded in tracing you since you severed yourself from the league?"

"Yes; you do not know the power of that terrible band," Cynthia said, in a hard, bitter voice. "They are fiendishly—almost uncannily clever! No one is safe from them once they have gone against the oath they take when they join the society."

"But there is still a great deal that baffles me," the detective remarked. "I know a good deal about the League of the Twisted Snakes. Is not the death penalty incurred when a member flees from the band and attempts to break his or her connection with it?"

"Yes; that is the invariable rule," the girl agreed. "There is a lot that I, too, do not understand."

"Yet they have spared you," the detective persisted. "What did your husband say to you when you saw him? Was his manner threatening towards you?"

"I am not clear what took place between us," the girl said. "I—I do not remember."

"You do not remember!" Nelson Lee stared at her in amazement. "You puzzle me," said he.

Cynthia shuddered, and her fingers tightened upon his arm.

"You will understand when I tell you that there are times when I am completely under the influence of the man who, Heaven help me, I am compelled to call 'husband,'" she said, in a low, tense voice. "Soon after our marriage, he hypnotised me, and from that period I have been more or less in his power."

"Good heavens!" the detective murmured. "I am beginning to see daylight. He has willed you to lead a life of dishonour?"

"Yes. I am not sure of anything that took place yesterday. I was only dimly conscious this morning that I had seen my husband upon the preceding night. I cannot even call to mind where I met him. It was dark—I am sure of that. I seem to see him holding a knife to my heart. The vision is continuously rising before my gaze. It is awful—awful!"

The detective felt that she was trembling violently.

"You had better return to the reception-room," he advised. "Find somewhere where you can sit down quietly and compose yourself."

"And my wretched secret?" Cynthia asked eagerly. "I would rather die than be disgraced in the eyes of Mr. Warner. Already I feel that he doubts me. Yesterday"—a wave of colour came to her ashen face—"he told me that he loved me. Heaven help me, I return his affections! I am eating out my heart for him, but there is Count Stefani standing between us. I was forced to tell Norman—Mr. Warner—that I was a married woman."

Nelson Lee bit his lip.

"That was certainly unfortunate," he said. "My poor girl, I sympathise with you deeply."

"Then you will not expose me?"

"Heaven forbid that I should bring more pain into your unhappy life," Nelson Lee replied earnestly. He drew a card from his pocket. "Here is my address," he said. "If you find yourself in trouble, do not hesitate to come to me. I will try to prove myself your friend."

The girl seized his hand and bent over it, with a dry sob. "Heaven bless you," she said brokenly.

---

## CHAPTER VI.

### Norman Warner's Strange Story—Nelson Lee in Doubt.

"COME away from this row and chatter, Lee, and smoke a cigarette in my study."

Norman Warner button-holed the detective as he left the conservatory whence Cynthia had preceded him some few seconds previously.

"What about Nipper?" the detective asked.

"Oh, he'll amuse himself, never fear," Warner said. "The young scamp was waltzing with the most ripping girl in the house—save one—when last I saw him. Three parts of the men here are green with envy about it."

Nelson Lee indulged in one of his curiously silent laughs.

"Is he making such good headway, then?" he asked.

"You bet! He's making hay whilst your paternal eye is not upon him. Look! There they go. Look at the expression on the young owl's face. He might have fallen head-over-ears in love with Miss Frenson, by the way he's looking at her."

"I'll warrant he'll forget all about her by supper-time," Nelson Lee said lightly. "Nipper would ignore the prettiest face when there is a good spread before him." He paused for a moment to listen to the dreamy music. "'Destiny,' is a favourite waltz of mine," he said.

"Oh, hang the beastly thing!" Warner returned. "Lee, I've something very important I wish to speak to you about."

"Indeed!" the detective said. "Do you mean something that will interest me professionally?"

"Yes; I flatter myself it will. But come to the study, and I'll tell you all about it."

The two men left the reception-room, and Warner, linking his arm through that of the detective, led him down a corridor, and paused before a door at the further end.

This the moneylender unlocked and gently pushed his friend into the room. A moment later he had touched a switch, and the room was flooded with light.

Warner waved his hand towards an easy-chair, and Nelson Lee allowed his long body to sink into it. The moneylender then produced a siphon, a tantalus of spirits, and a box of Egyptian cigarettes, and helped the detective to a whisky-and-soda.

When the two men had got their cigarettes going, Warner leant forward in his chair.

"I wanted to speak to you about a very curious thing that happened last night," said he. "Have I ever told you about this specially designed safe I have had built?"

He indicated the safe in the wall.

Nelson Lee made a negative gesture.

"It looks a massive affair," he commented.

"Exactly. I need a veritable strong-room to safely guard the valuables that are sometimes brought me here by my clients," Warner answered.

"Such as the Prendergast pearls, for instance," the detective murmured, regarding his friend through the blue smoke of his cigarette.

"Yes; they——" Norman Warner's jaw dropped, and he stared in blank astonishment at his companion. "How the deuce did you know I had them?" he asked, in bewilderment.

"I did not know," Nelson Lee returned. "I merely guessed at the fact. As it happened, it was I who recommended Sir Alec Prendergast to bring them to you. Evidently he has done so."

"Oh, I see!" Warner said slowly. "He did not mention your name, and you quite startled me. Well, there, as you say, is an instance. Frequently my clients bring me valuable jewellery, curios, and documents upon which to raise loans to tide them over some difficulty. That is why I have gone to the trouble and expense of having this safe installed. Take a look at it, and tell me your opinion of it."

Nelson Lee rose languidly to his feet, crossed to the safe, and studied the heavy steel door, with its polished brass fittings.

"A formidable problem for the most up-to-date cracksman, I should say," he said, "if one may judge by the outward appearance."

Warner gained his legs and joined his friend.

"I'll unlock it and show you the interior," he remarked, going to his roll-top desk, unlocking it, and taking the bunch, upon which was the safe-key, from the hook upon which it always reposed.

"Listen!"

He inserted the key in the lock, and instantly Nelson Lee became aware of the ringing of bells in the upper regions of the house.

"An alarm," he said.

"Precisely! It sounds in my bedroom. As I have explained, no man needs a well-made and burglar-proof safe more than I. I have therefore had one made which, in the opinion of experts, it would take even the most skilful burglar well-nigh all night to break into."

"But, apart from the possibility of breaking it, there is always the possibility that in some way a copy of the key might be made. Hence my having the electric alarm-bells fitted. As you have seen, the moment the key is inserted in the lock the bells ring loudly. In my room the sound is a positive din, and it could not possibly fail to wake me. The ringing ceases the moment the key is removed from the lock, but one second of the row they make ought to be enough to wake the dead."

He had unlocked the safe and pulled open the heavy door.

Nelson Lee bent forward and examined the interior, noting the thickness of the solid steel door and the cunning device that set the burglar-alarm in motion immediately the key pressed upon a tiny button at the rear of the lock.

"There's not much fear of that being rifled, my friend," he said with assurance.

"I agree with you," Warner answered. "But it was not really that question I wished to discuss with you. It may surprise you to learn that last night I was aroused by the alarm."

Nelson Lee whistled softly.

"Someone has secured a duplicate of the key?" he asked.

"No. Through a piece of carelessness on my part the original was left in the lock when everyone in the house retired for the night. I had been working very hard, and was sleeping more than usually soundly. It must

have been nearly half a minute before I realized the true meaning of the sound that I had been dimly conscious was in my ears.

"The bells, which are fitted near my bedside, were ringing frantically. I sprang out of bed, flung a dressing-gown over my pyjamas, and raced downstairs, a terrible apprehension gripping me, for the Prendergast pearls were in the safe.

"I have regarded my safe for months as quite as safe, if not safer than the average banker's strong-room, and I often allow valuables to remain upon my premises for days on end.

"I always sleep with a revolver under my pillow, and I had grabbed this up. I entered here cautiously, the weapon gripped in my hands, but when I switched on the lights the room was empty."

"I saw the key in the lock. I ought to have explained previously that when I had left it, it had been partially withdrawn, as I had suddenly turned to answer the telephone. Thus the bells had ceased to ring, for the key was not touching the button."

"Now, however, I saw that the key had been pushed fully into the lock—a fact that proved to me that someone had touched it recently. I unlocked the safe, and went through its contents, but to my relief I discovered that the pearls and other things of worth were there, and had apparently not been touched."

"How far are you from the railway-line?" Nelson Lee asked.

"Some good distance."

"Ah! I was wondering whether the vibration caused by a passing train had shaken the key fully into the lock."

"I don't think that could be the explanation of the affair, Lee," Warner said. "You see the other keys were hanging from the ring to which the safe key is attached. Their weight would bear it down, and should the room be shaken, if anything, the key would have been jerked out and fallen to the floor."

"Yes, I follow your reasoning. You think some person touched the key?" Nelson Lee asked, and there was a strange, hard look in his eyes.

"I am sure of it!" Warner agreed, with conviction. "Lee, someone took a wax impression!"

The detective started.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"I discovered traces of wax in the wards of the key when I examined it."

"Excellent!" Nelson Lee said. "You have the detective instinct. Ninety-nine persons out of a hundred would not have thought to examine it. Show it me now, please."

Warner proffered his friend the bunch of keys, indicating the one that fitted the lock of the safe.

Nelson Lee examined it, holding the key by the ratchet, but he failed to detect any traces of wax adhering to the wards now.

"You have cleaned it?" he asked.

"No."

"Then possibly the wax has worked its way into the lock of the safe. Pardon me for one moment."

The detective sank to his knees upon the carpet. He had taken from his vest pocket a toothpick, and he began probing in the lock. Presently he straightened his body and rose.

He whipped out his lens, and scrutinised the tiny spec of yellow substance that was adhering to the end of the impromptu instrument.

"You are correct about the wax impression business, Warner," he said grimly. "Are the Prendergast pearls still in the safe?"

"Yes. Unfortunately I have been too busy to take them to the bank to-day, and as my secretary has been unwell, I would not trouble her to go. You will know, of course, that I used to transact my business up West. My bank is there, and since I gave up my office I have not troubled to have the account removed to the local branch here."

"Did you notice if the French windows were open when you came downstairs last night upon receiving the alarm?"

"They were securely closed from the inside. I tried them."

"Then it almost looks as though some member of your household was implicated in the matter," Nelson Lee stated.

Norman Warner averted his gaze. He opened his lips to speak, closed them again, and sat twining and untwining his fingers almost nervously.

"You suspect someone," Nelson Lee said, with the air of a man who is stating a fact rather than asking a question.

"Lee"—Warner had risen, and, with his hands thrust deep in his pockets, was standing before the mantel—"I think we can claim to be good friends," he said.

"Assuredly!" Nelson Lee responded.

"I want to make a confidant of you. I know that you are not an official detective, and that your actions are not governed by an official sense of duty. I am in the most awful quandary. You have said that I suspect someone in the house—I do! I have an awful feeling that the woman I love best on earth is implicated in this affair of which I have informed you."

"Tell me everything," the detective said as he hesitated. "You can, of course, rely upon my discretion, Warner."

"I will keep nothing back from you," the moneylender answered. "If ever a man was in want of a friend who can give him level-headed advice, it is myself at this moment. Mr. Lee, I love my secretary, Miss Meadows—Miss Meadows, as you know her. She is in reality a married woman, and I know that whilst her husband is alive my suit is hopeless.

"But that does not alter the fact that I worship the ground upon which she walks, adore her to the extent of sacrificing my life if it were necessary for her dear sake. Yet, it is she who was astir last night when the taking of the wax impression was accomplished. As I made my way upstairs, after assuring myself that burglars were not in the house and that nothing had been taken from my safe, I saw my secretary entering her bedroom—the room directly above this."

Nelson Lee kept a grip upon himself, and his face betrayed nothing of what was in his mind.

"You are sure of this?" he asked.

"I am positive. Oh, heavens, can I have been deceived in her?" Warner groaned. "Is she an unscrupulous girl who has betrayed the confidence I have placed in her? Oh, I cannot—will not believe it! She is so good, so gentle—a woman who could not sink to crime!"

"You would do well to reserve your judgment until some development takes place," Nelson Lee advised. "She may have been absent from her room at the same time as yourself purely by chance. Sleeplessness, the craving for a book from the library, or a glass of water, should there have been none in her room, might account for your seeing her."

"You give me new hope," Warner said. "Tell me, what do you know of her past? In what phase of life was she when you met her in Italy?"

Here was a poser! Nelson Lee, for once in his life, was momentarily at a loss for words. He told a white lie.

"Our acquaintance was quite a formal one," said he. "I knew practically nothing of the lady."

Warner regarded his friend long and earnestly.

"You are not telling me the truth!" he blurted out suddenly.

Nelson Lee quitted his chair.

"You are not yourself, Warner," he said quietly. "What do you propose to do to-night? Will you put someone on guard over the safe?"

"No!" the moneylender said, his jaw going forward harshly. "If anyone meddles with the thing, Heaven help them! I am going to keep my revolver handy, as is my custom. If there is an alarm, I shall be on the alert."

"Very well!" the detective replied. "With your permission, I, too, will sleep with one eye open, as the saying goes."

"You mean?"

"That, provided it will not inconvenience you, Nipper and I will remain here to-night."

"Nothing will please me better!" Warner exclaimed, with a return of his old cordial manner. "We have plenty of sleeping space."

"Good! Then, as soon as possible, I will get you to show me to my room," the detective replied.

They made their way back to the reception-room, and later Nipper and Nelson Lee found themselves before the supper-table. When the repast was disposed of and toasts had been drunk, those of the guests who were not staying at Warner's house took their departure, and the detective and his assistant were shown their rooms.

Nipper was led to an apartment upon the second floor, far removed from his master, somewhat to his disgust. Nelson Lee found Warner's arm passed through his, and the moneylender conducted him to a small but comfortably equipped bedchamber on the first story, overlooking the extensive front garden.

When his host had wished him good-night and taken his departure, the detective removed his coat and blew out the candle.

He was in no mood to sleep, his brain being too busy with the sequence of events that had transpired during the evening.

The detective was asking himself again and again two vital questions. Had he, for the first time in his career, been taken in by a beautiful face? Had he been deceived by a woman's apparent grief?

What had Cynthia been doing away from her room when the wax impression of the key of Warner's safe had been made? Was she still deeply implicated with the scoundrelly band of which she had once been a member?

Had she lied to him when she had vowed that her old existence had been left behind—that she was striving to forget the past and lead an honest life?

## CHAPTER VII.

### What Nelson Lee saw from the Window—The Man at the Safe

**N**ELSON LEE had drawn a chair towards the window, which he had thrown open. He had lit a cigar, and was sitting forward, his shoulders haunched up, slowly smoking and gazing abstractedly down into the drive.

It was no use thinking of sleep. His brain was too busy grappling with the conflicting thoughts that were obsessing him since his interview with his host.

Somehow he had a presentiment that something was about to happen. It may have been instinct—a sense that was strongly predominant in his nature. Many times in the past he had found that this peculiar quality—call it second-sight, if you will—had proved strikingly correct.

He was usually unimpressionable, but to-night he waited for—he could not say what. His every faculty was alert and strained.

Nelson Lee licked the ashes from his cigar and leant out of the window. He was conscious that there was a storm brewing. The air was curiously heavy and oppressive, the night strangely depressing to the mind.

Had he been right in taking Cynthia Stefani's word? Again the doubt rose in his mind. Was she now, metaphorically speaking, laughing up her sleeve in the thought that she had tricked the man who was known as the most clever detective of his day? Yet again, if such were the case, why had she admitted that she had seen her husband—the head of the notorious League of the Twisted Snakes—upon the previous day?

It seemed to Nelson Lee that, had she been participating in a conspiracy against her employer, to give such information was ridiculous and distinctly against the interests of the band.

Nelson Lee suddenly started forward, and his fingers gripped so hard upon his cigar that the leaf was broken. The lids which had been drooping over his eyes were raised sharply, and his glance was riveted upon a clump of bushes by the side of the drive.

Had he been mistaken, or had something moved in the shadows?

A cloud had passed before the moon, rendering the night intensely dark, so that it was difficult to make out anything below in the gloom save the indistinct blurs that marked the clusters of evergreens and rhododendrons.

Ten minutes must have passed, and the detective sat tense and watchful; then the tinkling of falling glass fell upon his ears, followed by an unmistakable curse, muttered under the breath.

Nelson Lee sprang to his feet, knowing well enough now that he had made no error. His imagination had not played him a trick when he had believed he saw someone moving in the garden below. It seemed that the attempt upon Norman Warner's safe, which had been suggested by the evidence of the taking of the wax impression of the key, was to be carried out to-night—and now.

The detective's hand dropped to his coat-pocket, and his fingers closed about the automatic pistol that reposed there. Long experience had taught the detective that it was never well to travel without a weapon, even when upon pleasure, for he had been responsible for the imprisonment of scores of desperate men, some of whom had sworn when they had been sentenced that sooner or later they would take his life.

Nelson Lee silently moved over to the door. Next moment he had opened it and was gliding along the corridor towards the head of the stairs.

Quite coolly and noiselessly he descended them, and a few seconds later saw him standing before the door of his host's study, his nerves strung up to concert-pitch with suppressed excitement.

His hand went out and gripped upon the handle, turning it gently. To his satisfaction he found that Warner had not relocked the study door when they had left the room, and the detective cautiously entered.

He at once became aware of a beam of white light playing about the far end of the room, where the safe was situated.

Then, as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he made out the dark figure of a man, who was holding an electric-torch and doing something to the safe door.

Nelson Lee stood still, instinctively waiting for the bells in Norman Warner's room to ring loudly, giving the alarm. But, the next moment, the detective had difficulty in suppressing the exclamation of surprise that rose involuntarily to his lips, for—wonder of wonders—without a sound the marauder pulled open the heavy door.



Even in that critical moment, Nelson Lee asked himself how the silent opening of the safe had been accomplished. That the bells had not been set whirring he was sure, and—

The detective's body stiffened, and he steeled himself for the coming encounter. There was no time now to seek an explanation of the mystery. It was necessary to act at once.

The burglar, whoever he was, had drawn from the safe the case containing the precious Prendergast heirloom, and he allowed a soft chuckle of exultation to break from him as he swung round towards the French windows, which were standing ajar.

But the mirth froze upon the criminal's lips, and he let out an oath of dismay, for the detective, with a panther-like spring, had leapt at him and wound his arms about his body.

The jewel-case fell from the intruder's hands as he struggled frantically to break free, and the two men reeled backwards and forwards. For the space of a second or two the only sound that was audible in the room was that of their laboured breathing, as each pitted his utmost strength against the other. Then Nelson Lee neatly tripped his opponent, and they both went down in a huddled heap.

Over the floor the two men rolled, each fighting desperately to gain the mastery.

Nelson Lee clubbed his weapon and swung it aloft to deal his enemy a knock-out blow; but as it descended the burglar managed to clutch the detective's wrist, and made a savage attempt to wrench the weapon from his hold.

With a sudden twist that momentarily took Nelson Lee off his guard, the marauder jerked one of his hands free and struck his adversary a stunning blow between the eyes.

The detective reeled sideways, his senses dazed, and, hurling him away, the criminal scrambled to his feet.

Almost immediately Nelson Lee was up again, recovering himself by a supreme effort of will power. He hurled himself forward as the burglar leapt to the windows, clutched at his coat, and was positively dragged through into the night air.

Uttering a vindictive curse, the burglar freed himself and wheeled round upon his foe, his eyes gleaming malevolently through the holes in the black mask that covered the upper portion of his features.

He swung round his right, aiming for the detective's jaw, but Nelson Lee put his head round the blow, and, countering with the skill of a trained pugilist, lashed out with his left.

His bunched fist got home with a dull thud upon the other's ear, sending him spinning round upon his heels and detaching the fastening of his mask so that it fell, revealing his hate-contorted face.

Like a stone launched from a catapult, Nelson Lee was at him, his fingers seeking to get a grip upon his throat. The burglar clawed at the detective's hands, and Nelson Lee was dimly conscious that he had dragged a ring from his adversary's finger and that it had fallen to the gravel path.

They thudded down again, to roll over and over upon the ground, Nelson Lee getting in a stunning blow with the butt of his automatic.

The man who had been masked fell back limply, his hands relaxing their hold of the detective, and Nelson Lee whipped his handcuffs from his pocket.

Click!

One of the fetters was snapped home, and the detective was given an opportunity to take note of his would-be prisoner's appearance. He received something of a shock as he took in the hideous, wrinkled face, with its beak-

like nose, almost concealing the evil, grey-lipped mouth; and somehow it struck him that he had read a police description of this man in the past.

He had little time for meditation. The touch of the cold steel that had been snapped upon his wrist seemed to bring the criminal to his senses. Reason darted into his glazed eyes, and he jerked the other hand away just as Nelson Lee was about to encircle the wrist with the second fetter.

With a snarling oath, the criminal tried to throw the detective aside; then for the first time he seemed to recognise him.

"Nelson Lee!" he hissed between his teeth.

The detective made no reply, though he noted well enough that he was known to the criminal by sight. He exerted all his strength to bring the man's hands together, in order to secure the free wrist, but the burglar suddenly jerked his head forward and fixed his teeth in the back of his enemy's hand.

Nelson Lee could not suppress the involuntary cry of pain and surprise that rose to his lips, whilst just for a moment his hold upon the criminal was released.

It was the chance the latter had waited for and anticipated. His fist shot upwards, and struck the detective heavily upon the point of the jaw, lifting him almost to his feet before he crashed backwards.

Foebly Nelson Lee attempted to recover himself, and scrambled once again to his feet, though he swayed like a drunken man, and there was a blood-red mist before his eyes.

His foe hurled himself upon him, and now a heavy life-preserver was grasped in his hand. Nelson Lee managed to partly dodge the blow that was aimed at his head, but it descended heavily upon his shoulder, completely numbing his right arm and causing him to stagger and lose his balance.

He tried to save himself from falling, but without avail. He toppled backwards, his head came into violent contact with the wall of the house, and he sank down inert and insensible.

The burglar turned as if to make all haste from the spot; then his greed overcame his fear of capture, and he darted through the windows to stoop quickly and pick up the case holding the pearls.

He was about to swing round and leave the house when a cry—a cry in a woman's voice came from the direction of the doorway, and the burglar found himself confronted by a girlish figure, attired in a dressing-gown, her hair streaming over her slender shoulders.

It was Cynthia! Her room was situated directly above the study, and she had been aroused by the sound of the falling bodies of Nelson Lee and his opponent when they had first gone down together.

The girl had been obsessed by a horrible fear that she was indirectly responsible if some member of the gang of which she had once been an accomplice had entered the house. She had spoken the truth when she had told Nelson Lee that she was not clear as to what had taken place between her husband and herself when they had met, for Stefani had exercised his hypnotic power over her and willed her to forget.

Yet, since his spell had been broken by the long illness Cynthia had suffered in prison, Stefani's influence over her was weakened, and she was dimly conscious that she had in some way assisted her husband in a deep-laid plot he was levelling against the one friend she had in the world.

Never lacking in courage, Cynthia had risen when she had heard the noise in the room below, in which was the safe containing Warner's valuables. She had taken a small nickel-plated revolver from her dressing-table and crept downstairs.

The marauder gave a sharp cry as he found the girl before him, and realised that he was looking into the barrel of her small, but deadly, weapon, and instinctively he stepped backwards.

Her finger trembled upon the trigger, and in that brief moment the burglar's life hung in the balance. But, ere she could fire, Cynthia had recoiled with a low cry, breathing tensely, and in terrified accents:

"The Hawk!"

For a moment—a long, long moment—the man and the girl stood regarding each other, Cynthia curiously resembling a timid fawn at bay. Her hand was pressed to her heaving bosom, her eyes dilated and filled with an awful fear.

"Yes, the Hawk, my lady," the criminal said, in a low voice that was pregnant with hatred—"the Hawk, Mrs. Stefani—one of the band whom you've sworn to assist and work for!"

Cynthia's lips parted to cry for help—she seemed dazed, and to have forgotten that she held an effective weapon with which she could have dealt her enemy a swift death—but before she could make a sound the Hawk sprang at her, his always-hideous face more intensely repellent and ugly in his ungovernable passion.

His cruel fingers bit into the girl's white throat, and he forced her backwards over the table in a manner that threatened to break her spine. Savagely he struck down at her, causing the weapon to drop from her nerveless fingers; then she was completely helpless—a weak, fragile woman in the power of a fiend.

Cynthia stared up into the hate-contorted visage above her, reading murder in the evil, bird-like eyes. Red lights began to dance before her vision, and her lungs felt as though they must burst, for it was impossible to draw even one short breath. The Hawk's fingers grew mercilessly tighter about her windpipe, until her tongue lolled from her mouth and her face began to change colour.

He slung her from him and she sank inertly to her knees. He was more beast than man now, thirsting for revenge because the girl had sought to betray the band of which she had once been an unwilling tool by trying to prevent his escaping with the fortune he had gained.

The girl commenced to rise, but before she could gain her feet with the intention of renewing the struggle, the Hawk snatched down at the heavy poker that lay in the grate, gripped it, and swung it above his head. Then it crashed down with a thud upon Cynthia's unprotected head, and with a choking moan she rolled over and lay still.

Catching his breath, the Hawk recoiled, realising something of what he had done as some of his mad passion left him, and he stared down at the still form upon the carpet.

Next moment he had pulled himself together, regained the pearls, turned swiftly upon his heels and dashed into the night, the terror of the rope in his black heart.

But at present Cynthia Stefani was not dead. She stirred, and tried to drag herself to her knees. She was going to die—she felt certain of that, but she would not go to her last account without leaving word as to the identity of the scoundrel who had robbed the man she loved and laid her low.

Slowly and painfully the girl dragged herself across the carpet, the blood still flowing from her head. She covered a yard and gained the table beneath the telephone upon which lay a scribbling-tablet and a pencil—kept there in order that a note might be made of a message when necessary.

Blindly, Cynthia groped for the pencil, touched it, and closed her almost nerveless fingers about it. Then slowly and laboriously she began to write.

She formed the three letters "The" and the first three characters of the word "Hawk." Then a great darkness—a darkness that she dimly believed to be death—descended upon her, and she fell to one side and remembered no more.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### Nelson Lee's Investigations—Off to Scotland Yard.

"GUV'NOR! Thank goodness, you're come round at last!"  
Nelson Lee feebly opened his eyes and looked up vacantly into the anxious face of his young assistant.

He moved his head slightly, realising that it was aching horribly, and discovered that he was lying at full length upon a couch. He saw Norman Warner and a grave-looking man, in frock-coat and neatly-creased trousers, standing by the side of Nipper. Then memory began to return to him.

"He got away?" he asked weakly.

"Yes, sir," Nipper answered.

"But don't you worry about that, now, old friend!" Warner urged soothingly. "You've got a nasty crack on the head, and must try to sleep."

Nelson Lee's answer was to struggle up upon his elbow.

"I am used to rough handling," he said quietly, with a wan smile. "I cannot rest until I know exactly what has happened. Ah, the police are here?"

He had caught sight of a constable stationed by the door.

"Inspector Ringstead from the local station has made an investigation," Warner said. "He has gone back to the station to make his report."

"He took the pearls?" Nelson Lee asked. "He had them in his hand when I surprised him at the safe."

"Yes; the pearls have gone, Lee," Warner answered bitterly. "Good heavens, it's a baffling enigma—a mystery there is no unravelling! The bells did not ring. I swear that they did not ring! Not even for a fraction of a second! What I shall say to Sir Alec Prendergast, I dare not think! It makes my brain whirl. The loss is nothing compared with the scandal that will result! My reputation will be shaken—ruined! And yet I would willingly lose everything of value I hold for my clients—would have willingly paid out every pennypiece I possess in the world, could I have prevented the other thing that has happened!"

Nelson Lee's brows were raised interrogatively.

"The other thing?" he asked.

"The attempted murder of—of my secretary!" Norman Warner said huskily. "We found her lying in a pool of blood on the floor. The doctor thinks— Oh, merciful Providence, I—I can't tell you!"

He turned away with a dry sob and his shoulders heaved convulsively, as, leaning against the mantelpiece, he buried his face in his hands. It was the grief of a strong man whose heart was torn and lacerated with suffering well-nigh unbearable.

"Tell me the details, lad," Nelson Lee said softly, turning to Nipper.

"Well, so far as I can see, sir," the assistant replied, "Miss Meadows must have been aroused, and came down to try to stop the burglar bunking after he'd outed you. We found a revolver, which Mr. Warner recognised as belonging to his secretary, lying on the floor."

"Poor Mrs. Stef—Miss Meadows was lying by the telephone table, her head horribly knocked about. I'm afraid"—the lad sunk his voice in a

whisper—"that it's all up with her, guv'nor. Poor girl, whatever she was, it's dreadful to die like that, and—"

"Hush!" Nelson Lee said warningly, glancing towards the moneylender. "You can see how matters stand, Nipper."

"You bet, guv'nor! Poor Mr. Warner loves her."

"Yes. She has been carried to bed?"

Nipper nodded.

"The doctor has been with her for upwards of two hours, sir. You've been unconscious for a mighty long time! It is nearly one o'clock in the afternoon."

"I fear the case will develop into one of murder, Mr. Lee," the doctor put in, seriously. "The unfortunate girl's skull is badly fractured, and a most critical operation will have to be performed almost at once. It will be touch and go: her life will hang in the balance!"

"The brute!" Nelson Lee exclaimed, his jaw setting grimly. "Help me off this couch, Nipper!"

"Guv'nor, you mustn't get up and fiddle about yet!" Nipper exclaimed reproachfully.

"A good assistant obeys orders without question, Nipper," Nelson Lee returned sharply.

The lad flushed.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I was only thinking of—of you."

"I know, my lad," Nelson Lee answered, his tone softening, as his fingers touched the boy's arm. "But I must be up and doing. I swear that I'll not rest until I've brought this callous ruffian to justice!"

Nelson Lee swayed dizzily as his feet touched the floor: but he took a grip upon himself, and, with the assistance of Nipper, moved slowly towards the safe.

It was still standing open, and Nelson Lee stooped to examine the lock. At once it was evident that no force had been employed, although he had scarcely expected to find evidence in this direction.

The impression of the key, which it seemed certain had been taken, had not been made for nothing. That was certain. Yet, if a duplicate key had been constructed and the door of the safe unlocked with it, why had the alarm-bells failed to ring?

Nelson Lee turned to Norman Warner and asked, just to satisfy himself:

"You are perfectly sure the alarm was not sounded in your room?"

"I am sure it was not, otherwise I should, of course, have been aroused," the moneylender answered, turning slowly.

Nelson Lee frowned and stared again at the safe, as though he would wrest its secret from it by the intensity of his gaze. He had made sure that the device by which the alarm-bells were set in motion was not damaged in any way.

"You have the key handy, Warner?" he suggested.

Norman unlocked his desk, and handed the detective the bunch.

"It's the biggest mystery I've ever experienced," he said, shaking his head. "My desk had not been touched, so obviously this key was not used, whilst even if someone has made a duplicate, they could not have used it without setting up a terrific din by my bedside, which I am sure I should have heard."

Nelson Lee nodded slowly, and inserted the key in the lock. Immediately they could hear the bells ringing in Warner's chamber above.

"Extraordinary!" Nelson Lee murmured, a gleam in his grey eyes that spoke of a more than usual interest in the case. "It is a mystery such as I love to grapple with."

He seemed to have forgotten his weak condition. Despite its dead pallor, his face was alert and eager as he again knelt before the safe.

"You are sure that the safe was locked before you retired to rest last night?" he asked, removing the key, with the result that the bells at once became silent.

"My dear chap, you saw me lock it yourself!" Warner answered.

"You did not have occasion to go to it after we left the study? You are sure?"

"Positive! Before we left this room, I locked the safe, returned the keys to my desk, and locked that."

"Precisely! And where was the key of your desk?"

"In my pocket; it is there now, and could not have been touched."

Nelson Lee took out his cigarette-case, and with unsteady fingers selected a smoke and lit up.

He dropped into a chair, the bunch of keys still held in his hand, and smoked slowly and thoughtfully for a few minutes, the lids drawn low over his eyes, his forehead deeply lined.

Suddenly he raised the bunch of keys, quickly found the key of the safe and keenly inspected it.

"Ah!"

He caught his breath in sharply and rose to his feet, so abruptly that his injured head was jarred and his features twitched with pain.

"You have been deceived—cunningly deceived by the scoundrels who are in this affair, Warner," he announced, his voice trembling with unwonted excitement. "You thought you locked the safe to-night, but in reality you left it open!"

"What!" Norman Warner took a sharp stride forward, his jaw dropping in blank amazement. "Impossible!" he cried.

"It is not only possible, but a fact!" Nelson Lee persisted grimly. "Look here!"

He held the key before Warner's eyes.

"This is not the real key of your safe," he said. "It is the duplicate that was made from the wax impression that was taken. You see?"

Throwing away his cigarette, he held the key by the barrel, took a hold upon the wards with his other hand, and, to Warner's astonishment, turned them from right to left, holding the bar stationary.

"You can unlock the safe with this key, but it is impossible to lock it!" Nelson Lee explained. "Concealed in the bar is a miniature ratchet-wheel. When you placed the key in the lock and turned it from left to right to unlock the safe, the resistance of the ratchet kept the wards fixed, and enabled you to effect your object. But when you tried to relock the safe, turning the key from right to left, the ratchet merely slipped over the teeth of the ratchet-wheel, and the lock was not shot into position."

"By Jove! It's the most fiendishly ingenious piece of trickery I have ever encountered!"

"But the key—its discolouration—it does not appear to be new. It is the exact likeness of the real key," Warner protested.

"Oh, that is easily managed by the use of a few chemicals," the detective returned.

"Hullo, what have we here?"

He had moved to the telephone-table, and was standing looking down at the shakily-formed handwriting upon the tablet on the telephone-table. He noticed that the sheet of paper was smeared with blood.

"Whose writing is this, Warner?" he asked.

The moneylender took the pad as Lee picked it up and handed it to him.

"My secretary's, but it is almost unrecognisable! What can it mean?"

Nelson Lee made no reply, until he had examined the pencil which hung from the table upon a slender chain. He noted that this, too, bore traces of blood, and he answered his friend's question with another.

"Where was Miss Meadows lying when she was first discovered?" he queried.

"Directly before this table," Warner answered.

"Very near it?"

"Yes; almost beneath it."

"Ah; then I think it safe to deduce that these six letters, 'The Haw,' form part of the name of the man who took the pearls," the detective stated. "The uncertain formation of the characters, together with the marks of blood upon the paper and the pencil, clearly suggest that she wrote this message after the brutal attack upon her. You will see how the last letter trails off and how the pencil has been drawn to the extreme bottom of the sheet of paper. I think that proves that it is only part of the name, and your secretary would have written more, but was prevented from doing so by sinking down in an unconscious condition. If you will excuse me for one moment, I want to look for something outside the windows."

He turned on his heel and crossed to them, noting as he unfastened them the circular hole that had been cut in the glass.

He remembered the tinkling sound that had convinced him upon the preceding night that someone was breaking into the house, and he expected to see the broken glass that lay upon the gravel path. The burglar had accidentally dropped the circular piece that his diamond had cut from the pane.

Nelson Lee was doomed to a slight disappointment, for he had hoped to find some trace of footprints. However, the storm that had been threatening had hung about until the morning, when it had broken with a heavy downpour, which had utterly obliterated any impressions that might have been left by the intruder, with whom the detective had engaged in such a grim, desperate combat.

By the edge of the lawn, however, Nelson Lee came upon the ring that he remembered dragging from his adversary's finger. He stooped, picked it up, and inspected it.

It was a massive signet ring, and upon it was engraved the image of two snakes, entwined.

"As I thought," he murmured.

He saw that Warner was watching him from the room; he beckoned, and the moneylender joined him.

"Warner," he said gravely, "I am going to give you something of a shock, but you must keep a stiff upper lip, and bear it. Last night, you somewhat heatedly accused me of not speaking the truth."

"I'm sorry; I spoke in haste," the moneylender said apologetically.

"There is no need for sorrow," Nelson Lee answered simply. "Strictly speaking, I was far from frank with you when I told you I knew little of Mrs.—of Miss Meadows, your secretary—but I had given her my word that I would not acquaint you with what I knew of her past.

"As the matter stands, now, however, I honestly think that it is imperative that you should know all. You have been involved in a bad loss, and I believe that your secretary is in a way responsible for it."

Warner groaned.

"Heaven forgive me, I have thought the same," he muttered. "I have fought against my suspicions, but have been unable to dispel them. But,

Mr. Lee, she can't be all bad, or she would never have sought to prevent my being robbed."

"Far from it," Nelson Lee returned quickly. "I believe Miss Meadows is more sinned against than sinning. She has proved herself a plucky girl, and whatever she had done against your interests, she has been forced to do against her will. Listen, and I will give you my full confidence."

Clearly and concisely, Nelson Lee then related how he had encountered Cynthia in Italy, as a member of the dread League of the Twisted Snakes.

In doing this, the detective felt that he was not betraying Cynthia Stefani's confidence, when he took into consideration the happenings of the previous night. The unfortunate girl was very near to death, and possibly would pass away without being allowed an opportunity of unburdening her soul to the man whom she respected and loved.

Warner was placed in a most unenviable position with his client, and he would be hit hard in a financial direction. It was, therefore, not right that he should be longer kept in the dark. Nelson Lee felt fairly certain that Cynthia, had she been in possession of her faculties, would have wished her friend and employer to be told the truth.

Besides, his—Lee's—pledge of secrecy had only been given on the understanding that the girl was determined not to assist or enter into the plans of the league. And that she had actually been of vital assistance to her husband, although quite innocently and unknowingly, the detective was convinced.

He kept nothing back from his friend, telling him of the bank robbery, and of Cynthia's arrest in Italy, bringing his narrative up to the time of his dramatic meeting and interview with Cynthia upon the previous evening.

"But," he concluded, "let me impress upon you not to think ill of that poor girl, Norman. I fully believe that from the first she has been as a puppet in the hands of the rogue, Count Stefani, owing to the mesmeric influence he possessed over her. That the theft of the pearls was the work of the league, I have proven."

He showed the moneylender the ring, pointing out the device engraved upon it.

"I pulled this from the hand of the thief during our struggle last night," he explained. "But I am also convinced that your secretary acted quite unknowingly and innocently when she took the impression of your safe key and afterwards exchanged it for the bogus one."

"It all sounds like a wild story devised by the brain of a novelist," Warner commented slowly. "You say Cynthia admitted seeing her husband upon the night before last. You believe he forced her to tamper with the key."

"Assuredly. I think that she acted under his hypnotic influence. If I told a Scotland Yard man that, he would laugh at me. But, I have experienced the wonderful power of hypnotism in the past, and I am now the last to belittle it, or leave the science out of my calculations. Has your secretary been taken to her own room?" the detective finally asked.

"No; a bed was made up for her upon the ground floor upon the doctor's advice," Warner informed him.

"Then we could make a search of her room undisturbed?"

Warner hesitated.

"It seems playing the game a bit low down," he objected.

"It may make all the difference as to whether or no we are able to get upon the track of the man who has treated her so cruelly," the detective reminded him.

"Follow me," the moneylender said, doubt cleared from his face.



A minute later they stood in the girl's room, and Nelson Lee was making his search; his fingers seeming to rest almost reverently upon the articles he moved, handled and scrutinised.

At length he pulled open one of the small drawers in the dressing-table, and took from it a letter. As Warner's glance fell upon it he gave a sharp ejaculation.

"Why, that is the epistle that seemed to cause her so much consternation when she received it upon the day before yesterday!" he cried. "I suppose I ought to have told you of that, but it had quite slipped my memory."

Nelson Lee was perusing the message, his eyes narrowed and thoughtful.

"You say the receipt of it appeared to cause Miss Meadows anxiety," he suggested.

"Yes; it was brought to the house by a messenger, and then the butler brought it to my secretary, and when she read its contents, I thought she was about to faint. She asked to be excused from further work that day, saying she wished to lie down.

"She was as white as a ghost, and seemed terribly upset. Of course, I readily gave my consent to her absenting herself from her duties, and opened the door for her to quit the room. But, before she went, to my bewilderment, she took a dictionary from a shelf and seemed to intend taking it to her room."

"A dictionary," Nelson Lee repeated slowly.

"Yes; why there is the very book on the mantel-board. She had scarcely gained this room when I heard a crash. I sent the housekeeper upstairs to ascertain what had happened, and she found that my secretary had swooned, and was lying prone upon the floor. The letter was clutched in her hand, and the dictionary was open upon the bed."

Nelson Lee nodded, and, seating himself, he read the message through several times.

"Does it not strike you as strange," said he at last, "that a dressmaker who does not even trouble to have a properly printed letter-paper, indeed, who does not even think it necessary to put an address on her letter, should do such a large business that she must needs reference her various styles of costumes, etc., know them all by numbers, and ask her customers to quote those numbers for guidance?"

Warner scratched his chin reflectively.

"It is certainly rum," he admitted.

"I think it most extraordinary," the detective answered, with a dry note in his voice. "I am fairly sure the message has a deep and hidden meaning."

"You think it is a cypher!" Warner cried. "That would account for Miss Meadows being so upset, and——"

"Precisely," Nelson Lee agreed. "And why the need of the dictionary? Obviously it supplies the key to the cypher. But, smoke a cigarette and keep quiet for a few moments, Warner. I'll grapple with this enigma."

He stretched forth his hand and gained the dictionary. For upwards of twenty minutes he was engaged in referring to it, turning the pages, counting the number of words down to certain spots upon the pages and referring back to the message. The deep frown that had gathered upon his brow suddenly disappeared and he flung the book aside.

"I have solved the puzzle!" he cried. "The cypher is a most simple one when one has the explanation, but I should not have been able to read it in a hundred years had I not known that the dictionary must hold the key. The words in the message mean nothing. It is the figures only that count. I realised that almost at once, for so many are apparent, and a private dressmaker would hardly need to know her styles by numbers. First I

looked at the second and thirtieth words on page 432, and the first upon page 431, but the result was 'mechanics mediation mousolean,' which was not encouraging.

"I then tried other ways of reading the enigma, but all failed, until I coupled the price 30s. with the figures 432/2, and sought the thirtieth word in the second column of page 432. It gave me 'Meet.'

"I worked on this system, taking the first number as that of the page, the figure after the dash as denoting as to whether the word was to be sought in the first or second column, and the price mentioned as signifying the number down the column where the word would be found.

Thus the 40th word in the first column of page 431 gave me the word 'me.' I knew I was on the right track, and, continuing on these lines, I got:

" 'Meet me twelve to-night at gate.—S.' "

"Evidently certain dictionaries are used to read the cypher all over the world, but the members of the league know that when in Britain, a Nuttall's edition is to be used.

" 'S' stands for Stefani. There can be little doubt of that," Nelson Leo concluded. "It was evidently her husband whom Miss Meadows—or rather, Mrs. Stefani—was ordered to meet at midnight upon the night before last."

"Would that she could speak," Warner said passionately. "She might be able to tell us where to lay our hands upon the scoundrel. What do you propose doing?"

"I shall make for my rooms," the detective replied readily. "Nipper and I will walk across the common, and secure a taxi at the Plough. I want to look up my records of criminals. I am in hopes I shall discover who is the man whose principal name, or nickname, begins with 'H-a-w.'"

It was not long before Nelson Lee and Nipper were striking across Clapham Common.

The detective seemed almost to have recovered from the ugly blow he had received, and save that from time to time his fingers clutched rather hard upon Nipper's sleeve, and his footsteps were momentarily uncertain, he was almost his old self once more.

There was no difficulty in enlisting the services of a taxi-driver when they reached the Plough, there being a rank there.

They were driven to Gray's Inn Road, and, arrived at the detective's abode, the latter went direct to his consulting-room.

"The 'H' book, lad," he ordered.

Nipper, who had followed on his heels, took the volume in question from a shelf. Knowing what was required of him, he swiftly turned the pages until he came to the names beginning with the letters "Haw."

"Hawley," he began, reading aloud.

"Hanged at Maidstone in 1911. Obviously not he, Nipper," his master murmured, with a grim smile.

"Hawes, John——"

"A pickpocket and nark. No; he hasn't the nerve or the cunning to do a job like the one at Warner's."

"Hawk, The," Nipper read out. "Reported to be a clever and daring cracksmen, and maker of burglarious implements. British police unable to get evidence enough to warrant an arrest, but has served a term of imprisonment in Paris. Has——"

"It's the man, Nipper!" Nelson Leo cut in, with conviction. "I can recollect now where I read a police description of him. It was in the office of M. Lalard, the head of the Parisian Police. You needn't read any more.

So the Hawk has linked himself up with the League of the Twisted Snakes. Little wonder, then, that he has not been heard of in London for the last few years."

"What's the programme, gov'nor?" Nipper queried eagerly.

"A call on friend Spearing, of Scotland Yard, my boy," his master informed him, taking up his hat. "He may be in a position to tell us something."

## CHAPTER IX.

### Spearing's Information—The Arrest of the Hawk—The End of Stefani—Conclusion.

**D**ETECTIVE WILL SPEARING, of the C.I.D., rubbed at his short hair until it only needed the word "Welcome" written across it to make it positively first brother to a doormat.

The action was characteristic of the young detective, when he was worried.

That he was troubled now was more than obvious, whilst his companion, the Chief Commissioner, who was seated in his subordinate's office, also looked distinctly perturbed.

He frowned again at the telegram he held in his hand. It was short enough—just containing the words "Have just learnt Stefani, Twisted Snakes gang, in London.—Poppolio, Chief Italian Police," but it had caused him more anxiety than had all the telegrams received at the Yard during the last half-year.

"This means trouble for us, and between you and I, Spearing, it explains why the list of burglaries and swindles here have increased so enormously during the last month," the commissioner said, tugging at his iron-grey beard.

"Agree with you, Sir Henry," Spearing jerked. "Confounded nuisance he should come to London whilst we are so busy! Annoying—very!"

"There is absolutely no clue?"

"None. Was out all night last night," Spearing answered. "Poked about in his old haunts, but not there. No sign!"

There came a tap on the door, and a subordinate entered.

"Mr. Nelson Lee to see Mr. Spearing," the man announced.

The detective-sergeant glanced at Sir Henry, and the latter nodded.

"Show Mr. Lee in," Spearing jerked.

The detective entered the next moment, and shook hands with Will Spearing and the commissioner.

"I require some information, Spearing," Nelson Lee said, as he took the chair the detective offered him. "Can you lay your hands upon a burglar named the 'Hawk'?"

"Real name James Elkington," Spearing murmured. "Yes; think I can find him. You want him?"

"Badly," the private detective agreed. "You have, of course, had reported to you, the theft of the Prendergast pearls, from Mr. Warner's house at Clapham Common?"

"Assuredly," Sir Henry put in—"with a request that secrecy should be for the present maintained."

"Exactly. The jewels were deposited with Mr. Norman Warner as security for a loan," Lee explained. "I am working upon the case."

"The local police have informed us of that," Spearing said. "Understand you got badly knocked about."

Nelson Lee's fingers tenderly touched the back of his head, and for a moment his expression was a trifle rueful.

"You have heard aright," said he. "I surprised him at my friend's safe, and in a struggle which ensued, my head came into violent contact with the wall. But I am not here to tell you of my own troubles. I can identify the Hawk as the man who stole the pearls, if you know where to find him. I can also prove that he is a member of the notorious secret society, The League of the Twisted Snakes, the head of which is at the moment in London."

Sir Henry Fairfax's chair went over with a thud. He was usually the coolest of men, but the sudden information regarding the very gang he was so anxious to break up, coming as it did, like a bolt from the blue, had filled him with uncontrollable excitement.

"You say the Hawk is one of the gang?" he cried eagerly.

"Yes; there is no question about the matter."

"Then we've got 'em, Sir Henry," William Spearing jerked, bringing his fist upon his desk with a force that set his inkwells dancing. "Know where to get Hawk. Always at Milano Night Club. Find him—find Stefani—p'r'aps all of gang who are in London."

"I will see about a warrant immediately, and make arrangements to raid the club," the commissioner returned grimly, as he turned sharply towards the door.

Night had descended upon the West End of London—no longer the night that brought in its twain a myriad of blazing lights, a whirl of pleasure upon every side.

London is a very different place since the madman across the North Sea—the blustering, self-styled War Lord—saw fit to sling practically the whole of the civilised world into ravaging warfare and bloodshed. Here and there is a blurred, indistinct yellow smudge, marking a light in some shop window, in the wide roads taxicabs and 'buses crawl along, their illuminations lowered or shaded.

Two men, their coat-collars turned up about their ears, although the night was anything but chilly, turned from Leicester Square into a dark side street. It was the thoroughfare in which the Milano Night Club was situated, and in about the centre of the street a red light marked its entrance.

From the opposite end of the thoroughfare a third figure loomed into sight.

One of the first two men whispered something in the ear of the other, and both slightly quickened their steps, so that they reached the portals of the Milano simultaneously with the man who was walking towards them.

The feeble light from the coloured lamp fell upon the face of the latter, as the two others parted as though to allow him to pass between them. It showed it to be parchment-like and wrinkled, with a curiously hooked nose, half-concealing the thin, grey lips.

There was a quick scuffle. The two men whose collars had been turned up, and who had slouched along, keeping their features concealed, had suddenly sprung into life.

They had made a quick grab at the centre figure, his hands were jerked up, and a clicking sound denoted that he was handcuffed.

"What the blazes does this mean?" the Hawk—for it was he—snarled blusteringly. "You fools, you shall pay for this!"

"Steady, James Elkington!" the thicker-set of the two men jerked gruffly. "Arrest you for theft of Prendergast pearls from house in Clapham last night. Warn you, anything you may say, taken down, used in evidence against you!"

"It's a lie!" the Hawk raved, struggling frantically. "I've been straight for months. I don't know what you're talking about! Let me go!"

"Unfortunately for you," the other man said, very coolly, "your mask slipped from your face, Mr. James Elkington, or the Hawk, as your associates call you. You see, I recognise you."

"Nelson Lee!" The Hawk gasped hoarsely. "I thought I'd outed you!"

"Why, no," Nelson Lee returned blandly. "A detective is a person who dies hard, you know. Can you manage him. Spearing?"

"Bet I can," Will Spearing grinned. "What do? Whistle for van?"

"Yes," Nelson Lee answered simply.

All the fight was gone out of the Hawk now. He stood inert in his captor's grasp, his head drooping, his eyes upon the ground.

Spearing whistled, long and softly, and presently the summons—for such it was—was answered by the rumbling of wheels.

A pantechnicon rumbled round the corner, looking innocent enough. The man on the driver's seat seemed half asleep. The van pulled up, and the driver slowly climbed from his seat.

"Ready, sir?" he asked. And now he spoke in a very different tone—his voice sharp and eager.

"Yes," Spearing agreed. "Let 'em out. When we go to door, rush in! Don't stop to talk about weather!"

"I should say not, sir," the driver chuckled, as he passed to the rear of the van and swung open the doors. "All serene!" he said quickly.

There was the tramp of feet. A dozen police and some half a dozen plain-clothes men emerged from the van, Nelson Lee's assistant at their head.

"You've got him, guv'nor," Nipper said, looking at the scowling Elkington. "Crumbs, but it's a night like this that pleases yours truly."

"Don't get into unnecessary danger, lad," Nelson Lee advised quietly. "You are over-excited. I couldn't afford to lose you, you know."

"That's all right, guv," Nipper said, his hand momentarily seeking that of his master and pressing it hard. "I'll look after myself, never fear!"

"Ready!" Will Spearing jerked. He was standing before the Milano's door, the police and detectives gathered behind him. He had turned the Hawk over to his men, and a couple of them were in charge of the cracksmen within the van.

The Scotland Yard man stepped sharply forward and rang the bell. Almost at once the door was cautiously opened, and the face of the attendant—Jake—peered into the darkness.

He saw that Spearing was a stranger, but he could not see the men in the background owing to the gloom.

"What do you want?" he asked surlily, attempting to almost close the door.

"Little chat with people inside!" Spearing snapped, his jaw going forward aggressively. And he put his shoulder against the door and heaved sharply, with the result that the attendant was sent reeling backwards into the hall.

With a rush, Spearing was in, his men at his back, accompanied by Nelson Lee and Nipper.

"Keep here!" Spearing ordered, as a couple of constables seized the attendant's arms. "Don't let him make a row—warn others."

Up the stairs the raiders crept, and almost in silence they reached the swing doors that opened into the club-room. At a word from Spearing they went through with a run, and the scene that followed beggars description.

Well-dressed men and women—the majority of them quite innocent of any offence save they were frequenting a gaming-house—found themselves under arrest. Some of the men, the fumes of the Milano's "China tea" in their brains, attempted to show resistance, but they were quickly overcome and forced down upon the settees, the threat of handcuffs causing them to quieten down.

Count Stefani appeared for an instant from one of the gambling-rooms. He went staggering back with a great cry as he saw the blue uniforms of the police, and rushed back the way he had come to warn his accomplices who were playing with two young officers at one of the little tables.

"The police!" he shouted wildly. "They've raided us! Save yourselves! The escape!"

Colonel Meyer, Fitzmaurice, and the Russian, Orloff, leapt to their feet, their faces white with fear. Their chairs went over with a crash, and one and all leapt towards the windows which opened out on to a balcony, whence ran an iron staircase to be used in case of emergency, such as a sudden outbreak of fire.

Swift of action though they were, they were too late. Nelson Lee, Spearing, and Nipper, accompanied by six of the constables, appeared upon the threshold of the room as the count wrenched open the windows.

There was a desperate hand-to-hand encounter then. Stefani drew a revolver, and it spat viciously as Nelson Lee flung himself forward. The detective ducked, however, in the nick of time, and the bullet sped harmlessly over his head.

The police, Spearing, and Nipper grappled with the colonel, Fitzmaurice, and the Russian, whilst the two officers, who had taken no hand in the fight, allowed themselves to be quietly taken charge of by a couple of constables.

The count had leapt out on to the balcony, and was making for the staircase; but Nelson Lee was at his heels. And now Nipper, having tripped the bulky Meyers up, and seen Spearing clap the handcuffs on his wrists, emerged at a run from the windows and rushed after his master.

At the staircase the count paused and fired again, but again Nelson Lee was lucky. In his excitement, the Italian's aim was untrue, and the bullet merely tore a piece of material from the detective's sleeve.

Next moment he was at the count, his fingers seeking to gain a hold upon his clothing. But the Italian, scarcely knowing what he was doing, sprang backwards, gave a cry of terror, and went headlong down the stairs.

Nelson Lee was after him in less time than it takes to write. But he need not have hurried, for he found Count Stefani lying at the foot of the narrow staircase, his head doubled up gruesomely beneath him, and instinctively the detective felt that he had cheated the law.

Nelson Lee knelt beside him and straightened his body, then he bent his head close to that of the Italian, his hand went out and whipped away the false beard and moustache that had concealed his features.

"Stefani!" Nipper, who had joined his master, cried in surprise.

Nelson Lee rose and reverently removed his hat.

"Yes; it is the count himself, Nipper," said he. "And it is the end. He has gone to his last account."

"Dead, sir!" the assistant gasped, in an awe-stricken voice.

"Yes," his master agreed. "His neck is broken. Death must have been instantaneous. It is for the best. All through his life he has been a menace

to society, and by his demise, a good, pure girl is freed from a hateful bondage! We have only to find the Prendergast pearls, and, so far as we are concerned, the case is ended.

Three months have elapsed since the great raid upon the Milano Club, and before we write "The End" it is necessary to allow the reader to peep into the drawing-room of Norman Warner's house upon a bright autumn afternoon.

The surgeons had said that for Cynthia to pass through the operation they had intended making and live would be miraculous. But the miracle had come to pass. The operation had proved successful, and now Cynthia, although she looks terribly pale and fragile, is upon the highroad to recovery.

Norman Warner's mother leaves the side of the couch upon which the girl is lying as the door opens, and the moneylender enters the room.

Warner looks contented and almost boyishly happy as he kneels beside the girl and takes her hand. That morning the Prendergast pearls had been redeemed by Sir Alec, whose interest in the shares of the Bolivia Silver Mining Co. have risen to a wonderful extent in value, enabling him to sell at a more than satisfactory profit.

The pearls, together with an enormous amount of other stolen property, were found in a cellar beneath the Milano club-rooms, so that, thanks to the efforts of Nelson Lee, Warner had been able to return the security to his client without his so much as dreaming that they had ever been out of his or his banker's hands.

"Cynthia"—Norman is looking into the girl's eyes, and his mother has tactfully found something to deeply interest her somewhere out on the drive—"I have come to remind you that you are free, darling," he says softly. "Dear heart, will you say the one word that will make me the happiest man on earth?"

Cynthia's long lashes are veiling her eyes; a flush of pink has crept into her wan cheeks.

"Can you marry me after what I have done? Can you link your life with mine knowing that I"—her voice breaks pathetically—"that I am a—a released convict?" she asks. "I have told you that I remember all since the death of—of my husband. You know that I took the impression of the key of your safe, and afterwards exchanged it for the bogus one that enabled the league to rob you."

Norman stopped her with a kiss.

"Forget the past—think only of the bright future that is dawning, sweetheart," Norman murmurs tenderly. "You have been but an innocent dupe in the hands of a bad man. What does it matter to me what has happened in the past? To me you will always be the dearest little woman in the world. Your answer, dear?"

Cynthia hides her face upon his shoulder and murmurs just one word—"Norman." But Warner, as his arms slide about her slender form, is content.

THE END.

# The Boys of Ravenswood College;

or, Dick Clare's Schooldays.

A New Story of School Life. By S. CLARKE HOOK.

Author of the famous Jack, Sam & Pete stories, appearing weekly in  
"The Marvel Library."

*Dick Clare, a rich youngster, joins Ravenswood College, and he soon makes his presence felt.*

*One day news comes to the school that Dick and his chum, Tom, have been drowned, but ultimately they turn up safe and sound.*

*Melby, one of the other boys, takes a violent dislike to Dick Clare, and is especially jealous because the Headmaster takes special notice of the new boy.*

*Some time later Melby's father turns up at the school and causes a great disturbance.*

*Dick, knowing Gowl to be in money difficulties, offers to give him £50 with which to clear himself. Dick invites Tom to spend his holiday at his house. (Now read on.)*

\* \* \*

"BEHAVE?" inquired Dick, landing his last egg in the bully's mouth as he opened it to gasp for breath. "Don't you like it? How were we to tell you didn't like it when you never told us? Ha, ha, ha! You are turning yellow with passion! But never mind, Hamer, there's a pump outside, and Jim will carry you out while I do the pumping. It will soon clean the egg off you."

"Now, look here, youngster, stop it!" panted Hamer. "I have no intention of hurting you."

"Jolly good of you! Thanks awfully! Have you had a pleasant journey? What? Not pleasant. Poor old idiot! Well, you won't get anything to eat here because we have finished the little lot. There was some dripping and butter, but I notice Tom has heaved those at Ander's head. I wouldn't be surprised if your parents slipper you for having got into that awful mess. You know, Hamer, they won't like buying you new clothes."

Hamer rose to his feet, muttering a few things as to what he would do, but as he did not do them no harm came of it.

Dick dodged out of the place and left Jim to finish the argument.

"Now, see here, young gents," exclaimed Jim. "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves behaving in this manner. You have damaged my carriage, and——"

"I'm downright glad!" panted Hamer. "I hope it will ruin you!"

"Do you, really? Well, it won't make any difference to me, and Master Dick can afford to buy as many carriages as he chooses to spoil. It ain't the



first one he's bust up, and I don't suppose it will be the last; but if it be longed to me I'd make you pay for it."

"Serve up some lunch, landlord," snarled Hamer, "and turn those blackguards out of the place."

"I'm sorry, young gent," said the landlord. "There's nothing in the house to eat. The charge for the damage you have done will be two pound four-and-twopence. Shall I give you a receipt for it?"

"I'll not pay you a penny!" declared Hamer.

"Sorry, sir, but I really can't afford to allow wilful damage to be done in my place without being paid for it. You attacked the young gents——"

"They attacked us first on the road."

"Well, I don't mind that, and I wouldn't have minded if you had returned the attack on the road, but you are not going to fight free in my show when there's a law in the land. Of course, Mr. Hamer, if you haven't got the money I can write to your father for it. I know his address, seeing he paid your last score here. I can easy explain to him exactly how the matter stands. You were the one to blame, 'cos you attacked the young gent first."

"Young gentleman!" hooted Hamer, as Dick reappeared. "Do you call that little reptile a young gentleman?"

"I do so. It's not the first time he has been here for a feed, and I trust it won't be the last. Never one word of complaint, and I'll warrant the cooking isn't anything like he gets it at home. Now, you've never yet, Mr. Hamer, but what you've complained of every blessed thing, and made me knock something off the bill."

"I insist on having something to eat. You are bound to serve travellers."

"Oh, am I! Very well, you won't get nothing here, because I haven't got it."

"I think you mean he will get nothing here, because you have got it, old chap," laughed Dick; "but it amounts to the same thing as far as Hamer is concerned. We've yassled up all the food, Hamer. You will have to go to the next stage, and you won't find that so jolly easy, because I have turned your horses out to grass, and I expect they will want some catching. Look here, landlord, you needn't write to his father. I expect he will get into enough bother over his damaged clothes. Tote up your bill and I will square it, then if Jim has had enough to eat——"

"He has so, Master Dick."

"Right you are. Then we will go on, and drop you at the station, Melby."

"I could come on to your place for the night, if you wish it," observed Melby. "You could telegraph to my parents, you know. They wouldn't mind. Neither would I."

"Rather a shame to deprive your mother of your company on the first day of the vacation. No, old chap, you had best get home, then you and Tom are coming later on in the holidays."

"But Tom is coming now, and I don't call that quite straight."

"Well, Tom's parents won't be home for a few days, and it would be lonely for him. My mother has invited him, and as he has accepted, he is bound to come whether he likes it or not. Oh, shut up, Hamer! You can't have any food. Don't be so beastly greedy. If you had behaved decently we would have invited you to join us."

"Do you think I would accept an invitation from a horrid little cad like you?"

"Don't know, but I expect you would; however, as you are never likely to get the invitation we won't argue the matter. Come on, old chaps! We will do the rest of the journey in peace, instead of in pieces."

Melby had another try to get an invitation, but it did not come off. They left him at the station, and then drove on to Dick Clare's beautiful home.

Tom had expected something grand, but nothing like he saw, and he felt rather nervous until Mrs. Clare took his hand, and smiled her greeting.

"I am so glad you have come, Tom," she said. "You see, Dick is rather lonely here."

"Then he wants a lot of pleasing, Mrs. Clare."

"He has no friends."

"What about the colonel?" laughed Tom.

"Oh, he is perfectly horrid!" said Mrs. Clare, smiling. "Of course, I know Dick is fond of pranks, but then boys ought to be, and one does not like to be too strict."

"I don't believe the doctor would consider you are, Mrs. Clare," said Tom. "But I've got some good news for you. Dick came out number one in the exam. Passed first of the lot of us."

"I am very glad. But come in, boys. You must be starving, and dinner is quite ready."

"Ha, ha, ha! Look at Tom's face, mother. The very word dinner frightens him: but we will tell you all about that. Ah, I'm glad to get home, and to see you once again, my dear mother, and I know Tom is pleased to see you too.

And that was a holiday that Tom was likely to remember.

THE END.

**NEXT WEEK:**

**"THE SECRET OF THE SWAMP."**

*Another grand, long complete tale of Nelson Lee and Nipper, Introducing The Black Wolf.*

**ORDER YOUR COPY NOW!**

NEXT WEEK'S

STUPENDOUS

ATTRACTION!

“The  
Secret of the Swamp”

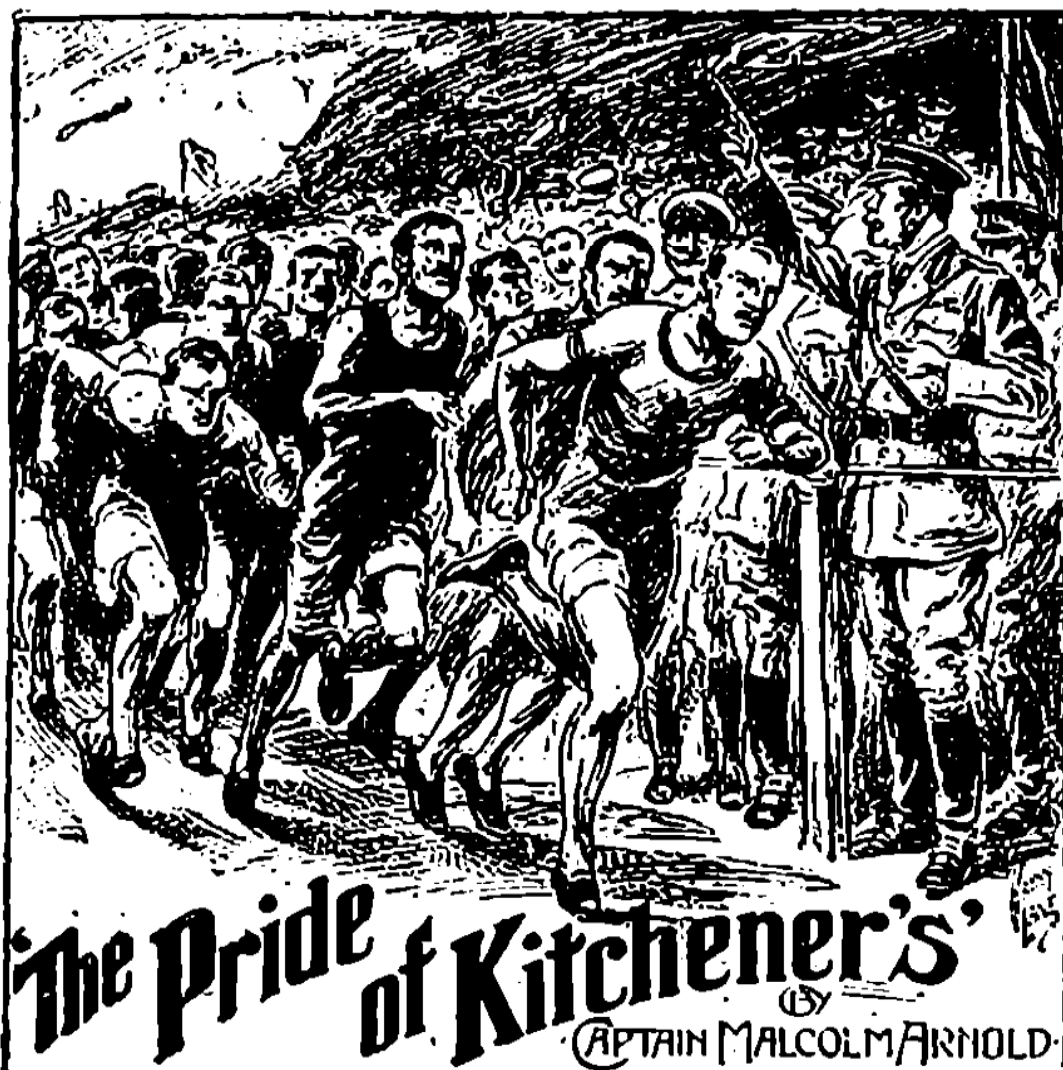
Another Enthralling Tale  
of

**THE BLACK WOLF.**

---

*Order Your Copy of the “Nelson  
Lee Library” TO-DAY!*

# SPORTSMEN!



Do Not Fail to Read This Wonderful  
 Story of the Lads in Khaki!

Just Starting in the

# BOYS' REALM

ONE PENNY - EVERY FRIDAY.