

NO. 37.—MAGNIFICENT DETECTIVE TALE.—10. *Week ending Feb. 19, 1916.*

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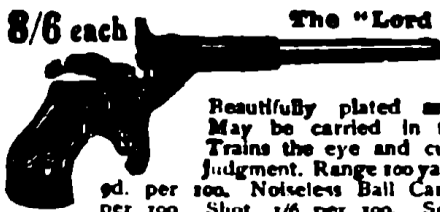


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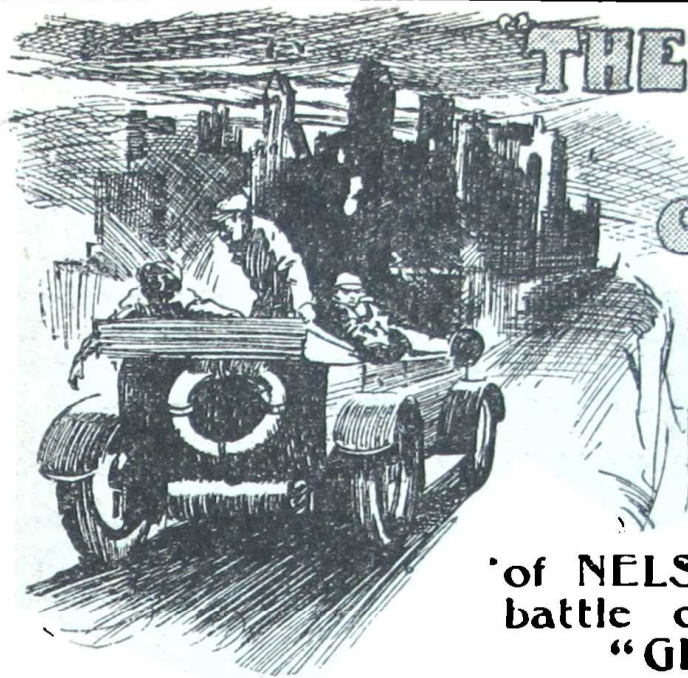
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CHAPTER I.

Mr. Malcolm Tressider, Multi-millionaire—A Proposal.

“YOU offer no objection, Mr. Lee?”

Nelson Lee shook his head, and smiled.

“My dear fellow, I have no wish to interfere with your pleasures in any way,” he said genially. “Why should I offer any objection? I know that I can rely on you to be discreet and cautious. You have always proved yourself to be commendably level-headed.”

Douglas Clifford laughed.

“I assure you to-night will be no exception to the rule,” he replied. “Lady Atherley’s ball is merely going to be a fashionable society affair, and but for the presence of one particular person at the function I wouldn’t care a jot about it. But—er— Well, you know all about it, Lee!”

The famous detective’s eyes twinkled.

“Quite so,” he smiled. “I sha’n’t express a wish that you will enjoy yourself because that goes without saying. I don’t suppose many of the gentlemen present at the ball will have the opportunity of dancing with Miss Vera Zingrave—and I expect many jealous glances will be cast upon your iron-grey hair. It will indeed, cause comment if you monopolise Miss Zingrave entirely.”

“I shall not do that,” replied Douglas Clifford. “Comment is just what I wish to avoid. You can rely on my discretion, Lee.”

“I am sure of it,” said Nelson Lee quietly. “But who will be there? Will Professor Zingrave himself be present?”

“Oh, no. In point of fact, I don’t think the League of the Green Triangle will be represented at all. By the way, what’s the next item on the programme?” went on Clifford curiously. “Have you struck any fresh trail?”

Nelson Lee lowered his eyelids a little and lolled back more comfortably in his easy chair. He and his visitor were in the great crime-investigator’s consulting-room at Gray’s Inn Road, and the time was early evening.

“No,” Nelson Lee exclaimed, “I have not struck any fresh trail, Clifford. The last member of the Governing Circle of the Green Triangle to go was Mr.

Austin Sheldon. As you will remember, Sheldon practically caused his own death during a struggle with me in the cellar of a ruined mosque in the native quarter of Port Said."

"Yes, that was a pretty exciting affair, by all that I heard," remarked Clifford, offering his companion a cigar. "By Jove, Lee, you do get into some queer holes! It is a wonder you ever got out of that mysterious Pyramid of Meyduraam alive!"

Nelson Lee nodded absently.

"It was, indeed," he agreed. "But that business is settled. And in spite of all my efforts—and yours—the League of the Green Triangle still flourishes. We have much work to do yet, Clifford—there are many dangers to be faced, and many exciting adventures to be undertaken before the accursed league is brought to its knees."

The detective suddenly sat up and clipped the end off the cigar he had accepted from his companion.

"But I don't want to spoil your evening's enjoyment," he said smilingly. "We will talk business some other time. If it will satisfy you, however, I will say this: I intend to continue my campaign against the Green Triangle with all the energy I possess. So far I have been successful all along the line; but the league is such a vast organisation that it has scarcely felt the effect of my efforts. Slowly, but surely, however, I mean to make Professor Cyrus Zingrave, the scoundrelly chief of the league, understand that his society of criminals is on the decline. It has all too long held its evil sway over our fair land."

"Who do you intend to deal with next?" asked Clifford.

"There are several members of the Governing Circle on my list for immediate attention," answered Nelson Lee carelessly. "At the moment I have not actually decided which gentleman shall receive my thoughtful care. To tell the truth, my dear fellow, I am waiting for an opportunity to present itself which will give me a chance of striking a swift and decisive blow."

Douglas Clifford nodded, and swung his leg as he sat upon the edge of the table. He was thinking of the campaign which he and Nelson Lee had opened against the greatest and most terrible criminal organisation in the world—the dreaded League of the Green Triangle.

Clifford was forced to admit to himself that the great detective had done by far the greater part of the work; but that was only natural. And the Green Triangle had already suffered keenly; many of its most important governing members had been brought to justice, and had been made to pay the penalty for their many crimes.

Years before Clifford had fallen foul of the Governing Circle, and of Professor Zingrave, the chief. And he had suffered cruel imprisonment and torture in consequence. But at last he had gained his freedom, and had proposed to Nelson Lee a great campaign against the league. That campaign had progressed with remarkable success—but the league was still practically as strong as ever.

Clifford had supplied the detective with information which laid bare to Nelson Lee the Green Triangle's most cherished secrets. Thus the famous criminologist had been in a position of great advantage. Scotland Yard and the police of the kingdom regarded the Green Triangle as a mysterious band of whom they could discover no trace. But Nelson Lee knew everything—and thus was on almost equal terms with his unscrupulous foes.

And Douglas Clifford, of course, had been forced to adopt a disguise. He wore his own beard and moustache, having allowed them to grow, but they and his hair were dyed an iron grey, and he looked a man of fifty—whereas he had only just turned twenty seven. He lived in a luxurious flat under the name of John Merriek, and not one member of the Green Triangle suspected that the elderly Mr. John Merriek was the man the league had attempted to murder not many months ago.

And now Clifford was off to Lady Atherley's ball. Lady Atherley was a noted society hostess, and the affair promised to be a gorgeous one. When Clifford left Nelson Lee's rooms he walked to his own flat in order to dress for the occasion. His thoughts were happy, and he was extremely light-hearted.

Not that he cared a rap for either Lady Atherley or the dance itself. No, it was the prospect of meeting a certain person at the ball which made his eyes sparkle with delightful anticipation, and which caused the blood to course warmly through his veins.

That person was none other than Vera Zingrave—the stepdaughter of Professor Zingrave, the famous scientist—and, in secret, the head of the Green Triangle. It was strange indeed that Clifford should be in love with the professor's stepdaughter. But it was nevertheless true; and Vera felt a very warm regard for her lover.

She was a delightful girl, as innocent as a babe regarding her stepfather's evil doings. She knew nothing of his connection with the Green Triangle.

But Clifford's secret was hers—he had confided with her, as was only natural. She was aware that both he and Nelson Lee were fighting the mysterious League of the Green Triangle with all their strength. But not a suspicion did she have that her stepfather was the actual ruling brain of the terrible society. Clifford had not told her that, for it was an extremely delicate revelation to make. But he was firmly resolved to reveal the dreadful secret to her—and without much further delay.

Clifford's love affairs were very difficult, for it was impossible for him to become openly engaged to Vera. His apparent age made this impossible. But Vera had made it clear that as soon as he was in a position to resume his normal character, she would be only too willing to accept his proposal. For she loved Clifford with as much fire and ardour as he loved her.

The young man had learned that she would attend Lady Atherley's ball, chaperoned by a dear old dame—Lady Dorothy Calton, whom Clifford had already met on two or three occasions. And he had therefore taken steps to gain an invitation for himself.

Arriving at his flat, he found that Foster, his valet, had prepared everything for him, and after an excellent dinner Clifford proceeded to dress.

Being alone, he had not troubled about dressing for dinner; besides, he wished to be absolutely spic and span. Although elderly in appearance, he nevertheless wished to look as well groomed as possible.

He taxied to Lady Atherley's mansion in Portland Square. He was in good time, for many of the guests had not arrived.

Everything was gloriously brilliant and gay. The evening dresses were wonders of charm and costliness. The ball was one of the events of the season, and all society was represented by the highest and noblest in the land.

Vera had not arrived, so Clifford lounged into the smoking-room for a cigar. He found many gentlemen already present. As he was entering he happened to glance behind him, and unwittingly came into collision with a big stoutish man who was on his way out.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Clifford politely.

"Clumsy fool!" muttered the other beneath his breath, and passed on without another word. Clifford coloured slightly, but then shrugged his shoulders and went into the smoking lounge. He had imagined the guests to be ladies and gentlemen all—but the man whom he had just encountered was obviously well outside the bounds of gentility.

As it happened, almost the first man he met inside the lounge was the Hon. Geoffrey Haswell, a rather elderly acquaintance of Clifford's, whom he had often met at his own club. They were not exactly friends, but had often chatted together.

"You here, Merrick?" exclaimed Haswell genially. "It's rather early yet, so I'm just having a quiet smoke."

"I came here with the same intention," replied Clifford. "By the way, do you know who that was who passed out just now—the man I accidentally bumped into at the door?"

"You mean the big, stoutish man?"

"Yes, who is he?"

Haswell smiled.

"Rather curious you shouldn't know," he said. "He's one of the richest men in the world—a multi-millionaire from South Africa. You're bound to have heard of him—Malcolm Tressider."

"By Jove, so that brute is Malcolm Tressider, the famous South African millionaire?" said Clifford thoughtfully. "Well, Haswell, he may be as rich as the Bank of England, but he's no gentleman."

"Most people find that out who come in contact with Tressider," chuckled Haswell. "I have had no actual experience myself, but I have heard quite a lot about the excellent Mr. Tressider. He's a man who sprang into prominence, apparently from nowhere, about five years ago. Since then he has literally forced himself upwards, and is now a most powerful man in the financial world—and will probably end up by becoming a baronet or a peer."

And the pair fell to chatting on other subjects.

Meanwhile the object of Haswell's remarks had entered the magnificent reception-room which adjoined the ball-room—where Lady Atherley was receiving the guests.

Mr. Malcolm Tressider was very soon in conversation with a group of distinguished ladies and gentlemen. He was received in society with open arms—for he was a multi-millionaire. That fact alone was quite sufficient to admit him to the most exclusive of society functions.

Tressider was big and fleshy, with a clean-shaven face, the skin of which was the reverse of clear, and decidedly coarse. His lips were coarse, too, and his eyes very prominent in spite of their smallness of size. Altogether he was by no means handsome, for he was the very embodiment of rich and blatant vulgarity.

But, again—his great wealth excused all these drawbacks.

Since Tressider had come into prominence he had had a hard fight upwards. Perhaps that was the cause of his rough manners and overbearing attitude. During the whole course of his career as a rich man he had exhibited tremendous power; his many great enterprises had been won by sheer brute force. His one outstanding characteristic, in fact, was a total disregard for those who came in contact with him. If he set his mind on a certain thing, that certain thing would be accomplished. No matter if a thousand people were ruined in the process, Tressider went his way relentlessly. Brute force—brute force—that had been his motto in all things.

As he stood there, chatting, several of the guests strolled away to greet friends or acquaintances. And the multi-millionaire was left talking to one man only—a prominent society physician.

The pair were merely chatting idly, and Tressider had his eyes upon the distinguished guests who were arriving. Suddenly his eyes became even more prominent, and decidedly more unpleasant to look upon.

Two women had just entered—or, rather, an elderly lady and a girl—and were now being received by the hostess. Tressider's eyes were upon the girl, and he could scarcely be blamed for the admiration which was expressed in them—although, to tell the truth, it was a kind of coarse admiration.

For the girl was strikingly beautiful. Attired in a ball dress that was a sheer vision in itself, her delightful figure was undoubtedly the loveliest in that whole throng of distinguished ladies. Her hair was dark chestnut, with exquisite wavelets

over her forehead, and fascinating curls round about her ears. And her face would have won admiration from the most indifferent of men. Her deep brown eyes were just wells of purity and laughing gaiety. Her dear little red lips were parted slightly, revealing a set of pearly white teeth which flashed as she talked. And her voice, reaching Tressider's ears, was sweetly musical.

The millionaire flushed a little, and he did not know exactly why. Feminine beauty did not usually affect him in the least. But this girl was so wondrously adorable that he could not help his pulse beating a trifle faster than usual.

"Can you tell me who that girl is?" he asked abruptly, turning to his companion.

"I was just looking at her," replied the physician. "She's splendid, Mr. Tressider, eh? Do I know her? I am pleased to say I have met her on several occasions, and her looks do not belie her nature. I don't think I have ever encountered such a sweet girl as Miss Vera Zingrave."

"Oh, Miss Zingrave?" said Tressider. "Perhaps she is a relation of the famous scientist of the same name?"

"She is a very near relation—Professor Zingrave's daughter, in fact," laughed the other—for it was not generally known that Vera was the professor's step-daughter. "It is rather curious, too, that such a beautiful girl is still unattached."

"She's not engaged, then?"

"No. Miss Zingrave must be particularly hard to please," said the physician, with a smile. "I'll warrant she has hundreds of admirers, and yet she cares not a snap of the fingers for any one of them."

Malcolm Tressider was thoughtful for a moment, and his powerful jaw twisted itself a trifle as it invariably did when his mind set itself to a fixed purpose.

"Could you manage to introduce me, doctor?" he asked quietly.

"Certainly, Mr. Tressider; certainly."

But it seemed rather a difficult matter to seize an opportunity for introducing Mr. Malcolm Tressider. Vera Zingrave was constantly the centre of a laughing group. Young aristocrats hovered round her like so many moths round a candle. But after a bit she managed to have quite a long conversation alone with a grey-boarded gentleman who was nobody in particular, and whose name was Mr. Merrick. Strangely enough, Vera seemed perfectly happy in the elderly gentleman's company—and Mr. Merrick, too, was beaming.

Douglas Clifford, in fact, was more than delighted to see the girl of his heart. The expression in Vera's eyes as she had taken his hand had clearly shown her true feelings towards him. And Clifford was proud, and wildly impotent. He knew that Vera would say the right word if only he were in a different position. But he was terribly hampered, and he would have to wait. But he would have given half his fortune—and that was vast—to have been able to pronounce her before all the world as his fiancée.

In all too short a time, it seemed to Clifford, the superb orchestra commenced playing, and the first dance was soon in full swing. And in that first dance Clifford and Vera were partners. The scene was magnificent in the extreme, and probably no other ball for months had been so gorgeous and spectacular. The soft electric lights overhead shed their radiance on the dancing throng. Diamonds and precious stones sparkled from every feminine neck.

Malcolm Tressider was dancing, and in spite of his bulk he proved himself to be extremely light on his feet. But he paid very little attention to his partner. His eyes, whenever possible, were directed towards Vera Zingrave.

Clifford noticed this—he could scarcely help noticing it—and he was by no means pleased. And, later on, he observed that Tressider was watching Vera constantly, and with an expression in his eyes which caused Clifford to frown uneasily.

At last, while Vera was sitting out during one of the dances, the opportunity for Malcolm Tressider to be introduced presented itself. For the sake of appearances

Clifford was dancing with another lady, for he had no wish to make himself conspicuous. And Vera was approached by Tressider and the physician. The introduction was not a pleasant one for the girl, for she took an instant dislike to the brutal-faced millionaire. In his own manner he made himself extremely agreeable, and finally succeeded in securing Vera for the next dance.

Clifford frowned more than ever at this, but he could do nothing, of course. He knew very well that Vera had been practically forced, and had not been able to refuse the dance. Tressider himself was pleased, and made no pretence of hiding it. He pressed his partner for other dances, but she protested that it was impossible. It soon became evident that Tressider was determined. He did not seem to care for anybody else in the great ball-room. His eyes were constantly fixed upon Vera, and she was uncomfortably conscious of it. She felt, in some vague way, that the millionaire intended making further overtures before the night was over. And the girl's intuition was perfectly correct.

In spite of the gaiety of the ball, in spite of her lover's presence, she was very ill at ease. She had a foreboding that something of an unpleasant nature was going to occur.

This strange foreboding notwithstanding, she was in no measure prepared for that which actually did occur. To escape from Tressider's unwelcome gaze she rose from the lounge on which she had been sitting, and slipped through some flimsy curtains into the beautiful, softly-lighted conservatory.

Here, among the palms and flowers, with the delightfully fresh scent of blossoms in the air, she sat and frowned to herself, wishing that Clifford was there with her. But a waltz was in progress, and Clifford was whirling round with a rather elderly spinster. Malcolm Tressider, Vera remembered with relief, was also dancing.

The conservatory was empty—at least, this portion of it was—and Vera decided to remain among the flowers until the waltz was ended. Then she would enter the ball-room again, and join Clifford. But, almost before the girl was fairly at rest on the soft settee, she heard footsteps, and the next moment Malcolm Tressider stood before her.

"Forgive me, Miss Zingrave, for intruding upon you," said the millionaire quickly. "I saw you enter, and I ventured to follow."

"Really, Mr. Tressider, you have acted rather strangely!" exclaimed Vera coldly, rising to her feet. "I must beg of you——"

"Be seated—please!" Tressider put in. "I have something of importance to say, Miss Zingrave, and I thought this opportunity——"

"Something of importance?" asked Vera, still with an icy chill in her voice. "You are almost a stranger to me, Mr. Tressider, and I cannot think of any subject on which you can wish to speak. Will you please be brief?"

Tressider seated himself beside her, and nodded slowly.

"Yes, I will be brief!" he exclaimed smoothly. "I observe, Miss Zingrave, that the third finger of your left hand is innocent of any ring. In short, you are not engaged to be married?"

"Mr. Tressider!"

"Please hear me out!" exclaimed the millionaire hastily.

"But this is outrageous!" cried Vera, her face flushing with anger. "It is no concern of yours whether I am engaged or not!"

"On the contrary, it concerns me very materially!"

"I—I fail to understand!"

"Then please let me be explicit," said Malcolm Tressider calmly. "Miss Zingrave, I am a man of prompt action and few words. I have snatched this opportunity for speaking to you alone because I have a very delicate question to ask. I want you to become my wife!"

CHAPTER II.

Tressider Perseveres—The Interview—Sold for Half-a-million.

FOR several moments after Malcolm Tressider had made that remarkable statement, Vera sat staring at him with a pale face, as though turned into a beautiful statue of marble. Then, quite suddenly, she lay back in the settee and a silvery laugh of pure amusement left her lips.

She knew positively that the millionaire was deadly serious in his proposal. But the very farcical absurdity of the thing was too much for the girl's sense of humour. She even forgot to be annoyed.

"If you are joking, Mr. Tressider, I cannot compliment you upon your choice of a jest," she exclaimed softly. "And if you are serious, you must allow me to be amused at your——"

"But I am serious," interjected the millionaire quickly; "and there is nothing to be amused about, either. I admit that I have been extremely hasty, but when I set my heart upon a certain thing I get to work without a second's loss of time."

"You flatter me by referring to me as a thing!" laughed Vera, mockingly.

"Oh, cannot you be serious?"

Vera laughed more heartily than ever.

"You ask me to be serious—on such a subject!" she exclaimed. "This absurdity has gone quite far enough, Mr. Tressider. If you are a gentleman you will leave me!"

Nine men out of ten would have accepted that dismissal without another word. But not so Malcolm Tressider. Throughout his career he had gained the object of his desires by sheer force. He had won his enterprises by brute strength. And now he fondly imagined that he could carry on his love-affairs by the same ballying methods.

It showed the extraordinary overbearing confidence of the man. He was such a power in the financial world that the mere lifting of his finger was sufficient to ruin a dozen men, if necessary. He was as chock-full of conceit and pride as a pomegranate is full of seeds. And he was fool enough to think that, because of his great wealth, any girl would be only too willing to fall at his feet.

"Perhaps I am not a gentleman," he said almost roughly, bending closer to Vera. "I know that I am something of a rough diamond, but I am rich, Miss Zingrave—I possess many millions of money."

"It would matter not if you owned the wealth of the whole world!" interrupted Vera, with a dangerous flash of her splendid eyes. "If you do not leave me at once, Mr. Tressider, you will compel me to leave the conservatory myself!"

The humour of the situation was becoming strained, now; it was getting beyond a joke. The coarseness of the man was revolting to Vera's delicate nature. His face, now bent so close to her, was puffy and brutal. The very idea of becoming Tressider's wife was so utterly impossible as to fill the girl with loathing. His wealth seemed only to accentuate his natural vulgarity.

He compressed his lips, and then rose to his feet.

"Very well," he said, gazing at Vera in a manner which caused her to drop her eyelids and flush slightly, "I will go, Miss Zingrave. But do not think you have seen the last of me. I fell in love with you the instant I saw you, and I am a man who makes up his mind swiftly." He bent closer, and his voice dropped. "I have made up my mind to win you—to possess you—and I have never yet been frustrated in any single one of my desires!"

He turned on his heel and left the conservatory.

Vera breathed quickly, and her snowy white neck heaved a trifle, causing the diamonds resting upon the soft skin to sparkle and scintillate like a thousand fires. She looked exquisitely beautiful at that moment, with her nostrils slightly dilated and her lips parted, revealing a glimpse of her white teeth.

But almost before she could collect her thoughts, a footstep sounded, and Douglas Clifford appeared. He seated himself beside her and took one of her little hands.

"My darling!" he breathed anxiously. "You seem agitated. What is it, Vera? That man—Tressider—passed me a second ago. Has he been pestering you?"

Vera pressed Clifford's hand affectionately.

"You'll be furious when you know," she said softly, "and then you'll smile, dear! Mr. Tressider has just asked me to become his wife."

"What?" cried Clifford, starting to his feet.

"Hush, Douglas! People will hear!" exclaimed Vera quickly. "It is nothing—nothing at all. I laughed in his face, of course, and dismissed him."

Clifford checked a desire to say something forcible.

"The infernal brute!" he said hotly. "Of all the cool nerve—Why, Tressider was only introduced to you an hour ago!"

"He told me he is a man who makes up his mind quickly," smiled Vera, allowing her lover to draw closer to her, and to place an arm round her slender young waist. "He declares that I have not seen the last of him."

"The scoundrel!" fumed Clifford.

"You mustn't worry yourself, sweetheart," whispered Vera gently. "You can trust me, can't you?"

He did not answer verbally.

"But this won't do," went on the girl, springing lightly from the settee. "Suppose just suppose somebody came along and saw us? We'll go back to the ball-room and enjoy ourselves. Mr. Tressider won't worry me at all."

And a few minutes later Vera was dancing again. But Clifford was uneasy and troubled. One fact caused him a certain degree of satisfaction—almost immediately after he and Vera emerged from the conservatory, Malcolm Tressider took his departure.

But, in spite of this, Clifford was very worried concerning Vera. He had a presentiment that Tressider would prove as good as his word—that Vera had by no means seen the last of him. A man who proposed to a girl an hour after being introduced was obviously a man who was very determined.

And the proof of this was not long in making itself apparent. The ball over, Vera was taken home by Lady Calton, and Clifford proceeded to his own flat, wondering how long it would be before Tressider would make another move.

He did not know it, but the very next morning, just before noon, the multi-millionaire presented himself at the door of Professor Cyrus Zingrave's mansion in Grosvenor Square. The professor happened to be in his library, and Tressider was at once shown into his presence. He introduced himself without loss of time.

"I have heard your name on many an occasion, Mr. Tressider," said Zingrave, in his musically quiet voice. "It gives me great pleasure to meet you now. I must confess, however, that I am at a loss regarding the nature of your business with me."

Tressider disregarded the easy chair which Zingrave indicated to him, and seated himself squarely upon a stiff leather-covered chair. Then, before replying, he thoughtfully shifted his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other, and took stock of his companion.

He was somewhat surprised in Professor Zingrave. He had expected to see a big, handsome man; but Zingrave was comparatively small, and certainly not handsome. But he was, nevertheless, decidedly distinguished-looking, and was very obviously possessed of massive brain power. His forehead was high and smooth, his silky black locks rather long and perfectly brushed. It added to his appearance, rather, that his collar and tie were somewhat untidy. Being a man of science, it would have seemed somewhat out-of-place had he been attired with the spruceness of a City business-man.

But he was Vera's father, and that was sufficient for Mr. Malcolm Tressider.

"I have called upon a rather curious errand," said the millionaire, with the cigar still in the corner of his mouth. "In short, professor, I had the extreme pleasure of meeting your daughter at Lady Atherley's ball last night."

Zingrave looked hard at his visitor, who had paused.

"Pray proceed," he said shortly.

"Well, I have come to you because I have decided to make your daughter my wife," exclaimed Tressider deliberately, and with amazing assurance.

Zingrave did not flicker an eyelid.

"That is extremely interesting," he said calmly, but in an icy voice. "You have decided to make my daughter Vera your wife?"

"You've got it exactly," replied Tressider, with ease.

"Your decision, I presume, is final?" asked the professor.

Something in his tone caused Tressider to remove the cigar from his mouth, and to twist his jaw determinedly.

"I believe I detected a certain note of sarcasm in your voice, professor," said the millionaire quietly. "I'm the last man in the world to look for trouble, and I hope we shall come to a satisfactory arrangement without any difficulty. I always speak very plainly and to the point; it is the best way in the long run. Beating about the bush is not in my line. I want your daughter for my wife!"

"And you mean to have her?"

"Yes, that is my fixed intention!"

For a moment the two men looked at one another in silence; then Professor Zingrave rose to his feet and fixed his gaze fully upon Tressider's eyes, and for the first time for many a year Tressider felt a qualm of uneasiness. He had been so long accustomed to bullying and browbeating others that it was a novel experience for him to feel nervous, more especially under the gaze of a man little over half his own size.

"I, too, am a man who believes in speaking plainly, Mr. Tressider," said Zingrave, in the most gentle tone imaginable. "Allow me to tell you that you have approached me in a spirit which has by no means pleased me. You met my daughter last night, and you come to me this morning stating that you positively mean to make Vera your wife. Your assurance and audacity, my dear sir, are astounding. It is an old proverb, but a true one—it is never wise to count your chickens before they're hatched. It was extremely unwise of you to settle this thing in your own mind before consulting me!"

"But I am consulting you at the present moment."

"Indeed? It seems to me that this interview cannot be described as a consultation," went on Zingrave smoothly. "On the contrary, you have definitely stated that you mean to marry my daughter. Well, not to be outdone, I will also make a definite statement. *You shall not marry my daughter!*"

"But——"

"I think I made myself clear," cut in the professor curtly. "These tactics of yours may be very effective in your own particular circles, but in this matter they carry no weight whatever. Moreover, I am not in the habit of being bullied in my own house. You don't ask for Vera's hand; you don't propose that you should pay her attentions. On the contrary, you come here and state that she shall become your wife. Your great wealth, apparently, has caused you to imagine that you are a god, and that your every command shall be obeyed. Let me tell you, sir, I don't care a snap of my fingers for your wealth. I wish you a very good morning, Mr. Tressider!"

And Zingrave reached over to press the bell.

"Hold a minute!" ejaculated Tressider hastily. "I apologise, professor!"

Zingrave stayed his hand and faced his visitor again. Malcolm Tressider jammed the cigar into his mouth again, shifted it about jerkily for a few seconds, grew very red in the face, and finally calmed down.

His host's short, but caustic, lecture had sunken into his inflated brain. He realised that he would have to change his attitude.

"Perhaps I went the wrong way to work, and if so, I'm sorry!" he growled reluctantly. "If you will allow me——"

"I fear you are wasting my time and your own."

Tressider shifted in his chair impatiently.

"Your daughter is a beautiful girl, professor," he went on. "I've seen a good many women, beautiful and otherwise, but your daughter puts them all in the shade. She would make me a wife I could be proud of, and I am in a position to lavish every worldly luxury upon her. She will have motor-cars, mansions, her own private yacht——"

"Really, Mr. Tressider, this is all very absurd!" interjected Zingrave. "In any case, I could not possibly think of your proposal at such short notice!"

"Delay—delay!" snapped Tressider testily. "Everybody in this country wants waking up! I'm a man of brisk action. I've already made up my mind, so what's the use of delay? I want to get the business through!"

Zingrave regarded his visitor somewhat curiously. It was novel for a man to talk of marriage as a business, and to spring himself upon a perfect stranger and demand his daughter's hand within the hour, almost. Tressider was evidently so consumed with his own importance that his perspective of everything was twisted and distorted.

"The business, as you call it, will never be transacted," said Professor Zingrave calmly. "I have no plans regarding Vera, I'll admit, and she is not engaged; but you appear to think your millions will influence me."

"And they will influence you!" interrupted Tressider, leaning forward and patting the table forcibly. "Look here, perhaps this will prove my determination. On the day Vera becomes my wife——"

"That day will never be!"

"Give me a chance—hear me out! On the day Vera becomes my wife, I will hand you a quarter of a million—no, I'll make it more! I'll make it three hundred and fifty thousand pounds. This sum shall become yours, professor—your own. And I will make over half my fortune—and that is twenty times the amount I just named—to my bride. Money talks, sir, talks a heap better than I can talk!"

Tressider was somewhat excited now. He had made up his mind to possess Vera, and he swore to himself that nothing should stand in the way of the consummation of his desire. Once launched on an enterprise, he never admitted defeat. If it cost him a million of money, he would emerge the winner. It had been his way during the whole course of his career.

"Three hundred and fifty thousand," he went on, without a pause. "It's a great fortune in itself, professor, and it's yours—yours upon the day Vera becomes my wife. I'm not boasting; I'm not making wild statements. I'll go straight from this house to a solicitor, and the whole transaction will be made perfectly legal and binding. What do you say now? What of my millions? Will they not influence you in my favour?"

Professor Zingrave was upon his feet. His expression was one of anger, and he again reached for the bell. But he paused in the act of pressing the ivory button and seated himself again. A sudden trend of thought had found a place in his remarkable brain.

"Wait!" he said sharply, as Tressider was about to speak again. "Don't talk, man; I wish to think! I admit your proposal has impressed me at last, but I must consider."

Tressider smiled triumphantly. Zingrave was aware of that smile, but he did not heed it. He was thinking deeply, and thinking quickly.

The millionaire's amazing proposition had, indeed, impressed him.

Tressider was a man of forty-five, at least. He was coarse and vulgar, but he

was fabulously rich. Rumour had it that he was worth ten millions sterling, and rumour in this case was probably correct.

Would it not be wise to consider his suggestion? Vera herself, the girl's own inclinations and wishes, did not enter into his calculation. He was thinking of himself, and of the League of the Green Triangle.

At first Zingrave had been disposed to treat Tressider's proposal with contempt, but three hundred and fifty thousand was a vast sum. It would swell the league's coffers to such an extent that several big undertakings Zingrave had in mind could be put into operation—undertakings that required vast capital.

It was obvious that Tressider meant all he said, and his wealth was such that he could afford to give the sum without being affected in the least.

And what of Vera?

To tell the truth, Zingrave had thought a good deal of his stepdaughter recently. He knew that she would want to marry somebody sooner or later, and Zingrave had always looked upon that day with a certain feeling of apprehension. Vera might wish to marry a man who would prove awkward in the future—a man who would display an interest in her stepfather, and would make himself a peril to the league.

The problem of Vera, in fact, had been a worrying one. Quite suddenly it struck Zingrave that here was an opportunity of settling the matter once and for all.

Malcolm Tressider's proposal was a way out of the difficulty. Vera would be married to a rich man, and would be taken to far-off South Africa. Every luxury would be lavished upon her; she would, at least, be well-cared for. Moreover, Zingrave himself would profit very considerably.

Vera would thus be married off to a man who would leave England, and would take his bride with him. The professor had always been somewhat hampered by the presence of his daughter constantly by his side.

Yes, upon the whole, it would be a wise action to comply with Tressider's suggestion. If Vera protested—and Zingrave feared that she would—force would have to be imposed. But, of course, nothing could be done in a hurry. The whole thing would have to be made absolutely legal.

Zingrave paced up and down for a few minutes, and then faced his visitor.

"I am inclined to meet you in this matter, Mr. Tressider," he said smoothly. "No, please don't gloat. You have influenced me by your offer, I'll admit, but it will not please me if you adopt a triumphant attitude."

"I want your daughter," said Tressider bluntly. "I'm only too pleased to have won you over to my way of thinking. Are there any questions you would like to ask?"

"Several. To begin with, after you are married, what will your intentions be?"

Tressider thoughtfully selected another cigar from his gold case.

"Well, at the present moment, I am making negotiations for the purchase of a steam yacht," he said. "A honeymoon tour round the world would be rather interesting, and it would take fully a year. After that I shall take my bride to South Africa, where a magnificent mansion is at present being erected. South Africa, professor, will be my permanent place of abode."

Zingrave nodded.

"You mentioned a certain sum a few minutes ago," he said quietly. "It was a princely sum, but the amount was not even. It would be far better for us to settle upon a round sum before proceeding further. Shall we say five hundred thousand?"

"That is a big increase," remarked Tressider.

"Nevertheless, if you do not agree, I do not think we can come to terms——"

Tressider laughed roughly.

"Oh, it doesn't matter a jot to me," he said, with a wave of his fat hand, as though the sum mentioned was a mere trifle. Half a million it shall be. But there

must be no alteration ; if we can settle this thing now, professor, it must go through right to the end. Whatever happens, your daughter must become mine."

"We will talk," said Zingrave softly. "We will go into details, Mr. Tressider. My daughter may possibly raise objections, but it will make no difference ultimately. She will be forced to obey my commands."

And then the two men went into a fairly long discussion. At the expiration of an hour, Malcolm Tressider rose to his feet, and his face was flushed, and his eyes gleaming with triumphant satisfaction. He did not love Vera in the true sense of the word—such a man was scarcely capable of love. But she would make him a wife who he could take into the most noble houses. And she, being gentle and beautiful, would compensate for his roughness and vulgarity. He was only too well aware that he was only tolerated in famous houses because of his wealth. To have Vera as a wife would make all the difference in the world ; his social status would be rendered much higher.

And so the transaction was completed.

Vera Zingrave had been sold by her scoundrelly stepfather for half a million sterling.

CHAPTER III.

Vera's Alarm—She Informs Clifford—Nelson Lee Gets to Work.

AFTER Malcolm Tressider had gone, Professor Zingrave sat in his library for some considerable time thinking deeply.

The whole disgraceful "business" was settled except for the purely legal points. And these were being attended to at once. Zingrave felt that there was trouble ahead. He was practically certain that Vera would not agree to become Tressider's wife. But, objections or no objections, she would have to obey. The programme would be carried out at all costs.

Half a million was at stake, and half a million was a stupendous sum ; and even Zingrave, in his position as Chief of the League of the Green Triangle, had never dealt in such a huge amount of money before.

But although it seemed vast to him, Malcolm Tressider was only too willing to give it in order to gain his object. His fortune was so tremendous, that he would probably never feel the effects of the loss.

Before long Zingrave rang the bell, and ordered the man-servant who appeared to inform Miss Vera that her presence was required in the library. And shortly afterwards Vera appeared, looking simply delightful in a neat morning frock.

"What is it, father ?" she asked smilingly, as she paused just inside the room.

"Close the door, Vera, and sit down."

She did so wonderingly, noting that her stepfather appeared unusually grave. His attitude seemed to affect her, for she, too, lost her smile, and had a dim presentiment that something unpleasant was in the air.

"Last night, Vera, you attended Lady Atherley's ball," began Zingrave. "While there, you met a gentleman named Mr. Malcolm Tressider——"

"No, father, you are wrong. Mr. Tressider is no gentleman."

"My dear child, do not come to hasty conclusions. Mr. Tressider has visited me this morning, and I have found him to be a true gentleman in every sense of the word. He may be a trifle uncouth, but he is a good man—and a very rich man."

Vera looked uneasy.

"But what has Mr. Tressider to do with me ?" she asked quickly.

"Nothing, at the present moment," replied her stepfather. "But before many weeks have passed, I hope he will be very much to you indeed. Vera, you have sometimes expressed the wish that you are always desirous of respecting my——"

"What do you mean, father ?" Vera cut in, breathing rapidly.

"I want you to marry Mr. Tressider," said the professor smoothly. "No, let me

finish. Mr. Tressider is a millionaire, and he will make you an excellent husband in every way. I understand he proposed to you last night, and you refused him. I am not surprised, for he went the wrong way to work. But when he comes to you again, Vera, you must not refuse him."

Vera had gone deathly pale, but she was quite composed.

"Father, you are joking with me!" she said huskily.

"I am not joking. It is my wish that you should marry Malcolm Tressider!"

The girl choked back a furious outburst, and forced herself to be calm. But her eyes flashed with anger and determination. She was strong-willed, and was not the sort of girl to knuckle under. And this attitude of her stepfather's almost took her breath away. She would never have believed that he would consent to her marriage with a brute of a man such as Tressider.

Yet he was ordering her to obey his commands.

"I will never marry Mr. Tressider!" she said, with forced calmness. "You must be mad, father! I—I cannot understand you——"

Zingrave rose, and crossed to her side.

"Put aside your foolish prejudices!" he exclaimed. "Tressider is a good man, and I would not dream of suggesting this marriage unless I was convinced of his honour. I expected you to be a little upset, but you will get over it, my dear child."

"I will never marry Mr. Tressider!" repeated Vera firmly.

Her voice was icy, and her face as pale as chalk. At that very second she was thinking of Douglas Clifford. She knew that she could not reveal her feelings towards Clifford to her father. Under the circumstances it was impossible to do so. But she realised now, all in a second, how much she loved Clifford.

The idea of marrying Tressider was absurd, revolting. Not for all the money in the world would she consent!

Zingrave set his lips tightly, and faced Vera. His fears had not been ill-founded. And he realised that the girl would prove even more obdurate than he had anticipated. But he swore to himself that she would be reduced to subjection. Hitherto he had been kind and considerate to his stepdaughter. But now—well, now her refusal or acceptance of Malcolm Tressider involved half a million of money. And he steeled his naturally hard heart, and knew that harshness was required.

"I have told you my wishes," he said grimly, staring straight at her with his strange, piercing eyes. "You will obey me, Vera! It is my decree——"

She sprang to her feet.

"Your decree!" she cried passionately. "Are we living in the Middle Ages, that you should speak so? Have I no say in the matter? Am I to marry the first man you choose for me? Am I a slave to obey your bidding——"

"Quiet, child!" said Zingrave sternly. "This is not like you, Vera, to indulge in outbursts of temper. Listen to me quietly. Mr. Tressider has been to me this morning, and has asked me for your hand. I have consented, and you will marry him in due course. There is no need for hurry, and in a month or two——"

Vera laughed strainedly.

"Never!" she said. "Never! I loathe the very sight of the man! In fifty years I could not feel any different. I am amazed that you should wish this awful thing. I would rather marry the first beggar in the street than Malcolm Tressider! I would rather die as I now stand!"

Her eyes flashed with passion, and her breast heaved so much, that she was forced to place a hand to her neck to control herself. And as Zingrave looked at her, he was convinced of one thing.

He knew Vera, and he knew that she was possessed of a strong will. She spoke with fierce determination, and he realised that a year of argument would make no alteration. It would be better, perhaps, to seemingly accept her decision.

With a soft, musical laugh, he patted her gently upon the shoulder.

"Do not upset yourself, my little girl," he said softly. "I will see Tressider

again, and will tell him that the marriage is impossible. I thought you would be reasonable, but as you are not, there is no other course open to me. Perhaps, in a few weeks' time, you will think differently. I shall make a point of inviting Tressider here frequently, and you may grow to like——"

Vera opened her mouth to speak, but the words refused to come, and her lower lip trembled with emotion. Her lovely eyes, too, were becoming moist, and she knew that she would give way if she remained in the library another moment. So, with a choking little sob, she walked quickly from the room, and closed the door quietly.

Professor Zingrave snapped his fingers, and sat down.

"She is firm!" he muttered angrily. "I feared that this would happen. And I know the girl as only a life-long guardian can know her. She will never change her mind; she will remain obdurate. But the marriage shall take place! I swear it shall! It is the safest and best course for all concerned. Married to Tressider, she will be in a queen's position, and will be far from England. I shall be free to——"

He brought his fist down upon the table forcibly.

"The only way is by force!" he murmured, his eyes gleaming dangerously behind his glasses. "Force! She is my stepdaughter—— But that is of no account. The thing can be accomplished without a hair of her head being harmed. Drastic measures are required, and drastic measures shall be adopted!"

Meanwhile, Vera had gone straight to her room. But she did not remain there long, for presently she dressed and left the house. Her eyes were dry, but they expressed terrible anxiety and pain.

She went straight to a post-office, and dispatched a short telegram. Half an hour later, as she was sitting in a private corner in a fashionable restaurant, Douglas Clifford strolled in, raised his hat to her, and took a seat by her side. Neither of them wished any chance watcher to guess that the restaurant was a rendezvous.

"Your telegram came just as I was on the point of going out," said Clifford softly. "What is it, Vera darling? Something has happened—I can see it by your eyes. You must tell me."

"That is why I sent for you," replied Vera, smilingly happily as she looked into his face; then her expression changed. "I am worried, my sweetheart. Father has exploded a bombshell upon me this morning, and I am nearly distracted!"

And then, in quiet even tones, she told Clifford all. He listened with a grim, set face, and with his lips tightly closed. When Vera had done he nodded slowly.

"I cannot understand it," he said. "The professor's wish is amazing, for Tressider is obviously a brute and a cad. But I am worried for you, Vera. Your stepfather is a strange man with extraordinary will-power. I am afraid he will talk to you, and argue with you——"

She looked at him reproachfully.

"Do you not trust me, Douglas?" she asked tenderly. "All the talking, and all the argument in the world will make no difference. I will never marry Malcolm Tressider! I care too much for you, dearest, to even dream of such a thing!"

"By Jove, you dear little girl!"

Clifford glared round him rather unreasonably. But, just at that particular moment, he would have preferred to be alone with Vera. A restaurant certainly has many disadvantages on certain occasions.

But when they parted, Clifford walked away with a worried frown. He had seen Vera into a taxi, and knew that she was relieved in mind. Having unburdened herself to him she felt more contented. But he was uneasy and worried.

He, too, wished to unburden himself. And he instantly thought of Nelson Lee. Clifford was a man of action, and he had no sooner thought of Nelson Lee than he hailed a taxi, and set off for Gray's Inn Road.

The famous detective was at home. He was seated in his consulting-room with Nipper, his trusted young assistant, and the pair were discussing a plan of campaign which was connected with the Green Triangle.

Clifford lost no time. He told Nelson Lee exactly what had happened, and the detective listened in silence to the end.

"What do you think of it, Lee?" asked Clifford, in conclusion. "Is there any necessity to worry? Or do you think Zingrave will drop his mad idea, seeing that Vera is so determined?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I don't wish to alarm you, my dear fellow, but there is every cause for us to be very concerned," he exclaimed quietly. "Professor Zingrave is a dangerous man, and Vera's refusal to marry Tressider will carry no weight with him. There is much more in this business than you seem to imagine."

"Heavens!" ejaculated the other. "What do you suspect, Lee?"

"To begin with, do you know Tressider's reputation?"

"He is a brute and a conceited cad, at all events."

"Those qualities are merely minor defects," said Nelson Lee calmly. "Malcolm Tressider is a millionaire from South Africa, and he made his vast fortune mainly by fraud and criminal dealings. In spite of the fact that he has always kept himself within the law, he is nevertheless a rogue of the first water."

"Good heavens, you—you don't mean to suggest he's a member of the Green

"Dear me, no! He probably knows nothing of the Green Triangle, and you may be sure Zingrave had revealed nothing to him," went on the detective. "But there is some deep game afoot, Clifford—some dastardly scoundrelism, and Vera is being drawn into it."

Clifford clenched his fists convulsively.

"But what," he asked between his teeth—"what is the scheme, Lee?"

"I do not know—but I can guess."

"What do you mean?"

"Many things. Tressider is a millionaire many times over. He meets Vera Zingrave, and decides to have her for his wife. He knows that her father will probably refuse him, and so he decides to make it worth the professor's while to give his consent. It is my opinion, Clifford, that Tressider has offered Zingrave a vast sum—probably a quarter of a million—if he gets the girl in return."

Clifford gasped.

"But this—this is awful!" he exclaimed thickly. "Even Zingrave, scoundrel though he is, would not sell Vera for money. The idea is revolting!"

"It's awful!" put in Nipper, from the fireplace.

"I agree with the pair of you," said Nelson Lee. "But everything points to the facts being as I have outlined. Tressider is rich, and Zingrave's real interest in life is centred in the League of the Green Triangle. He has agreed to sell Vera for a sum of money—in his heart I'll warrant he cares not a rap for the girl. And there is another point, Clifford. Tressider comes from South Africa, and will presumably go back to South Africa after his marriage. Thus Vera will be taken out of the country, and Zingrave will be free to continue his nefarious work uninterrupted."

"But why is there cause for concern?" asked Clifford keenly.

"Because Zingrave is not the man to take 'no' for an answer," replied the detective. "Vera has refused to have anything to do with Tressider. But if I know anything of the professor, he will not let the matter drop. He will bring pressure to bear on Vera, and will force her against her will."

Clifford was excitedly alarmed.

"But—but she is strong minded——"

"That makes no difference. Zingrave will probably use force."

"Force! Then—then Vera is in danger?"

"That is what I believe," said Nelson Lee. "Of course, I may be a little wrong in my surmises, but I do not believe so. After all, I have only outlined that which is practically obvious. If only for your sake, Clifford, we must not let this monstrous thing go on. We must not allow Vera to be sold to a brutal scoundrel like Tressider."

"I do not see what we can do," Clifford said helplessly.

"Neither do I at the moment. We can only await developments. But, somehow, I have an idea that developments will not be long in making themselves apparent. Tressider only met Vera last night, so he is evidently a man of brisk action. He will not waste much time now. But there is one thing we can do, and that shall be done at once. There is work for Nipper here."

Nipper looked up eagerly.

"Hallo! What do I do, guv'nor?" he asked.

"You will keep a constant watch upon Professor Zingrave's house in Grosvenor Square," replied his master grimly. "Whenever Miss Zingrave ventures out you will follow her as a kind of bodyguard, and see that she comes to no harm. I myself will relieve you at times. I do not intend to spy upon Miss Zingrave in any way, but to have help near at hand in case of necessity. Possibly Nipper's efforts will be in vain, but it is always wise to take precaution."

And so Nelson Lee embarked upon a case, vaguely uncertain at the time, which was to lead to many exciting adventures before a week had passed.

CHAPTER IV.

Nipper Finds Something to Do—On the Track—The House on the Cliffs.

NIPPER was on the watch in Grosvenor Square. This was, in fact, the second day, and Nipper was rather inclined to be bored. The previous day he had followed Vera on several occasions, but her journeys had only been to various shops, the houses of friends, and such like. And to-day had been a repetition of yesterday, except that Vera had only been out on two occasions.

The time was now early evening, and the darkness was gathering rapidly. Vera had not been seen by Nipper since the morning, and he was anxious to be relieved; for certain sensations within him made it clear that he required his tea, and it would be no mean tea, either, when it came to it.

Nipper was just deciding what he would have for the first course when his attention became distracted to a taxicab. An irate old gentleman was demanding it for hire, but the driver persistently refused the fare.

"Queer," muttered Nipper, frowning. "That's about the tenth fare that cabby has refused in a couple of hours. And what the deuce has he stuck there for, in one position, all the blessed afternoon?"

Nipper had been puzzled for some little time. Early in the afternoon the taxicab had driven up, empty, and had taken its stand against the curb not far from where Nipper was standing—some little distance from Zingrave's mansion.

And the taxicab had remained there for three or four hours, its driver lolling in his seat reading and smoking. Many people had required the cab, but they had all received the answer that it was engaged. The little flag being down, it was not possible to argue, for the lowered flag denoted that the vehicle was not for hire.

All the same, it was a bit curious. Nipper, having been on the watch the whole afternoon, could not fail to be struck by the fact. Nobody else would notice anything curious, for there was nothing remarkable in a taxicab waiting outside a house.

"If that giddy motor's been ticking away all this time somebody will have a

pretty penny to pay," muttered Nipper. "Oh, well it's none of my business, although it is a bit queer."

The lad certainly never suspected anything sinister in the taxicab's presence in Grosvenor Square. The thing was so open and straightforward that it did not seem possible that any villainy was afoot. There was no reason why Nipper should suspect anything—at least, there had been no reason so far.

But a change was soon to occur.

Nipper had the corner of his eye upon the gate of Professor Zingrave's house. And now, while he was still thinking of the taxicab, the gate swung open, and a slim, girlish form appeared. Nipper's heart sank, for he had hoped that he would be relieved before having to do further work.

For he knew that the form was that of Vera Zingrave. It was his duty to follow her, and see that she came to no harm, and there was no telling when he would be able to get free. However, Nipper was not the lad to grumble, and he resigned himself.

But as he was about to move forward in order to keep Vera in view, he heard the throb of an engine, and the taxicab slowly passed him so that it would approach Vera. Nipper noticed that the little flag was now up, and he was instantly filled with vague suspicions. And these suspicions lost their vagueness a moment later.

They became definite and acute.

The taxicab crawled past the near-side pavement, along which Vera was walking. And the driver leaned over towards her.

"Keb, miss?" he inquired briskly. "Keb, miss?"

Vera nodded her head, and the taxi came smartly to a stop against the kerb. Nipper watched with his heart beating a fierce tattoo against his ribs. What did it mean? Something definite was happening at last, he knew.

The cab had been waiting there for one reason—to approach Vera as soon as she left the house, and to carry her off somewhere. It was obvious that this was a carefully planned affair. And Nipper, knowing all he did, was filled with excitement and alarm.

"It's fishy," he muttered—"it's thundering fishy! There might be a man in that taxi, ready to overpower Miss Vera as soon as she entered; or there may be a drug, or some other——"

He paused, and looked round him helplessly.

The taxi was even at that second moving off. Vera was inside it, and Nipper was certain that she had walked into a trap. In some vague way this was a scheme of Zingrave's to gain his object. Nipper knew that he was not mistaken.

But what should he do? How could he follow? He was on foot, and he knew that running after the taxi would be useless—running after it, that is, in the hope of finding another taxi close by.

Besides, such a thing would have been conspicuous, and he did not want to mix a cabby in the business. He gazed round him desperately.

"By jimmy!" he muttered.

As he looked from the taxi—which was now gathering speed—to the other side of the road, he observed a tradesman's bicycle propped against the kerb. Its owner had just entered a neighbouring gateway.

Nipper made up his mind in a second.

This was no time for delay!

He dashed across the road, grasped the bicycle, and swung himself into the saddle. Then he started pedalling away for all he was worth. He half expected to hear shouts of indignation and anger behind him, but none came.

The thing had been done so quickly that the bicycle's owner probably knew nothing about it. And the few people who were in the square certainly did not take any interest in the doings of a shabbily-dressed boy.

Nipper was rather surprised at his own cool nerve. But it was done now, and he

was extremely elated. If the whole business proved to be nothing at all he would have done no harm.

On the other hand, if his suspicions turned out to be correct, then he would probably discover much which would be of great use.

It was not difficult for him to catch up with the taxi, for it was travelling comparatively slowly, owing to the traffic. He soon found that it was making for Brompton Road. At last it reached Fulham Road, and speeded up somewhat.

"Looks as if the blessed thing's going to Putney," muttered Nipper. "My hat, what a rotten old gigger this is! It wants oiling in every joint!"

The bicycle was certainly one that left much to be desired. But it still kept going, and that was the main thing. By pedalling hard Nipper managed to keep up with his quarry, but it was an effort. He realised that if the chase proved to be a long one he would have to drop out.

In the traffic it was quite easy to keep up with the taxi; but once quiet roads were reached it was all he could do. And, later on, should the taxi make for the open country, it would be a sheer physical impossibility for Nipper to keep the pace up.

Fulham was reached at last, and here Nipper lost sight of the taxi ahead, for it had been travelling pretty fast since passing through Walham Green. But he breathed with relief some little time later as he again saw the taxi. It had been hung up by some heavy furniture vans which were travelling at a crawl. This had necessitated the taxi slowing to a walking pace, and it enabled Nipper to catch up.

Over Putney Bridge and along Putney High Street the cab proceeded. By this time Nipper was practically sure that something sinister was afoot. Vera would never have travelled all this way of her own accord.

"I can't keep it up much longer!" panted Nipper desperately. "Oh, rats! There's a rotten hill now!"

For the taxi was making its way straight up Putney Hill. It was a long weary climb, but fortunately for Nipper a commercial motor-van was ascending the hill at the same time, and at about the same pace as the taxi, some twenty yards behind.

Nipper gave a spurt as it neared him, and clung on to the rear part of it. Now, free wheeling, he was enabled to take a breathing spell.

"I should have been done, but for this!" he gasped to himself. "Thank goodness, I can take a breath of air!"

The free pull, in fact, was more than welcome. It not only made it easy for him to keep up with the taxi, but he was able to take a rest. And when the top of the hill was reached he was quite fresh again, and was now close to his quarry.

The commercial van overtook the taxi, so it was necessary for Nipper to release his hold. He did so and commenced pedalling with renewed strength.

He was now only a hundred yards behind the vehicle which contained Vera. For some reason it was travelling very slowly, and he found his task easy.

Before him Putney Heath stretched out bleak and bare. Hardly a soul was about, and the atmosphere, being somewhat misty, it was not possible for anyone to see very far.

Nipper did not want the taxi-driver to become aware of the fact that he was being followed; so the lad opened the front of his lamp and allowed the light to blow out. The night was so dark that he knew he would not be seen. He would have to risk being held up by a constable for riding without a lamp. His rear light had jolted out long since, but that did not trouble him.

But as it happened Nipper need not have feared.

Quite suddenly the taxi came to a halt. The spot was almost in the middle of the heath and very deserted and desolate. No vehicle of any description was coming either from the direction of Putney or the other way.

Without hesitating a second Nipper leapt out of the saddle, whizzed his bicycle on to the heath, and crouched behind some bushes.

Why had the taxi stopped?

The lad was soon to learn the reason. And it caused him a feeling of dismay—but, at the same time, he knew positively that Vera was in peril.

Two men emerged from the darkness near by, and spoke a few rapid words to the driver of the taxi. Then they both entered the vehicle, and the door slammed.

Nipper did some quick thinking. He even thought quicker now than he had done in Grosvenor Square. He was almost exhausted by his ride, and by the look of things the taxi was going to proceed straight ahead into the country.

He knew it would be impossible for him to keep the pace.

And yet the necessity to follow was now ten times as urgent!

Vera had been kidnapped. But if Nipper lost the trail now, neither he nor his master would be able to pick it up again. At least, if they did, it would entail a great amount of trouble; and the delay would probably be fatal.

Everything hinged upon the next few seconds.

Nipper was filled with dismay and anxiety. A dozen thoughts passed swiftly through his brain, and only one seemed to be of any use. But that was risky, and would probably end in his giving the warning to the league men—as Nipper was sure the trio were.

But there was no time for further thought.

Quick as lightning he slipped forward. The taxi was just restarting. Nipper ran lightly up to the rear of it, gripped hold, and swung himself up. It had been impossible for him to follow on the bicycle, and so he was riding on the taxi itself!

But if his presence should be discovered the fat would indeed be in the fire. He would be treated drastically, and he knew that the league would make short work of him.

In addition to this, he had not been sure that he could cling to the rear of the taxi. He might be able to do so for a few miles, but the strain would be terrific. It all depended how far the vehicle was destined to go.

To Nipper's joy he found that it was fairly easy for him to ride with a certain degree of comfort. Unlike most taxis this one had a fairly large chassis, and there was a small projecting ledge upon which he rested his feet. And just above it was a small luggage grid.

He kneeled upon this, and clung with his hands to the iron support of the hood, which was fast closed.

The luggage grid seemed to prove that this was no ordinary taxi; and, indeed, Nipper knew that it was not. He had seen one or two privately owned taxicabs in the streets of London with luggage grids behind, so this was not exactly a novelty.

But he was very glad of it. He was fairly on the track now, and he glowed with triumph. Vera had been abducted, but he was there to look after her. He would see where she was taken to, and would then report to his master.

But who was responsible for this startling turn of events?

"It's jolly well connected with that rotter, Tressider, I'll bet a quid!" Nipper told himself. "Well, thank goodness I've managed to keep near at hand. Everything in the garden's lovely. These rotters will deliver up their prisoner, but I shall be able to see everything."

He realised the wisdom of Nelson Lee's plan in having Vera watched. But for that fact the abduction would have taken place, and Vera's whereabouts would have remained a mystery.

In all probability Nelson Lee would never have got on the track. But now, if things went well, he would know exactly where Vera had been taken, and would institute immediate steps to effect her rescue.

Mile after mile sped by. Once on the open main road the taxi buzzed along at a great speed. Nipper's arms were aching, and his left leg was numb and asleep. But he bore the discomfort with fortitude, for he knew that his success meant everything to both Nelson Lee and Clifford.

He noticed that the vehicle steered clear of big towns, and this fact was very

gratifying to him ; for the lights would have revealed him clinging to the taxi and the game would probably have been up.

The fact that the towns were shunned implied that the men had no wish to leave any traces of their journey. But what was to be the destination ? Nipper hoped that it would not be long before the journey's end was reached.

But if it went on for hours he swore that he would still cling on to his perch. He had been successful so far, and he would not admit defeat now.

At last, when he least expected it, the cab slowed down, and finally came to a standstill. Nipper dropped lightly to the ground, and hobbled to the roadside, and flopped himself into the ditch, so that he would remain unseen. In the gloom he saw a high iron gate, with lofty walls on either side. Almost immediately after the taxi had stopped, the gate was swung open, and a man in a kind of uniform appeared.

Without a word being spoken the taxi drove into the gates and proceeded up a fairly long drive to a gaunt house which Nipper could just discern.

The gates were swung to with a clang, and securely locked. Footsteps sounded as the uniformed man followed the taxi to the house, and Nipper found himself alone in the darkness.

But he was elated and hugely pleased with himself.

Vera Zingrave was here, in this lonely old house, behind a locked gate, and great high walls with spiked railings along the top. It was indeed a grim prison !

But Vera was not at the mercy of her enemies. A friend, in the shape of Nipper, had seen everything, and the next thing was to report to Nelson Lee. After that had occurred events would probably begin to move.

CHAPTER V.

Nipper's Story—The Plan—Clifford Gets Into Hot Water.

IT was not until the following morning that Nipper arrived back to Gray's Inn Road.

Nelson Lee had been extremely anxious about his young assistant. For Nipper had been missing the previous night, and no word had reached his master regarding him. The detective knew there was a possibility of Nipper being on the track, but he was nevertheless very anxious.

Nipper arrived just after breakfast. Douglas Clifford, as it happened, had called a few minutes before, and he and Nelson Lee were talking together, when Nipper calmly walked in.

"Hallo, gov'nor," he exclaimed coolly. "Left any breakfast for me ? Because, if so, I don't want any—I had a terrific feed on the train !"

The detective smiled calmly, but his eyes expressed his relief. He was not at all surprised to see Nipper, but he was decidedly glad.

"What's the meaning of this, young 'un ?" he asked. "What have you been doing with yourself ? Where have you been all night ?"

Nipper grinned and sat down.

"Well, sir, Miss Zingrave was kidnapped yesterday evening——"

"Kidnapped !" cried Clifford, starting forward.

"Be calm, man," interjected Nelson Lee. "I do not think there is much need for us to worry—I had, in fact, suspected something of the sort. I think I know Nipper fairly well ; and his manner at the present moment tells me that he has had a successful night. Had he failed in his project, he would now be wearing a very different expression. Come, my lad, let's hear the story."

And Nipper, without any further delay, related all that had occurred. After the taxicab had disappeared behind the gates of the lonely house he had not thought it advisable to make any investigations on his own.

"You acted very wisely, Nipper," said Nelson Lee approvingly. "And I will take this opportunity to commend you very highly upon your promptitude and shrewdness in sticking to the taxi with such leach-like tenacity. You see, Clifford, owing to Nipper's smartness, we know where Miss Zingrave has been taken to. That simplifies matters exceedingly."

"Good boy, Nipper—good boy!" exclaimed Clifford, with relief.

"I scouted round a bit, gov'nor," explained Nipper. "I soon found that the house and grounds is entirely surrounded by a terrifically high wall, with spiked railings all along the top. The blessed place might be a prison! On the opposite side of the house—opposite to the gates, I mean—the wall is only about a hundred yards from the cliff-edge. The house is right on the sea coast, and the sea thunders on the beach a tremendous distance below, for the cliffs are very high. And there's not another house for a mile or two in either direction."

"You did not allow yourself to be seen?"

"You bet I didn't!" replied Nipper promptly. "I sheered off after a bit, for I was hungry and tired and cold. After a long tramp, I came to a small town, and managed to get a lodging at a small inn. The first train didn't come through until about half-past seven. But it was a jolly good train, with a breakfast-car on it. I came up by that train—and here I am!"

"You have done wonders," declared the great criminologist. "It is rather a pity we do not know who the house belongs to——"

"Oh, half a jiff! I forgot," interrupted Nipper. "There was a kind of brass plate upon one of the gate-posts, and I managed to read the name engraved upon it. It was Dr. Simeon Whitten—just that, and no more."

Nelson Lee drew his breath in sharply between his teeth.

"By James!" he exclaimed sharply.

"Why, do you know the name?" asked Douglas Clifford.

"Do I know it!" repeated the detective. "I should say I do! Nipper, I believe, was in ignorance of the fact, but Dr. Simeon Whitten is a member of the Governing Circle of the League of the Green Triangle. There is nothing surprising in that, for it was obvious all along that Vera was kidnapped by league men. What the plot is I don't know, but it is evidently something very deep. The very character of the house proves that."

"My goodness! Do you know what the house is?" asked Nipper.

"It is described as a Private Asylum for the Care of the Insane," replied Nelson Lee grimly. "It is, in short, a private lunatic asylum, and I am convinced that it is nothing more or less than one of the league's houses for putting away people who are dangerous."

"A lunatic asylum!" gasped Clifford. "Great Heaven above! And Vera has been taken there. We must take steps at once to effect her rescue. We will telephone the police——"

"Not so fast, my dear fellow," interjected Nelson Lee calmly. "I'm afraid the police will be useless. You may be sure Zingrave has taken steps to insure his own safety. Besides, it is my intention to strike another blow home to the league. While we are rescuing Miss Vera we might as well kill two birds with one stone. I intend to do my level best to prove a case against Dr. Simeon Whitten, and to have him sentenced to the penal servitude he so richly deserves."

"This is the place, gov'nor!"

It was Nipper's voice, and the words were spoken almost in a whisper. Night had again fallen, and the gates of Dr. Simeon Whitten's establishment were closed and deserted.

Nelson Lee, Nipper, and Clifford were crouching in the road in the gloom. A short time before they had arrived in the detective's own motor-car. This had been pushed into a meadow and placed between two hayricks out of sight. The trio had then proceeded on foot.

Nelson Lee intended acting on his own, and without delay. The police should not be brought into the affair until afterwards. The rescue of Vera was a delicate matter, and not for the general public to learn of in a police report.

The detective had not advised Clifford to take part in the affair, but the young man had absolutely refused to be left out of it. The girl of his heart was in peril, and if there were any dangers to be faced in rescuing her, he meant to take his share.

The first thing was to enter the grounds. Once that was accomplished Nelson Lee meant to force an entry into the building, and to discover the exact lie of the land.

The little party had come well prepared, and it was not such a difficult matter to gain the top of the wall. Aided by ropes slung round one of the iron spikes, the detective hauled himself up, and then assisted his companions.

They stood within the grounds, and could see the house, with one or two lights showing, between the gaunt old trees. Almost at Nelson Lee's feet was a great cudgel of wood, and he picked it up and held it in his hand as he walked, feeling that the weapon might be necessary.

As it happened, it was extremely fortunate he did so.

Even while the three were noiselessly approaching the house there came the sound of pattering footsteps, and a deep-throated bay rose upon the air. Nelson Lee came to a halt at once.

"A dog!" he muttered quickly. "I half suspected we should meet with trouble. We must——"

He ceased speaking abruptly, and for a very good reason. For at that second a dim form came bounding out of the shadows. The intruders could see that the animal was a huge brute of a mastiff, savage and dangerous.

But almost as soon as the peril had come, it was over. The mastiff did not bark again, but flung itself straight upon the trespassers. Apparently it was usually left loose in the grounds, and this was the first opportunity it had had of making use of itself.

As the great beast sprang, Nelson Lee lifted the cudgel of wood and swung it round with every ounce of his strength. More by chance than anything else—the detective was only too willing to admit that—the knotted end of the cudgel dashed full upon the head of the savage animal.

The mastiff's great body thudded to the ground with a low grunt emerging from its throat. But that was the only sound it uttered. It lay there inert and still, except for a slight twitching of its limbs.

Nelson Lee, Nipper, and Clifford were quivering visibly. The danger had passed so swiftly that they hardly realised it was all over. But it was over; and mainly owing to a sheer stroke of luck.

"I am sorry this has happened, but it was necessary," said the detective quietly.

"Have you killed it?" breathed Nipper huskily.

"It is as lifeless as this cudgel," replied the detective, who had made a short examination of the animal. "My blow was a fearful one, and the animal's skull is cracked to splinters. But hush! It will be advisable for us to crouch behind these trees and make no sound for at least fifteen minutes. The mastiff's last bay may have been heard within the house."

Apparently it had not, however, for after twenty minutes complete silence no sign had been forthcoming of any alarm. The house was still quiet, and no human being could be seen. Only two windows were illuminated, and these were but dim.

"What's the programme?" asked Clifford.

"I mean to make investigations," replied the detective. "You two will remain here, and await my return. I may be ten minutes, I may be two hours——"

Clifford gripped Nelson Lee's arm.

"I cannot bear the uncertainty!" he murmured in a quivering voice. "Mr. Lee, you know how matters stand with me—you know that the girl I love is a prisoner in this house. How can you expect me to wait here an indefinite period,

without knowing what is going on? I must be in action! I should go mad if I were forced to remain still, and——”

“Very well, you had better venture forward yourself,” interjected Nelson Lee quietly. “I gange your state of mind exactly, and must do as you wish. But I warn you to be extremely cautious, and to report to me before you act!”

In another moment Clifford was off into the darkness. Nelson Lee knew very well that his companion would never have remained behind, to wait patiently. He was so anxious and excited that to remain inactive would probably be fatal. He would have done something to betray himself and his companions. It was far better to allow him to do the investigations. The project was of such peculiar interest to himself that he would be extra cautious.

Besides, Nelson Lee and Nipper would be near at hand in case of necessity.

Nelson Lee's judgment was shrewd, and he did the only thing practicable under the circumstances. He knew very well that Clifford could be trusted, for the young man had the making of a very fine detective in him. Nelson Lee had found that out on several occasions.

Clifford approached the house without making a sound, and saw that it was a square building with scarcely any projections. The front was bare and ugly in the extreme, with just a short flight of broad steps leading to a massive front door. He observed that all the windows were covered by thick iron bars.

“How the deuce am I going to get in?” he thought swiftly. “The windows are barred, and the doors are bound to be locked. I had better have a look at the back of the house before——”

His thoughts were interrupted abruptly. For, almost at his feet, he saw something which caused his heart to beat more quickly. He was standing almost before the steps leading to the front door.

At his feet, just distinguishable from the gravel, was a smooth circle. And Clifford instantly recognised it—now that he looked at it closely—as the iron covering of a coal-shoot.

Without pausing to consider, he bent down and prised up the iron lid, and then tried to pierce the blackness beneath. Not being able to do so, he sat down, lowered himself into the shoot, with difficulty, and then wedged himself so that he could replace the cover from below. Then he allowed himself to slip slowly down, until at last his feet touched solid ground. The place was in utter silence; and after a few minutes he produced an electric torch, and ventured to switch the light on.

As he had suspected, he was in a fairly spacious coal-cellar. But it was more than this; it was a wine-cellar as well, for a kind of dividing partition of brickwork in the middle separated the cellar into two portions. One contained coal, and the other crates of bottles of several descriptions. Clifford moved forward until he arrived at the foot of some wooden steps leading to an upper door. But he suddenly paused.

Voices had reached his ears!

He switched the light off, and remained in darkness. For a second he thought the voices were approaching, but then he realised that they were proceeding from directly overhead. He knew then that this portion of the cellar was immediately beneath one of the front rooms of the house.

He listened intently, and a man's harsh tones came to his ears. The words, however, were indistinguishable. After a few moments, another voice could be heard—a soft, feminine voice.

“By heavens, that's Vera!” muttered Clifford fiercely. “Some brute is probably threatening her!”

In one second he became inflamed with fury. The knowledge that his loved one was immediately over his head, at the mercy of a villain, drove the blood to his head in a flood.

Almost unconsciously he paced forward—and the next moment he was brought

to himself in a startling manner. There was a sudden shattering crash, and he fell sprawling full length upon the hard stone floor. In the darkness he had blundered upon two cases of bottles, one piled upon the other. The noise they made was appalling, and he hurt his knee considerably in the fall.

For a few seconds he was unable to scramble to his feet. And when he did so, he hobbled painfully across the cellar in order to reach the coal-shoot. After what had happened, it was better for him to make his escape. He swore softly under his breath at that unfortunate stroke of ill-luck.

But Douglas Clifford was not destined to escape !

Even as he limped forward, the door at the top of the staircase was flung open, and lights appeared. A shout rent the air, and Clifford turned at bay. Two men blundered down the stairs, one of them a tall, grim-looking individual with pitch-black hair, and a pitch-black beard which reached half-way down his waistcoat.

His dark, hollow eyes were gleaming with alarm and fury.

Without waiting to be attacked, Clifford rushed forward. He simply flung himself at the bearded man, whom he guessed—rightly—to be Dr. Simeon Whitten himself. The doctor was taken completely by surprise.

Clifford sprang like a tiger, his hurt leg completely forgotten, and the next second the two men were rolling upon the floor.

"Wells, you fool!" Dr. Whitten managed to gasp. "Tear this hound away from me! I'm being throttled!"

Clifford knew that he could not win the battle, but his fury had impelled him to make a fight. His failure had caused him to become desperate.

But Wells, who was apparently one of Whitten's henchmen, came to his master's assistance. He set his lamp down hastily, and picked up a thick plank of wood which stood against the wall.

Crash !

The plank descended upon Clifford's head with a terrific thud. Had it been of stouter wood, he would probably have been brained, for the man's excitement had made him use all his force. The plank was quite thick enough as it was, but Clifford was only partially stunned, and he rolled away and lay upon his back dazed and helpless.

Dr. Whitten scrambled to his feet.

"Who is this fellow?" he grated furiously. "By thunder, Wells, he must have entered by means of the coal-shoot. But we have no time to attend to him at present. This other business has got to be dealt with at once."

"What shall we do with this chap, sir?" growled the other, glaring at Clifford.

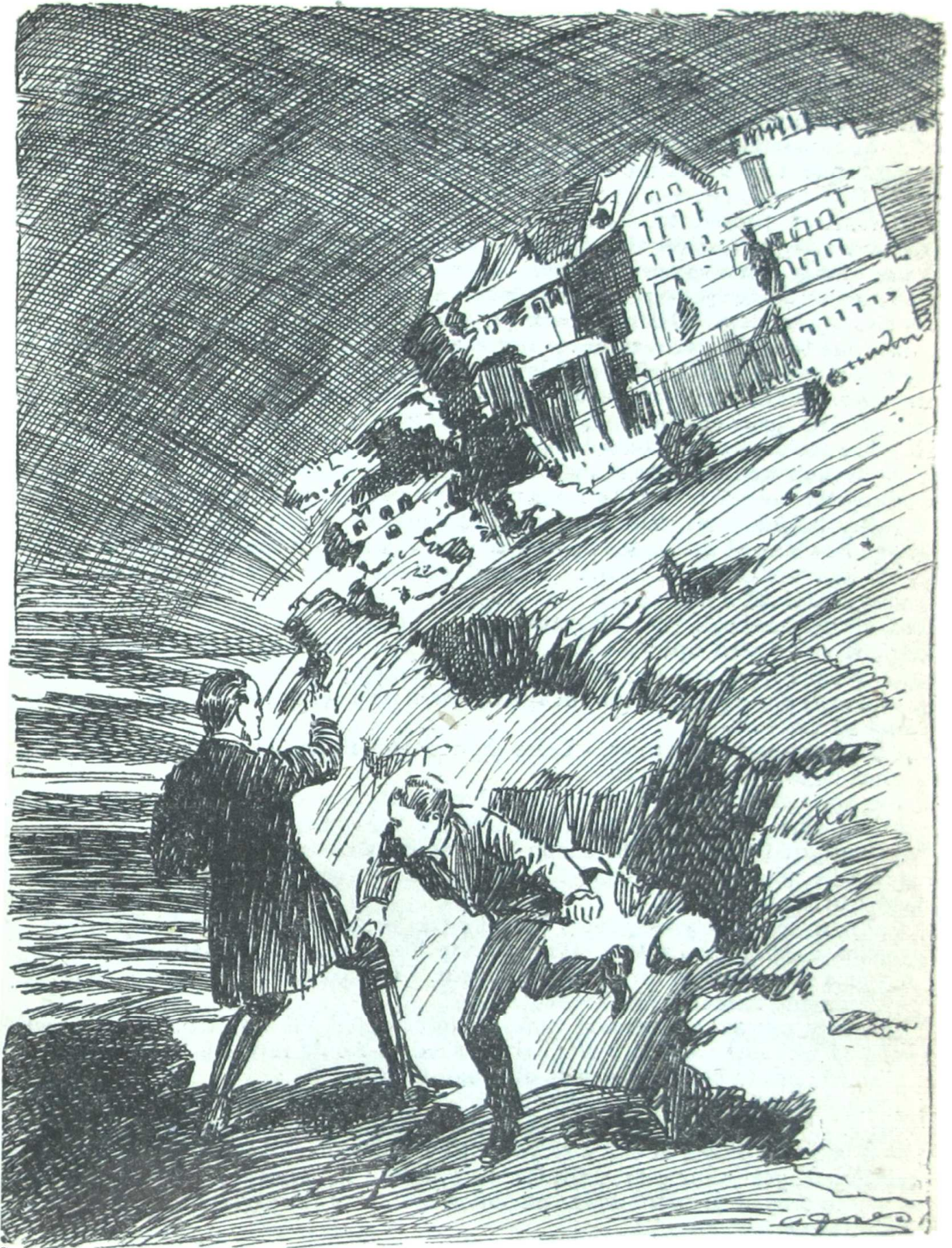
"I will show you!" snarled Dr. Whitten.

He had not been hurt much by Clifford's onslaught, but his mind was in a whirl of doubt and anxiety. Who the stranger could be he could not guess. But he intended to make Clifford a firm prisoner until he could give him more attention. There was a suspicion in Whitten's mind that the intruder was only a tramp—for Clifford had come prepared for his adventure, attired in shabby clothes, and with a choker round his neck.

At the present moment Whitten was engaged in the affair of Vera Zingrave, and it was extremely urgent. Clifford was half carried up the stairs, and forced along a bare, dimly-lighted passage until the rear of the house was reached. Here his captors came to a halt before a heavy open door, the top half of which was fitted with huge iron bars.

Clifford, slowly recovering his wits, was flung into the apartment, and the door closed on him with a slam. Bolts were shot, and a key grated in a massive lock. He was a prisoner in the lunatic asylum, incarcerated in a cell which was probably built for the especial use of dangerous lunatics.

So much for Douglas Clifford's investigations !



There was a deafening, shattering roar, louder than any that had occurred hitherto.

Before their eyes Nelson Lee and Nipper saw one corner of the house crumble up like a child's castle of bricks. Two walls fell amid clouds of dust and flying debris. Furniture from the upper floors came plunging down into the open. (See page 34.)

CHAPTER VI.

Dr. Whitten's Threat—Vera Receives a Shock—Self-Sacrifice.

DR. SIMEON WHITTEN dismissed his companion, and paced up the dismal passage until he came to the front hall of the house. This was square, and quite comfortably furnished. A dim lamp hung from the ceiling, shed a soft light upon the foot of the staircase, and the two doors which led into the front room.

Dr. Whitten paused to straighten his ruffled clothing. He was somewhat calmer now, for he had convinced himself that the man he had just placed in the cell was merely a tramp on the prowl. He would hand him over to the police in the morning. At the present moment there was urgent work on hand.

At any other time Whitten would probably have been exceedingly alarmed. But now his thoughts were running in other channels. He stood there for a few moments, muttering to himself, and brushing himself down.

His eyes, hollow and sunken, were of a queer colour, and grim-looking in the extreme. His lips were hidden by his huge black beard, but they were thin and cruel. The incident with Clifford had interrupted the task he had been performing, and he now went back to it with an expression of harsh cruelty upon his face.

Opening the door of one of the front rooms, he passed inside, and then closed the door softly behind him. This room was lit up fairly well by two big oil-lamps. A bright fire burned in the grate, and the room was furnished comfortably, but with old and well-worn furniture. He had unlocked the door upon entering, for the room contained a prisoner.

And the prisoner was Vera Zingrave.

The girl was seated upon a couch, attired in the afternoon frock she had been wearing when Nipper saw her emerge from her father's house in Grosvenor Square. But, although she was a prisoner in the hands of this scoundrel, she did not show the least sign of fear.

Her face was pale and drawn. Lines showed around her eyes, and her hair was somewhat untidy and dishevelled.

But in spite of all these disadvantages, her beauty was every bit as apparent as it had been when Malcolm Tressider had first met her at Lady Atherley's ball.

But beauty did not affect Dr. Simon Whitten in the least.

He had his plan to carry out—the plan which he and Professor Zingrave had discussed to the last detail.

"And now, my dear young lady, I must again press you for your final answer," he exclaimed softly, but with a harsh ring in his voice. "This interruption has given you a few minutes for solitary thought. I have asked you many times if you will consent to marry Mr. Tressider——"

"You may ask me a thousand times!" interrupted Vera quietly. "Oh, you coward! I will never alter my original decision. I would rather have you kill me now than consent to become the wife of a man I loathe!"

"You are obstinate—you have got pluck!" exclaimed Whitten, standing before his victim. "But it will make no difference. I will tell you again what your fate will be if you still persist in this attitude. You will be kept a prisoner here month in, month out, year after year, until the solitude and the grim surroundings finally cause you to become as insane as the present occupants of the asylum. That process will only take a few years."

Vera listened quietly, and without wincing. The picture was horrible enough to all conscience. She was not to know it, but at the present moment there were no insane people within the building. Usually Dr. Whitten kept several lunatics, so that everything would be above board, and would satisfy the authorities. But just now he had no patients. And it was for this reason that the present plan regarding Vera had been adopted. The only occupants of the house, in fact, were Whitten himself, Vera, Douglas Clifford, the man Wells, and one other assistant.

There being no patients, several members of Dr. Whitten's staff had been granted a holiday. There were one or two patients arriving during the next month, and they were genuine mad people. But Dr. Whitten's establishment held many grim secrets. It had dealt with several people who had proved themselves dangerous to the league. They had entered the place sane, but by fiendish treatment had been driven out of their minds in a very short time. But such was the cleverness of Dr. Whitten, that the authorities had never had the slightest suspicion of anything wrong at his asylum.

Whitten was, in fact, a valuable member of the Governing Circle of the Green Triangle. .

He waited for Vera's answer, but as none was forthcoming, he proceeded. The scheme which he and Zingrave had planned together was a dastardly one, and Whitten was smiling triumphantly to himself. He had yet to play his trump card, and he knew that it would turn the scale.

"Your answer?" he demanded smoothly.

Vera remained silent. For a moment she turned her beautiful eyes full upon him, and they were full of scorn and contempt.

But they might as well have been turned upon a brick wall for all the effect they had. Vera was terribly upset, although she strove her hardest to hide the fact. She swore to herself that she would never allow her captor to see the least sign of fear in her looks or behaviour.

Vera was proving herself to be a girl in a thousand—a girl possessed of pluck of a most unusual order. Not many girls could have stood the awful strain of this dreadful experience.

She imagined that her abduction had been brought about by the machinations of Malcolm Tressider himself. She had not the slightest suspicion that the whole foul scheme had emanated in the brain of Professor Zingrave.

Her love for Douglas Clifford was very deep, and very sincere. Not for all the threats that Satan himself could devise would she prove untrue to her lover. Somehow, she had a feeling of confidence deep down within her that Heaven would not allow this terrible thing to go on. Her womanly intuition told her that help would come in time.

But the greatest blow was yet to fall.

"There is no escape for you," Dr. Whitten proceeded. "You will remain in this asylum——"

"I do not believe it!" the girl interrupted quietly. "I know that my father will, sooner or later, discover what has become of me. I shall then be rescued, and you will receive the punishment you deserve. Oh, I cannot believe that you are an Englishman! It seems impossible that an Englishman could be such a scoundrel as you are! But my father will come——"

Whitten interrupted with a harsh laugh.

"It is not necessary that your father should come," he exclaimed, bending forward and stroking his long black beard. "Professor Zingrave is already within this building. He is, in fact, a prisoner like yourself."

Vera smiled quietly to herself.

"Perhaps that bluff would work with some people," she replied. "But I do not believe it."

"I do not ask you to take my word. You will, perhaps, believe your own eyes?"

Vera started a little.

"My own eyes!" she repeated, with a little quiver in her voice. "Oh, you are lying to me! My father is not here!"

"He is here," Dr. Whitten persisted. "Come, I will take you to him. All other methods have failed, so I will now prove that we are determined. My employer has done this thing well; no detail has been forgotten. As you refuse to consent to marry Mr. Malcolm Tressider, we will see what a little persuasion can do!"

Vera rose to her feet, and laid a hand over her heart. It was beating hotly, and she wished to calm herself. The scoundrelly doctor's words had at last effected her more than she cared to admit. Could it be possible that her father was really a prisoner, too? Had Malcolm Tressider caused the pair of them to be kidnapped?

It was a curious fact, but the real state of affairs was quite opposite to that which Vera imagined. The real instigator of the crime was Zingrave himself. Tressider knew nothing of it. The South African millionaire had merely been informed to wait events—that Vera would come round of her own accord in good time. And at the present moment Tressider was in London, already armed with a special licence, waiting for Professor Zingrave to send his word that everything was ready for the marriage.

Dr. Whitten left the room, with his hand fiercely gripping Vera's delicate arm. Such a precaution was not necessary, but it pleased him to treat the girl as though she were a dangerous character.

She did not protest—indeed, she knew that it would have been useless to do so. Her mind was in a whirl. What was she about to see? A strange, unknown fear took possession of her.

She was led along the same dim passage that Clifford had been forced along so shortly before. But Dr. Whitten branched off down a corridor to the left. Here a lantern was hanging from a nail. He took this in his hand, and walked along a few yards until he came to a heavy door set in a recess.

"You will now see that I spoke no idle words," he exclaimed softly.

He took a bunch of keys from his pocket, inserted one in the heavy lock, and turned it. The door swung open, and he set the lantern just inside.

"Set me free, you hound!" exclaimed a weak voice from within the cell-like apartment. "I have had no food or water for days! I am parched, I am starved!"

Vera uttered a little gasp, and ran forward. The voice was that of her father! And when she entered the apartment a little sob rose in her throat. But Dr. Whitten still gripped her hand, and would not let her go forward.

"Oh!" gasped Vera, her eyes open wide. "Father!"

"Vera, my child!—And you here, too? Has this inhuman scoundrel got you in his clutches as well as myself?"

The voice was weak and faint. Vera could hardly repress a shudder of horror. But it was not on account of the voice, but because of what she saw.

The room was small, with bare walls, and with a stone floor. Lying upon this stone floor against the far wall was a huddled-up figure which looked almost like a bundle of rags. But Vera knew at once that it was her stepfather—Professor Zingrave!

His clothes were dirty and ragged, and she saw that one of his arms and one of his legs were fixed to chains which came out of the wall. They clanked a trifle as he moved. But there was no mistaking the face. It was pale and drawn, as though with suffering. He seemed to have aged years. His long silky hair was like a mop upon his head, and, altogether, he presented a picture of pitiful misery.

He stretched out his arms to his daughter.

"They mean to kill me, Vera," he muttered huskily. "They tell me it is in your power to have me set free. I beseech you to do so."

Vera was almost struck dumb with the shock.

"I did not know that you were here, father!" she exclaimed, in a low, frightened voice. "Oh, I do not know what it all means! But it is horrible!"

Zingrave moaned a little.

"If it is horrible for you, can you not judge what it is to me?" he asked. "I am being starved, and I shall receive nothing to eat, and nothing to drink, until you consent to some demands which Dr. Whitten will make of you. He is a fiend—a scoundrel! For Heaven's sake save me!"

Dr. Whitten uttered a quiet chuckle.

"Now do you believe me?" he demanded. "You see, Miss Zingrave, there is no way out for you. Your father is in my power, and no help will come from outside, for not a soul knows what has become of either of you."

The tears were starting from the girl's eyes. She endeavoured to wrench herself away, so that she could go to her stepfather's side. But the doctor gripped her wrist more fiercely, and pulled her back. Then he took the lamp up, and slammed the door again.

Vera walked back to the front room as though she were in a dream. It seemed as though the whole thing were a horrible nightmare. But, at the same time, she knew that it was grim, terrible reality.

Once again Dr. Whitten faced her, and now she was in a very different frame of mind.

What she had seen had taken every ounce of determination from her, and she was limp and weak with the reaction.

"Your father is in my power," said Whitten grimly. "If you will consent to marry Mr. Malcolm Tressider, the professor will be set free at once, and you will be the cause of saving his life. For if you will refuse, he will die!"

"You would not dare!" panted Vera huskily. "It would be murder——"

"You do not know what you are saying, girl!" snarled the other. "As sure as we are in this room, your father will be a dead man inside a week unless you bring that obstinate will of yours into submission. You do not seem to understand that a lunatic asylum is unlike all other institutions. Your father will die, and there will be no inquest, no inquiries. And you will be the cause of his death—you, if anybody, will be his murderer!"

Vera sank back, and covered her face with her hands. It seemed to her as though something was going to burst in her brain. It was too terrible for realisation.

Poor girl, she was so distraught that she hardly knew what the doctor was saying! But the import of his words sunk into her brain. She was unversed in such matters as these; she fully believed that it was within Whitten's power to do as he threatened—to let the professor die. She thought that there would be no inquiries. The whole thing, of course, was absurd; but she was not to know it.

Moreover, in her present condition, she would not have fully realised it even if she had been able to think more freely. One fact alone throbbed through her brain.

If she did not consent she would be the cause of her father dying a miserable death.

The situation was appalling. What could she do? She knew that she was beaten, that there was nothing for her to do but agree to marry Tressider.

Never for one instant did she suspect that the whole thing was a dastardly planned affair to play upon her emotions. Everything pointed to the fact that it was grim truth and reality.

Under the circumstances she admitted defeat. Most girls would have knuckled under long before, but Vera had stuck out to the last extremity.

"I will do what you want," she said dully.

It was sheer self-sacrifice. In order to save her father—as she thought—she was sacrificing herself without another thought. So long as she herself was only concerned, she had been obdurate. But the Professor had been brought into it, and his fate rested with her.

Dr. Whitten chuckled and stroked his long beard. The plan had succeeded. Vera had been defeated at last!

CHAPTER VII.

A Discovery—The Runaway Motor-Car—The Plunge Over the Cliff.

"**S**PLENDID! Zingrave's plan has worked to perfection! The rest is all plain sailing!"

Dr. Simeon Whitten had paused for a moment out in the hall. He had just left Vera in the front room to attire herself for an immediate journey. She was quite resigned now, the last development of the plot had completely broken her, and she hardly cared what happened.

Whitten sought out his assistant—Wells—and gave him some orders. Then he made his way to the back of the house, and she entered his own private apartment. This was an extremely cosy room, luxuriously furnished. He found Zingrave within, in the act of finishing his toilet.

"Well?" demanded the professor softly.

"Everything is all right—she has consented."

"As I thought," went on Zingrave. "I was sure that your trump-card would win. But I don't quite like it, Whitten. Under the circumstances, however, I don't suppose I must grumble. My object is attained."

Zingrave was really highly pleased. But, at the same time, he was not happy at having been forced to take a personal part in the business. But Vera had come to no harm, and a fortune was at stake.

That fortune was now as good as won. Everything, as the doctor had said, was plain sailing. Vera would be taken to London at once by motor-car—by the very taxi which had brought her here.

The car would arrive in London in the early morning, and Tressider would be waiting there with a special marriage licence. The whole affair would be settled long before noon, and then there would be no drawing out. For Vera to institute proceedings against Dr. Whitten would be useless, for she would have nothing to substantiate her story, and her father's story. The police, even if they were told about it, would regard it as altogether too absurd for consideration. And, besides, the publicity and notoriety would be exceedingly disagreeable. And nothing could be gained. The marriage would have taken place, and Zingrave himself would tell Vera that it had better be hushed up completely. A scandal would be useless and pointless.

It now remained simply to carry out the last details—the journey to London and the marriage itself. But, as often happens, a serious hitch was to occur even at the moment when success seemed assured.

Zingrave took care to remain within Dr. Whitten's private room. To have let himself be seen by Vera would have been fatal, for the whole scheme would have been ruined.

Vera was very soon ready, for she had merely to put on her hat and coat. She was ready, in fact, long before Whitten himself was. But at last Whitten unlocked the door of the front room, and announced that the car was ready.

She preceded him out of the house like a girl in a trance. Her heart was absolutely full of misery. Nothing matters in the world to her now. In order to save her stepfather she was going to wreck her own life.

She did not even dare to think of Douglas Clifford. She knew that if she did allow her thoughts to dwell upon her lover she would be on the point of going into hysterics, and of breaking down completely. She told herself that she would bear up till the last. To break down now would only cause useless delay and her father many hours of added misery.

The motor-car was waiting outside in the drive. A muffled-up figure sat at the wheel, for the night was cold. The driver, in fact, was Whitten's other assistant, a man named Pearce, who was somewhat deaf.

Vera entered the car without a word, and the doctor followed. He closed the

door, and the car set off. It emerged from the gates, and turned to the left, which would very soon lead on to the main road to London.

The road just here ran quite near to the cliffs, and it was bordered on either side by smooth grassland. There were no hedges, and no ditches; it was, in fact, a kind of heath.

Two minutes after leaving the gates Dr. Whitten suddenly remembered that he had failed to obtain certain information from Zingrave—he did not know precisely where he was to meet Malcolm Tressider. It was necessary, therefore, to turn back.

Whitten leaned forward quickly, and tapped upon the glass which intervened between himself and the driver. Instantly the latter turned round for a second, and the doctor, whose senses were unusually acute, was startled. Pearce was deaf, and even as Whitten had tapped he realised that the driver would not hear.

But, light as the touch on the glass had been, Pearce had turned instantly. And now, all in a second, Whitten noticed a certain little difference in the man's appearance. Without a second's loss of time he turned a switch which illuminated a bright electric light in the roof of the cab.

The light revealed the driver more clearly, and Whitten suddenly gave vent to a snarl of rage. He saw now that the driver was not Pearce at all—he was a perfect stranger!

And, simultaneously, the man at the wheel bent lower over it, and put on speed. He seemed to realise that he was discovered, and was bent on getting every revolution out of the wheels so that it would be impossible for Whitten to stop the car.

In plain truth, the driver was none other than Nelson Lee himself!

The great detective and Nipper had been rather alarmed at Clifford's non-return. While they had been debating upon a course of action, the car had made its appearance at the door of the house. And Nelson Lee instantly guessed why the car was there.

On the spur of the moment, he acted quickly and drastically.

Pearce, the deaf man, had seen that everything was right on the car, and then had returned to the shed to lock it up. He had been followed by Nelson Lee and Nipper; the pair had sprung upon him unawares, had gagged him, and had locked him in the shed. After that the detective had just had time to don Pearce's overcoat and peaked cap, and to take his seat in the driver's place.

There was a distinct chance that the ruse would be successful. It was the detective's plan to drive straight to the nearest town, and to hand Dr. Whitten in charge at the police-station. But, practically at the outset, Nelson Lee's hastily formed scheme was frustrated, and even then it was only because Whitten had forgotten something. But for that fact the plan would probably have succeeded without a hitch.

As Fate had willed otherwise, Nelson Lee was now doing his best to make the most of his advantage.

But he was not prepared for such desperate means as those which Dr. Whitten adopted. Without hesitating a second, the doctor whipped a revolver from his pocket, pointed it at the driver, and pulled the trigger.

Vera gave a little scream as the report rang out like a thunderclap in the car, and what happened next was intensely dramatic. Nelson Lee was not hit fairly and squarely by the bullet; it grazed the side of his head and caused him to become momentarily giddy. The range was short, but Whitten had fired almost without taking aim. This was very fortunate, as otherwise the famous detective would certainly have been struck dead.

He swayed in his seat for a moment, and then collapsed towards the right, which was the open side of the car. The lurch was too much, and his body was unable to regain its equilibrium. He pitched right out, and fell into the long grass beside the road.

The car, its engine still running smoothly, ran on unmanaged and unguided.

"Good heavens!" gasped Dr. Whitten, startled by the result of his own action.

He knew nothing about cars, and even if he had done, he would not have been able to do anything in this case, for he was divided from the wheel by the glass partition intervening. The bullet from his revolver had ripped clean through the glass, making a perfectly neat, round hole.

Almost frantic with alarm and fury, Whitten opened one of the side doors. As he did so, the car gave a terrific jolt which nearly sent him flying out. The night was gloomy, but the doctor knew the neighbourhood as well as he knew the palm of his own hand, and he saw quite enough to cause him to start with horror.

For the unsteered car had left the road, had jolted on to the grassland, and was now careering along in a zig-zag kind of way towards an awful danger.

In a few moments it would reach the cliff-edge, and would plunge to its doom far into the sea.

Nothing in the world could stop it. Whitten realised that fact at once. He valued his own skin very highly, and he knew that if he was to preserve it, he would have to act at once. The ground rose from the road up a not very steep hill, and the car had accordingly slowed its pace as it climbed. But once it reached the brow of the hill, and commenced running down the short slope to the cliff-edge, the end would be swift.

The only chance of escape was to jump out at once.

"We are making for the cliffs!" he grated harshly. "The driver has fallen out of the car, and we must leap for it!"

The startling incident had aroused Vera completely. She was clinging to the cushions, her mind somewhat upset, but running clearly. And suddenly Whitten jumped through the open doorway and landed heavily upon the grass. He had made no attempt whatever to assist his fair companion.

But she was quite capable of acting for herself.

The very instant he had disappeared, she rose to her feet, paused at the door, and then jumped. The car at that moment had reached the brow of the hill, and was travelling its slowest before it accelerated. Vera landed upon her feet, stumbled forward, and fell; and, as she was rising, her eyes were upon the automobile ahead.

It shot down the decline with ever-increasing speed, and it was making for the cliff-edge in a perfectly straight course, as though steered by some demon of destruction.

It was a breathless moment.

The motor-car seemed to leap outwards. It hovered for a second, and then plunged down—down into the sea breaking on the cliff-face far below!

CHAPTER VIII.

Comparing Notes—The Amazing Land-slide—The Release of Clifford.

VERA stood up, shivering and agitated. The car had just disappeared, and she knew what a narrow escape she had had. By a margin of only a few seconds she had been saved from being carried in the car to certain death. As she stood there, Dr. Whitten limped up to her and gripped her arm.

"Curse the fates!" he snarled. "We will go back!"

He dragged at Vera's arm and forced her to accompany him. His grip was fierce and painful, but Vera did not wince. He had no intention of letting her escape. What had happened had startled the doctor considerably. The car's plunge over the cliff and his own narrow escape did not worry him so much as the other matter.

Who was the man who had been driving the automobile? And had he been killed by the revolver bullet? It seemed as though everything was going wrong at the last moment, but the doctor did not mean to be frustrated.

He had another car, a smaller one, and it was capable of doing the journey to London. Wells could drive, and the journey could be made just the same. The chief thing was to get Vera to London and married to Trossider.

After they had walked back to the road, Whitten kept his eyes open, and in a few seconds he saw the huddled-up form of Nelson Lee lying in the grass. He forced Vera in that direction, for he would not relax his grip for a moment. She was young, and would be fleet of foot. Once free, and she would probably give him the slip.

He bent over the detective and looked at him keenly in the gloom. He could see blood upon the stranger's head, and he was lying perfectly still and quiet. Vera was looking, too, and she was shocked. They both thought that Nelson Lee was dead.

Whitten decided what to do at once. He would first take his prisoner back to the house, and then he and Wells would sally out, and would carry the apparently dead man to the asylum.

Accordingly, he wrenched at Vera's wrist and hurried her along the road. As soon as the pair had disappeared into the darkness, the motionless figure suddenly sat up. Nelson Lee was very far from dead; he was not even unconscious.

He had fallen from the car on to soft grass, and the shock had revived him rather than injured him. He now proceeded to bind his head, and to take a long pull at his brandy flask.

The neat spirit made the blood course freely through his veins again, and he rose to his feet and stood steady. But he was very bitter, and he clenched his fist with helpless rage. His plan had been a failure—a miserable failure. No good had come of it whatever.

He had thought of springing to his feet and overpowering Whitten, but he wished to make absolutely sure of the scoundrel. Whitten was armed, and he had proved that he would not hesitate to use his weapon. Not that Nelson Lee feared that he himself would be overpowered. But a struggle out here would probably have ended in several revolver shots being fired, and that would have brought help quickly to hand—help in Dr. Whitten's favour. It was far better to let the doctor go and capture him later.

Nelson Lee walked briskly towards the gloomy building—the House of Fear. When he arrived at the gates, he found that they stood wide open. He slipped on, and almost immediately a slim form ran up to him.

"My stars, gov'nor, what's happened?" breathed Nipper's voice excitedly. "Whitten and Miss Vera have just come back, and I thought the very deuce had happened to you!"

"Well, to be frank, the very deuce has happened to me!" said Nelson Lee grimly. "But come, we will get along those trees, in case we are seen. My plan has miscarried, young 'un, and we must think of something else!"

He rapidly told Nipper what had occurred.

"It's a jolly lucky thing you weren't killed, sir!" exclaimed Nipper thankfully.

"The murderous hound!" said the detective. "He will meet with his desert before long, Nipper! But what of Clifford? Has there been any sign of him?"

"None whatever, sir!"

"I am at a loss to understand it—or perhaps I had better say there is only one explanation. Clifford has managed to get himself placed under lock and key. It was because of his discovery, probably, that Whitten was so much on the alert. He detected me at once, my boy."

Nipper scratched his head.

"I'm blessed if I can see what we're going to do, sir!" he murmured. "Miss Vera has been taken into the house again, and you say that Whitten and some other Johnny are to come out soon in order to fetch your remains?"

"That is obvious. Whitten thinks I am dead, and he will not allow me to remain on the roadside. He will certainly come out to carry me in, probably with help.

My dear Nipper, everything has happened swiftly, and we hardly know where we are. This is proving to be a night of adventure, indeed."

"I wonder——" Nipper paused. "What's that, guv'nor?"

He asked the question abruptly, and in a rather startled voice. It seemed as though the very ground beneath them was quivering, and, at the same second, a dull roar came from behind the house—from the direction of the sea. The roar increased with every second, until it sounded like booming thunder.

"Upon my soul," ejaculated the detective, "I cannot understand what it can be! The sky is clear; there is no wind. By James!"

"What's up, sir?"

"There is only one explanation, Nipper. A cliff-slide is occurring, a huge portion of earth is sliding down to the sea. Cliff-slides occur fairly frequently on this coast, but it is only seldom that they attain serious proportions."

There was no doubt, however, that this present land-slide was assuming exceedingly serious proportions. The ground was quivering as though affected by an earthquake, and the thunderous roar was increasing in intensity. The slide had started probably with a few hundred tons, and that had caused a more serious slip.

"Suppose we go and see——"

"Back, Nipper, back!" roared Nelson Lee suddenly.

He dragged at his young assistant's arm, and the pair flung themselves in the direction of the house. Almost at their feet, between them and the gates, a great crack had appeared in the earth; and as they watched, with fascinated gaze, it increased until it was a great, yawning cleft. Several trees crumpled up and dived down into the cavity, and the very same moment the high brick wall at a certain position crashed to the ground. A wild confusion of sounds filled the air; it was as though pandemonium itself had been let loose.

The cliff-slide was developing into amazing proportions.

The ground on which Nelson Lee and Nipper were standing seemed to be moving. The solid earth itself was shifting towards the sea. And this, in point of fact, was exactly what was happening.

A huge piece of land on which the house stood was sliding slowly, but surely, seawards and downwards. Unless the phenomenon came to a stop before long, the building itself would slide right down until it finally plunged into the sea.

The yawning cavity between Nelson Lee and the gates was now wider than ever, and thousands of tons of earth was plunging into it every second. And suddenly Nipper grasped his master's arm and pointed.

"Look at the house, sir!" he cried hoarsely. "The house is moving!"

"Yes, my lad, and we are moving with it!" said the detective quickly. "This piece of earth on which we are standing is sliding even as we are talking. House, outbuildings, gardens, and everything are on the move. It is astonishing that the house has not collapsed, for it has long since departed from its horizontal position."

During the last few seconds, in fact, the building has assumed a distinct slope. It was dipping down towards the rear, the front windows looking slightly upwards towards the sky. And that which Nelson Lee anticipated happened almost before the words were out of his mouth.

There was a deafening, shattering roar, louder than any that had occurred hitherto. Before their eyes Nelson Lee and Nipper saw one corner of the house crumble up like a child's castle of bricks. Two walls fell amid clouds of dust and flying debris. Furniture from the upper floors came plunging down into the open.

But while Nelson Lee and Nipper were watching, terrific excitement prevailed within the building. Zingrave was in a portion of the house that was unaffected. The room in which Vera was locked was also safe—so far. It was only the right-hand corner of the building which had collapsed. And in that corner were three human beings at the time of the disaster.

Two of them were Dr. Simeon Whitten and Wells, his assistant. The other was Douglas Clifford.

Dr. Whitten and his man were caught in the falling debris, and they disappeared beneath tons of falling brickwork and crashing beams. Exactly what their fate was nobody knew at the moment. By an ironic chance of fate the pair had dashed that way in alarm at the very moment of the catastrophe. Had they remained still they would not have been trapped.

Douglas Clifford was unable to help himself. He heard the confusion of sounds, and he was convinced that an earthquake was taking place. The barred cell in which he was imprisoned was on the outskirts of the danger zone, as it were. It seemed to him as though the whole building was crashing down over his head. His ears rang with the terrible conglomeration of noises. And suddenly one of the walls of his cell crumbled away like dust.

He sprang back, and crashed against the opposite wall, his lungs nearly choked with the dust. For several moments he remained there, not daring to move, and believing that his last minute on earth had come. He momentarily expected the ceiling to fall in, and to feel himself crushed to pulp.

But the worst was over.

The land-slide had nearly exhausted itself. That one corner of the house had met with disaster, but the rest was still intact.

Gradually the confusion died away, and Clifford was awakened to life and brisk action.

Believing that an earthquake was taking place he knew that another shock might occur at any moment. So he seized the opportunity which Providence had afforded him to make his escape. He was in utter darkness, and the dust was thick. He groped his way forward by feeling with his hands like a blind man. And he discovered that one entire wall had disappeared, leaving the way open for him.

Even in that tense moment he was irresistibly reminded of his escape from Strathio Castle, when he had been a prisoner in the hands of the League of the Green Triangle. That incident had been very different from this, but he was reminded of it, nevertheless.

As soon as he emerged from the cell he could see the sky around him. A large portion of the house was lying in ruins. Clambering over fallen beams and masses of masonry he at last succeeded in reaching the hard gravel. Here, more dead than alive, he sank down in order to regain his breath.

But the open air worked wonders. His dazed brain became clear, and the dizziness left him.

And as he breathed more freely he became aware of one fact.

Everything was still, and the ground no longer quivered.

The stupendous cliff-slide, in fact, was over. But what damage had it wrought ?

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CHAPTER IX

The Fire!—At the Risk of His Life—Conclusion.

CLIFFORD was in the act of struggling to his feet when he observed two dim forms hurriedly approaching him. He saw, as they came up, that they were Nelson Lee and Nipper.

“Thank Heaven you are safe, my dear fellow !” exclaimed Nelson Lee quickly.

"We were both convinced that you had met your death in this terrible catastrophe."

"We'd better get away," gasped Clifford. "There might be another shock at any moment."

"Shock! Do you imagine an earthquake has been occurring?"

Clifford stared.

"I should like to know what else it was?" he asked. "If it wasn't an earthquake it was a thundering good imitation! Of all the infernal pandemoniums— But what was it?" he broke off abruptly.

"A cliff-slide. A large portion of land has evidently become detached," replied Nelson Lee. "The whole house slid with the rest of the earth, and a portion of it crumpled up."

"It's like a nightmare, sir!" panted Nipper.

Nelson Lee nodded.

"It is worse than the nightmare, young 'un," he replied, with grim emphasis. "But what of the other occupants of the house, Clifford? Where is Dr. Whitten?"

"I've no more idea than you have—perhaps not so much," replied Clifford. "I met with a mishap soon after I had entered the house, and was thrown into a kind of dungeon. The place is like a prison, Lee! I hope with all my heart Whitten is buried beneath these ruins!"

He suddenly started.

"But where is Vera?" he asked, with hoarse alarm. "She is safe, of course?"

"I have no idea. Nipper saw her taken into the house some little time before the land-slide commenced, and she must be there now."

Clifford went deathly pale.

"She is in the house!" he repeated huskily. "Then—then she may be crushed and battered—"

"Don't get yourself into a panic," the detective interjected sharply. "Only a small portion of the building is affected. The odds are that Miss Zingrave is quite safe."

"But we must investigate at once!"

"I agree with you. It is absolutely necessary to—"

Nipper suddenly interrupted his master with a yell of alarm.

"The house is on fire, sir!" he cried. "Look—look!"

While they had been talking the old house had, indeed, been bursting into flames. The fire had started at the very outset of the land-slide, two or three lamps having been upset. And swiftly the fire had spread. For the first time the trio became aware of this new development.

"Fire!" rapped out Nelson Lee. "After such an upheaval it is scarcely surprising. The need for action is even more urgent than we anticipated."

They dashed round to the front of the house. And from there the outbreak of fire was very apparent. They instantly saw that it was very serious, for flames were bursting from the window of one of the front rooms.

The hall door stood wide open, and great gusts of smoke were pouring out on to the night air.

"Great Heaven!" gasped Clifford. "Vera is within the building, and we have been talking while the danger has grown into alarming proportions! We must act at once!"

He ran swiftly towards the house, tying his handkerchief over his mouth as

he did so. His head had been throbbing agonisingly—mainly the effect of the blow he had received from the plank in the cellar—but he forgot everything now.

Vera was within the burning building!

Very likely she was in a locked room, cut off from all escape.

Clifford nearly went mad with anxiety and horror. At that moment he felt that he would have plunged through the very flames themselves if there was the slightest chance of him saving the life of the girl he loved.

He simply flew up the steps, and plunged into the smoke. His eyes instantly smarted so much that he could hardly bare the pain without crying aloud. He groped before him, and was just able to see that, while the rooms on one side of the house were in flames, the others were not yet affected.

But to his right the door of the front room was already cracking, and tongues of flames were appearing. The house was old, and as dry as tinder. He knew that the whole building was doomed, and that the flames would spread with appalling rapidity.

The awful thought struck him that Vera was in the room which was now a rolling furnace of flame. If so, he knew that she must have perished long since, for she would have been caught in a death-trap. With the door locked there was no escape by means of the window, for all the windows were barred.

Frantically he raised his voice, and let out a terrific bellow.

His voice was husky and somewhat weak, but he nevertheless made a considerable din.

And instantly a hammering sounded on the door on the opposite side of the hall to where the fire was raging. He groped his way over to it, and grasped the handle. But the door refused to budge; it was locked securely, and the lock was a massive one.

"Vera!" he roared with all his strength.

Faintly he heard an answering cry. It was Vera's voice, and Clifford could have jumped for sheer joy. She was safe!

"Thank God!" he muttered fervently. "I am here, Vera!" he shouted. "Are you hurt?"

"No," came the reply; "but the room is filling with smoke, and I am nearly choked. I am afraid the flames will soon reach me."

Clifford waited to hear no more. He wrenched at the door feverishly, but it resisted all his efforts. He stepped back, and then charged at the door sideways. His shoulder thudded against the woodwork with a solid crash that jarred every bone in his body, and caused him the most exquisite pain.

But the door remained unaffected. What was to be done? Every second was of value, and if he delayed now Vera's life might pay the forfeit. But he knew that he was absolutely helpless alone. His shoulders, muscular as they were, were not capable of bursting the door off its hinges.

Without pausing to tell his intentions to Vera he staggered out of the house, and blundered down the steps as though drunk.

Nelson Lee rushed forward, and gripped him.

"You fool, Clifford!" exclaimed the detective sternly. "You might have sacrificed your life uselessly. The fire is spreading with terrible swiftness—"

"Vera is there!" croaked Clifford frantically. "She is in the front room—the room that is yet safe! Heaven help us, Lee, the door is locked, and I cannot burst it down. Vera is trapped—trapped!"

The detective drew his breath in sharply. He had felt sure that Vera was

beyond all human aid, and the thought had almost sickened him. But this news of Clifford's awakened him into fresh life.

There was a chance of saving the girl yet. And he himself was also willing to risk death in an effort to rescue the unfortunate girl. He gazed round him swiftly, and could see with perfect distinctness. One corner of the house was now a towering mass of flame, and the lurid light illuminated the whole scene with ghastly clearness. He saw a great log of wood lying against the drive, and he indicated it with a sweep of his hand.

Clifford understood at once. They dashed forward, gripped the log, and then hurried towards the house. Nipper ran after them, with an expression of nameless horror upon his face.

"Guv'nor!" he panted. "You're not going in there, sir! The fire is spreading—you will both be killed!"

"Courage, young 'un!" said Nelson Lee calmly, as he ran. "Do not attempt to follow us. If we perish it will be in a noble cause. But there is no necessity for you to share the danger. Go back, go back, lad!"

At the very foot of the steps Nipper paused and then rushed away, covering his face with his hands. In that second he fully believed that he would never see his beloved master again. Nipper was as courageous as any man living, but he could not help a flood of tears dimming his eyes. And as he stood there, sobbing as though the worst had actually happened, a figure came rushing from the rear of the house. The figure was that of Professor Cyrus Zingrave. The professor had made his escape from the rear—but not before he had performed a certain operation. Thoughtful even in the most dire moments of peril, Zingrave had once more donned the rags in which Vera had seen him. To have appeared in his own clothes would have given the game away completely. He knew that he must apparently be a prisoner escaped from his confinement.

He saw Nipper standing there alone, with his face averted from the blazing house. Zingrave had no notion who the lad was, but he approached him.

"Boy!" he exclaimed sharply.

Nipper twisted round.

"Oh!" he gasped. "Who—who——"

And then he paused, for he recognised the newcomer in spite of his rags and in spite of his unkempt appearance. Zingrave had added to the effect by making himself grimy, and had actually torn one of his hands until it bled.

"What is happening?", demanded Zingrave, with no vestige of his usually musical voice—for it was now harsh and sharp. "Where is Dr. Whitten? What has happened to my daughter?"

Nipper glared at the professor.

"Whitten is dead, I hope!" he said deliberately. "And Miss Vera is inside the house, and will probably never be seen again!"

Zingrave uttered a husky cry.

"You lie to me!" he exclaimed fiercely. "My daughter is in no danger——"

"She is in the house," repeated Nipper. "My guv'nor and another gentleman are even now attempting to effect her rescue. Oh, they'll never do it! They've gone to their deaths themselves!"

Professor Zingrave looked at the burning building, with eyes that glowed with a strange light. Perhaps, now that Vera was in danger, he felt a certain sensation of guilt. If Vera had indeed perished, he knew that he was the one to blame for the dreadful tragedy. But for his plotting Vera would have been here. He stood like a man dazed.

The flames were now roaring fiercely, and with a crackle like that of a thousand whips. The glare from the fire lit up everything with startling clearness. One

side of the house was simply a sheet of livid fire. The other was still intact, and the hall was only just showing signs of being seriously affected. What little wind there was was blowing in the right direction—that is, it was fanning the flames away from the portion of the house which still remained.

Nipper was watching now, too. Deep down in his heart he had a feeling that the direst tragedy in his life had occurred. His master had plunged into the flames in an effort to save the life of another, and would never emerge. But, although Nipper had that conviction, he nevertheless felt a wild desire within him to fix his gaze upon the door. Would his master appear? Would Clifford appear? Or had they both gone to their doom?

But both Nelson Lee and Clifford were by no means dead. In point of fact, they were very much alive. The fire was very deceptive from the outside. It seemed as though the whole building was involved. Smoke was rolling out of the front door in dense, impenetrable clouds, accompanied, now and again, by showers of sparks. But the hall itself was not in flames. The room on one side was a blinding furnace, and the door had burst through. And the fire was licking the staircase. A draught of air came from the burning room and ran upwards. The flames, therefore, were directed up the stairs, and not across the hall. The latter was spacious and wide.

It had seemed to Nipper that hours had passed. Yet, in reality, the exact time that had elapsed since his master and Clifford left him was three minutes—and no more than three minutes.

When Nelson Lee and Clifford plunged into the smoke they held their breath, and groped their way forward. It was impossible to see an inch, for the smoke was like yellow fog. Indeed, both the men closed their eyes, as it was of no use to leave them open.

Clifford was leading, and with one free hand he felt before him, until he grasped the knob of the door-handle.

“Here we are!” he mumbled, through his handkerchief. “There’s not a second to lose, Lee!”

Nelson Lee was only too well aware of that. He and his companion swung the log back, and sent it crashing forward on to the stout door. They put all their strength into that blow, and it had due effect. The door shivered and shook, but did not open. The second blow weakened it still more, and the third sent it crashing off its hinges into the apartment.

Dropping the log, Nelson Lee and Clifford staggered into the room and opened their eyes. But the smoke was just as thick here, and a lurid red light from one corner of the room showed that the fire had burned through from somewhere in the rear. The air was scorchingly hot.

“Vera!” cried Clifford, frantically.

But there was no reply.

Clifford felt as though an icy cold hand was gripping his heart, and he almost gave way to panic. But the presence of Nelson Lee made him retain his presence of mind. He fell upon his knees and groped about with his hands. The detective was doing the same thing close by.

And, abruptly, Clifford uttered a gasp of thankfulness. His hand had touched one of Vera’s arms. The next second he picked the girl up as though she had been a child.

“To the door, Lee!” he roared triumphantly, feeling as though he possessed the strength of ten men. “I have found her! Save yourself, man!”

Nelson Lee stood back instead of passing through the doorway. It was not his way to make his escape before another—especially when that other was burdened as Clifford was burdened.

The young man passed out with a perfectly steady stride. The discovery of Vera still safe had braced him up to a wonderful extent. He entered the hall and made straight for the outer doorway. Nelson Lee came close behind him.

The heat in the hall was now terrific, for the stairs was blazing furiously. To have remained stationery there would have resulted in awful burns. But the pair passed through swiftly, with never a pause.

And, after having remained in the burning house for an age, or so it appeared to them, they once more found the stars above their heads, and the cool night air fanning their scorched cheeks. As Clifford staggered down the steps a tremendously wild whoop sounded. It came from Nipper, who could scarcely believe the evidence of his own eyes. For Nipper had seen Nelson Lee at the same moment.

The lad dashed forward, and clung to his master's arm.

"Oh, gov'nor!" he choked. "I—I thought——"

"Never mind what you thought, my lad," interjected the detective, removing the binding from his mouth. "We are not yet dead, and Miss Zingrave has only fainted, I believe."

A short examination proved this to be the case. In fact, the cool air revived the girl quickly, and she opened her eyes to see Nelson Lee, Clifford, and her stepfather—to say nothing of Nipper, in the background.

The danger was over; her life had been saved, and the plot which Zingrave had hatched to force her into marrying Tressider had fallen to the ground, an utter failure. Fate had intervened, and had ruined the whole scoundrelly scheme.

The landslide proved to be a very serious affair. The roadway had disappeared for over a hundred yards, and millions of tons of chalk and earth had thundered into the sea. Altogether, Dr. Whitten's house had been shifted a clear hundred feet from its original position.

The gates leading on to the road were separated from the rest of the drive by a yawning cavity in the earth. This had been nearly filled up by the sides caving in.

The house itself burnt until not a wall was standing, although the outbuildings were not touched. The man, Pearce, had evidently come to himself during the excitement, and had made his escape. For when the shed was examined he was nowhere to be found. But his escape mattered nothing; after all, he had been merely an assistant of Dr. Whitten's.

Nothing more was ever seen or heard of Whitten himself or Wells. The pair had been crushed by the falling masonry and beams, and had probably been dead long before the fire reached them. At all events, no trace was ever found in the ruins, and the fire had been so fierce that everything had been consumed.

While the fire was still in progress, Nelson Lee had fetched his own motor-car from the place where it had been left. And in this the little party had travelled to the nearest town, and Vera was handed into the care of a kindly hotel-keeper's wife. Both Nelson Lee and Clifford were burnt in several places, and the next morning they were somewhat bandaged, but thoroughly cheerful.

They made rather a curious party, for Professor Zingrave was present. But he acted the thing thoroughly. He explained to Nelson Lee that he himself had been made a prisoner by Dr. Whitten, and that he had only just escaped with his life. Vera was as far as ever from knowing the true character of her stepfather.

And Zingrave had no idea of the real part that Nelson Lee had played in the little drama. The detective's story was simple. He and Nipper and their friend, Mr. Merrick, had been passing close by in their car when the landslide had occurred. They had stopped, and had been on the spot to render assistance.

The professor, for all his cleverness, was satisfied with the story. He was positive that Nelson Lee had taken no part in the business. Nemesis had been responsible for the frustrating of the plans.

For the plot to make Vera Malcolm Tressider's wife was now at an end. Zingrave abandoned it completely, for after what had happened nothing further could be done. And Tressider himself left England very shortly afterwards.

Nelson Lee was satisfied very thoroughly with the net result of the case. Another Governing Member of the League of the Green Triangle had met his deserts, and Professor Zingrave's foul scheme had come to nought. Clifford declared to Nelson Lee that at the earliest opportunity he would tell Vera the absolute truth concerning her stepfather. And the great detective offered no objection, for it was proved more than ever that Zingrave was utterly heartless, and certainly unfit to be the guardian of such a girl as Vera.

But when Clifford's opportunity would come he could not guess. Probably much would happen—other Governing Members of the League would fall before the time would ultimately arrive.

THE END.

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IN POLAR SEAS.

A Romance of Adventure in the Frozen North.

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FENTON ASH,

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

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

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

Hugh and Val Ruxton are sent out by Grimstock, the leader, who has, for some unknown reason, taken a great dislike to the youngster, to make observations, but return to find the camp deserted—they are left to die in the dreary white wilderness.

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

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

They fall in with a party of men dressed in the armour of the Vikings of old. These men, it seems, are expecting an attack by sea, and the chums, with their followers, offer to fight for them.

The offer is accepted just as a huge fleet of war-galleys is sighted. The enemy has come, and the "berserker"—the old lust of battle—seizes Hugh and Val in its grip.

A great battle takes place in which the chums prove to be splendid fighters. They are successful in boarding an enemy galley, and Cable turning round utters an exclamation of amazement. (Now read on.)

The Last Fight—Father and Son—Conclusion.

RUXTON looked round.

"Jimmy! A sail! Yes; there she is! A clipper, too!" he cried. "Coming up hand over hand! They've missed us and are giving chase! We'll have to fight again yet, before we get clear. I'm thinking!"

At first the two friends thought it might be possible to reach the head of the lake before the pursuing craft came up with them. But she gained upon the Colbrand so fast that they had soon to abandon that idea.

The appearance, moreover, of two other vessels in the distance, evidently bound on the same errand, complicated matters still further, and convinced them that it would be hopeless to risk a fight on board the galley. All the pursuers were seen to be sailing under the banners of Osth, a fact which caused some surprise.

"Osth must have got the best of it, after all, then," Ruxton commented. "Perhaps the seeming retreat of his people was but a ruse to draw the others on."

"His victory must have been a pretty decisive one," Hugh speculated, "to allow him time and leisure to come after us like this."

"Well, we can't fight the lot, situated as we are—that's certain," Val decided. "So the only thing I can see for us to do is to run this heavy awkward craft aground, and get out of her. We can wade ashore, and set off for our destination on foot. Once we gain the woods we shall be safe from attack, at any rate, for a while, even if they decide to follow us up."

"But how are we to find our way to—to the one you said you expected to meet?" Hugh asked, doubtfully.

"I must question Amaki and his friends as to that. I expect they know their way."

Amaki was sent for, and with him came a couple of men dressed in homely garb—the two who had aided in carrying the parcels of cartridges from the Cedric on to the Colbrand."

A short conference confirmed Ruxton in his plan, and they set to work at once to carry it out.

The galley was run ashore, and the little band left it in two parties. The first, under Hugh, carried the extra ammunition and some provisions, and some of them set off at once for the nearest wood, while Hugh and Amaki stood on the bank, and, rifles in hand, covered the departure from the galley of Ruxton and the two sailors.

It was not an easy manœuvre to carry out, for they knew that some treacherous attack was pretty sure to be made on them ere they could reach the bank.

To guard against this, as far as possible, they waded ashore crab-fashion—i.e., sideways. And it was well they did so, for two or three javelins were hurled after them, which, thanks to this precaution, they were able to throw off with their shields. At the same moment, the rifles on the bank rang out, and the treacherous spear-throwers paid the penalty of their murderous intent.

The afternoon was drawing to a close as they all gained the shelter of the wood and disappeared from sight, but though they were all about worn out from the exertions of this eventful day, they had no choice but to hurry on. As Ruxton said, the more space they could put between themselves and Osth's myrmidons, the less likelihood would there be of an immediate attack.

Their two guides, both elderly men, with grim, weather-worn faces that told of lives of exposure and privation, were reserved and uncommunicative.

and no information could be extracted from them. Their replies to questions were usually, "I know not," or "We can tell you nothing; you must ask our master."

Night fell and the moon shone out, and found them still tramping along the mountain slopes.

At last their guides called a halt, and announced that they had reached the place appointed. As, however, there was no sign of any one being there to meet them, and they were now all tired out, it was decided to rest at the place till the morning.

So far as they could guess, it seemed likely that they had not been followed, but it was only a guess and no more. The last they had seen of their enemies had been a glimpse they had obtained from a rock overlooking the lake, just about sunset. There had then been no less than three other vessels round the stranded Colbrand, and some sort of a fight seemed to be in progress. But the fugitives had not waited to see how it ended.

The place their guides had brought them to seemed well suited for defence in case of their being attacked by superior numbers. Hugh and Ruxton, having satisfied themselves as to this, and found that there was a cave at hand to sleep in, quickly made their dispositions and lay down to a much needed rest.

At dawn they were astir, and as the one they were expecting was still absent, they decided to wait a few hours longer ere they made another move.

They were on a rocky terrace on the side of a mountain. In the distance was the lake, on which, as the light grew stronger, they could just make out two or three sails. Evidently, therefore, the Vikings were still somewhere about, and it would be necessary to keep a sharp look-out in order to guard against any sudden attack.

Below the terrace was a grassy slope, and below this again another slope thinly covered with trees. Behind them was a high rock flanked on each side by thick wood.

Taking stock of their arms, it was found that there was a rifle for each of the eight able to handle firearms—their two guides knowing nothing about such weapons.

Hugh was restless, anxious, and uneasy. He was deeply disappointed at the fact that the mysterious unknown had seemingly failed to keep his promise. Ruxton, too, was perturbed. They had very little in the way of provisions, and save for the fact that they were now well armed, they seemed to be little better off than they had been before encountering the Vikings.

"It seemed to me," Hugh muttered, "that there must have been some misunderstanding. Hadn't you better have another talk with Amaki and question him, to see——"

Just then came a hail from Cable, who had mounted the rock at the back of the terrace as a look-out station.

"Below, ahoy! Are ye there, sir?"

"We're here, Bob," Val called out. "What is it?"

"Them pirates be a comin'—an' theer's a good crowd of 'em, too!"

A moment or two later the sailor had descended to give further particulars.

"I c'd reckernise several o' the galoots," he declared. "The boss o' the show, an' they chaps as you was a fightin' wi'."

"What?—Osth himself, and Hertseg, and Berdrok?"

"Ay, ay, sir; they be the names. They be all comin'."

"Good news!" cried Hugh through his set teeth. "This is good news indeed! It went sore against the grain to think of leaving here—if, indeed, there is any chance of our getting away—with the score we owe those chaps unpaid! Now there is a chance of not only getting our own back but avenging the awful suffering they have inflicted on others. What glorious news!"

Ruxton laughed at his enthusiasm. "Well, we'll try to teach them a lesson in good manners, at any rate!" he joined in. "Now then, lads, get the cartridges out, and take your stations. We couldn't have had a better place for defence than this if it had been chosen on purpose." Then a thought came to him; and he and Hugh looked at each other.

"Perhaps it was chosen on purpose," said Hugh in a low tone.

"Perhaps—yes—who knows?" Ruxton murmured thoughtfully; and then relapsed into silence.

It certainly was a well-chosen position—if chosen it had been. The terrace on which they stood was five or six feet above the grassy slope below, so that, after mounting the slope, a wall of rock of that height had to be scaled before the terrace itself could be reached. And at the edge of the ledge were numerous bushes and stunted tree-trunks, which afforded good cover for the defenders.

They had not long to await for the attack. Soon the Vikings were heard climbing upward with much blowing of horns and shouting and singing. Then, through the foliage below, gleams of light sparkled here and there, as the rising sun was reflected from armour and shield, from helmet and spear. And shortly afterwards the men themselves came into view in the more open woods at the foot of the grassy slope. And now it could be seen that two or three of them carried banners.

"Mercy on us, if they baint comin' it strong!" exclaimed Cable admiringly. "This do beat the Lord Mayor's Show."

"Certainly they've paid us the compliment of turning out in style," Ruxton laughed. "Anyone would think they expected to meet a whole army, instead of half a dozen poor unlucky travellers."

Hugh only smiled grimly. He was keeping an eye on Hertseg, whom he could see leading a file of men on the left.

"How many more?" muttered Ruxton, as another lot were seen on the right. "If this goes on we shall have our work cut out to hold our own!"

"We'll do it, though," said Hugh between his teeth. "We'll give 'em a lesson! They want it—have been wanting it a long time—a lesson as to their treatment of unfortunate travellers who stray here by chance. All the same, there are one or two there I would rather meet again in fair fight, man to man, as we did yesterday, than shoot them down. But if they won't meet us so, and prefer to bring all this array to beat us down by brute force—they must take the consequences."

Little more was said. The Vikings, whatever their vices, were certainly not wanting in courage, and they showed it now. Singing their wild, barbaric songs, and accompanied by their "scalds" and musicians, they followed their leaders up the ascent in fine style.

They were allowed to get as far as the foot of the grassy slope, and then the rifles of the defenders opened fire and sang another sort of song, which carried death and destruction into their midst.

But though the firearms—weapons hitherto altogether unknown to them—frightened many of them at first, they returned again and again to the charge. But their efforts were in vain. Not one reached the top of the slope.

Presently there was a pause, and a warrior was seen coming forward with a white flag. It was "Hertseg the Fighter," and he brought a challenge to the defenders to meet their champions in single combat as had been done the previous day.

"Rubbish!" was Ruxton's practical comment, as he saw Hugh flush under the taunts with which the Viking backed up his challenge. "Don't listen to him. If they got us at a disadvantage they would play some treacherous trick on us, you may be sure."

And with this view Hugh could not but agree; so the challenger went back rebuffed.

Then Osth—who was there in person, but so far had taken no active part in the conflict—grew impatient, and determined to make an end of the affair by rushing the terrace, let the cost be what it might.

There was accordingly much blowing of horns and trumpets, and a fresh outburst of singing and shouting; and then the whole force of the Vikings was marshalled for a rush.

Ruxton's heart fell a little as he saw crowd after crowd come out into view.

"Why, they must have brought the whole fleet across the lake during the night," he growled. "Every blessed ship!—and they have crowded every man jack they could spare into them! Lads, keep steady, and make every shot tell! If once they get a footing up here we're done for!"

With a great roar of rage and vicious fury the crowd swept upwards. So closely packed were they that the shots which the defenders poured into them seemed to have scarcely any effect. Men fell here, there, everywhere, but the gaps were no sooner made than they disappeared—were filled up. And so, like a huge breaker sweeping upon a tempest-tossed shore, irresistible and overwhelming, the whole armour-clad mass surged upwards, and gained the top of the slope.

There was a momentary pause as the front ranks halted under the shelter of the wall of rock and began to climb it.

Seeing that it was hopeless to remain longer, Ruxton was about to give the order to retreat into the woods at the rear, when, from those same woods—to left and to right—there came such a chorus of sounds as rose even above the triumphant cries of the assailants.

Sounds that were horrible, terrible to listen to; screams and shrieks as of pandemonium itself let loose; yells and howls that curdled the blood, and seemed to come direct from the throats of fiends and devils.

At once the attack ceased, the assailants fell away. Every one there knew what the hideous cries meant, and not one was stout-hearted enough to stay to meet those who made them.

Vainly did Osth himself, and his officers, Hertseg, and Berdrok and others, try to stay the rout. Vainly did they place themselves before their panic-stricken men and try to beat them back with their own swords. They could do nothing; the Vikings would not listen to them.

Ruxton and Hugh stared at each other. "It's your friends, Caliban and his fellows!" said Val in a low tone. "They have come at a good time! Once more they have done us good service!"

Suddenly, from out of the wood on to the terrace, a strange figure rushed. A tall, thin man, with unkempt, grey beard, and long, streaming hair, wild eyes with a hungry glare in them, as of fever or uncontrollable passion. He waved aloft a stout staff, and pointed at Osth and those near him.

"Aha, Osth!" he cried, in ringing, trumpet-like tones that were heard above all the din. "At last thy punishment is at hand! At last thou, and Hertseg, and Berdrok, and all the rest of thy cowardly rabble, have fallen into my hands! This day have ye walked into my trap! At last I shall be revenged for the long years of unspeakable cruelty and suffering I bore at your hands! Cowards! bullies! demons in human form! know that to-morrow

"Leave your accursed land! The means of deliverance are in my hands; but I would not go and leave you here unpunished!"

Osth and his jarls stared at the speaker, and fear came into their eyes.

"Who will kill yonder madman for me?" the chief cried. "A thousand pieces of gold——"

"Pah! Save thy breath! Thou wilt want it, I promise thee, if thou are going to run away fast enough to escape my hell-hounds. Come forth, my children! Come forth, my avengers! Here is your prey before you. You need not spare them! There is not a man amongst them who deserves mercy!"

He put a whistle to his mouth and blew shrill blasts upon it; and then, from out the woods at hand, rushed the "borghens"—the hideous, horrible, yellow-haired monsters that Hugh and his friends knew so well. But little had the chums dreamed that the creatures existed in such numbers as now streamed out of the wood! They came out in crowds, and, looking for their orders to the stranger, obeying his slightest signs, even the glance of his flashing eyes, they rushed down the slope like a swarm of avenging demons.

Nor sword nor shield, nor battle-axe nor spear, availed aught against them. Insensible to fear, careless as to what happened to themselves, they crowded round the luckless Vikings and vented upon them their awful rage and fury.

Few were there of the Vikings who reached their ships and escaped; and amongst that few, neither Osth the Hard, nor Hertseg the Fighter, nor Berdrok the Fierce, was to be found when they had re-crossed the lake and came to count up their losses.

As to the extraordinary figure who had brought this thing to pass, after he had watched the scene long enough to make sure that none of those he deemed most guilty had escaped, he turned to the party his arrival had saved from death or capture.

"There is one among you who calls himself Hugh Arnold," said he, in English, "whose full name I believe must be Hugh Arnold Fenwick."

His glance had already, as by instinct, rested upon Hugh, who was now gazing at him with staring eyes.

"My name is Fenwick," the stranger continued, "and I have dared to hope——!"

Hugh sprang forward.

"Father!" he cried.

"My son," murmured the old man.

And thus, at last, "after many years," did these two meet.

.

There is not much more of this strange story that needs to be told. Dr.

Fenwick, after the first emotions aroused by the meeting with his son had subsided, explained how he had come upon Grimstock's outfit hidden away in a cavern. During the absence of that gentleman and his gang on an exploring trip, Dr. Fenwick, aided by his faithful "borghens," had carried everything off, sledges, firearms, ammunition, stores of food and furs, tents, and other requisites, and concealed them in caverns farther away, where Grimstock could not trace them.

As a consequence, the latter and his band fell an easy prey to Gerwulf's people, and were seized and made to serve as "thralls," just as Dr. Fenwick had been years before.

"That man—Grimstock—basely deserted me and my Eskimo companions," the doctor solemnly declared, "when I was ill with a fever, and left us, as he thought, to die. But we had then reached the very verge of this country; and I grew better, and struggled on, and we arrived here. One day I saw a borghen and shot at it; but repented of the act, and, instead of killing it—it was only badly wounded—I tended the wound, and cured it. That was the beginning of a strange friendship with those creatures. Later on, I and my companions were captured by Hertseg, and taken before Osth, who condemned us to the mines; and there I lived a terrible life for many long years. At last, I, with a few others, escaped, and went back to the wild life in the caverns, with no other company than the strange beings we had made friends with before."

Such, in brief, was Dr. Fenwick's account of what had happened to him. The next day the whole party started out into the "White Wilderness," and, after a long and arduous journey,—reached the shores of Greenland. There they were fortunate enough to meet with a whaling ship, which, later on, brought them back in safety to England.

THE END.

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