

No. 78.—OUR FIRST CHRISTMAS NUMBER.

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MAGNIFICENT XMAS No

2^D



A CHRISTMAS OF PERIL

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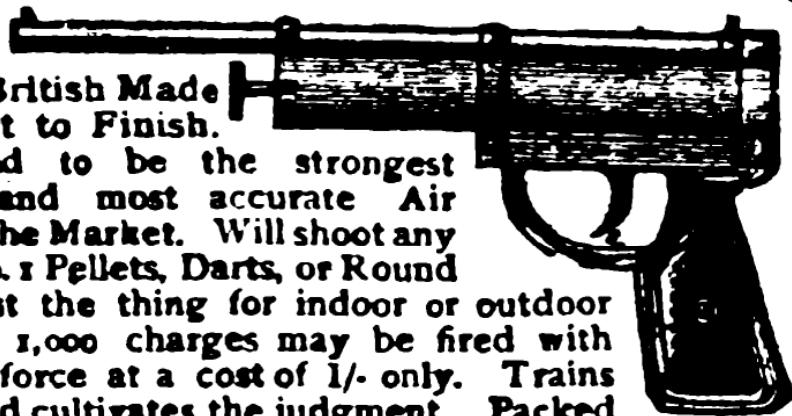
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THE PROLOGUE.

Christmas Eve—Clive Worthing's Mission—A Double Tragedy.

CRICKLEWOOD was disguised.

The eminently respectable London suburb was wearing a quite unusual appearance, for the streets, the houses, the gardens—everything, in fact—was enshrouded in a mantle of pure whiteness. The snow lay thick everywhere, and snow was descending silently and quietly from a dull, black sky.

It was snowing with singular force, and had been doing so for several hours past. It was Christmas Eve, and Londoners were somewhat astonished to see the gleaming snow. Most people had prophesied that Christmas would be signalised by miserable, drizzling rain; but the clerk of the weather had evidently recollected that Yuletide is the most suitable time for frost and snow. He had, therefore, rolled the dull, leaden clouds up, and these were now busily transforming dingy London into a place of sparkling whiteness.

To some the snow came bitterly and cruelly, but others, more fortunate in their homes and circumstances, welcomed the white flakes, and were glad of an old-fashioned Christmas.

It was late evening, and the snow had been falling since the early afternoon, and the downy flakes were silently drifting down in thicker numbers than ever. Windows gleamed warmly against the cold darkness, and within the houses the occupants were, for the most part, cheery and gay. But in one particular villa there was little or no Christmas cheer.

This house was a pretty little building—one of those modern, semi-detached dwellings which are springing up on all sides of London. It stood back from the road a fair distance, and young trees lined the painted iron railings. It looked like the house of a fairly well-to-do young married couple. And that is exactly what it was, with this exception—Mr. and Mrs. Clive Worthing were by no means well-to-do.

They were within the cosy drawing-room of the house, Worthing himself standing with his back to the fire, and his wife, Ethel, seated in a chair.

"It's not a bit of good, Ethel," Worthing was saying; "I'm going. I'm firm on that point. The fellow is responsible for our present difficulties, and I'm hanged if I see why he should sit by his fireside enjoying his Christmas with our money—our money, mind you!—while we practically starve."

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Mrs. Worthing lifted her head.

"Oh, Clive, I wish you would be reasonable," she exclaimed softly. "We're not starving—or practically starving, either. And what good will you do by visiting Mr. Marcombe to-night? He won't return any of the money——"

"Won't he?" interjected Worthing fiercely. "We'll see, Ethel—we'll see! The blood-sucking hound! I'll have it out with him, I tell you! I'll force him to——"

"But you can't force him, Clive dear."

"Nonsense! You don't understand business, Ethel, and I wish to goodness you wouldn't oppose me in this way!" went on the man petulantly. "The law may be unable to help me, but I'm going to take the law into my own hands. You understand? Marcombe's an arrant coward, and he'll knuckle under when he sees that I'm determined!"

Worthing lit a cigarette and paced the room with frowning brow. His wife, meanwhile, sat in her chair, and looked at him half fearfully and half admiringly. And all the time a great love shone in her deep-brown eyes. It was her love for him, in fact, which now caused her to oppose the plan. She was afraid—afraid for him. He was hot-headed, and when he was face to face with Victor Marcombe he would act rashly and thoughtlessly.

Victor Marcombe—stockbroker. He was the cause of Clive Worthing's trouble. He was the cause of this somewhat heated argument between two people who loved one another purely. Clive Worthing worshipped his wife, and she, in her turn, adored him.

They had been about the happiest young married couple in London three months before. It was only shortly before then, indeed, that they had been married. Clive Worthing's prospects had been excellent in every way, and both he and his young wife were perfectly contented. She was only a girl now—a dainty girl of nineteen, and rather above the average in good looks. Troubled as she was now, she lost none of her natural charm and prettiness.

But affairs with herself and her husband were serious. Not by any means desperate, but certainly serious. And the source of the whole trouble could be laid at Victor Marcombe's door. When the young couple had married, Clive Worthing had merely known Marcombe as a business acquaintance—nothing more. They were, of course, friendly in a business way, but nothing beyond that. For, frankly, Worthing did not like Marcombe, and never had liked him personally.

Marcombe was a stockbroker by profession, and—Worthing had thought—a thoroughly reliable and honourable man. To his bitter knowledge, Worthing now knew that his first impression of Marcombe was totally wrong. The latter had interested the young man in certain speculations. Hitherto, Worthing had never gone in for anything of that sort, and Marcombe had found in him an easy victim. To be brief, Worthing had been induced to trust his savings in Marcombe's hands, and he had even speculated further. The result, in three short months, was little short of disastrous. By clever manipulation and trickery Marcombe had defrauded young Worthing of every penny he possessed. Until a few days ago Worthing had thought that it was merely a matter of bad luck—that Marcombe was as straight as a die, and that he had done his very utmost to keep the sinking ship afloat.

On the contrary, Marcombe had deliberately schemed to possess himself of his victim's money. He had played Worthing false, and on this very day—Christmas Eve—Worthing had learned the truth. It would be wearisome to describe the full facts, for they are of no interest in this record of events. But Worthing had learned from an intimate business friend of his that

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Marcombe was nothing less than a rogue and a swindler. It had come as a great shock to Worthing, and it had had the effect of setting his hot blood afire. Always impulsive, an overpowering desire seized him to rush straight to Marcombe and have the whole thing out with him. Worthing had hurried home first of all, and his young wife, having an intuition of impending disaster, tried her utmost to dissuade him from his decision.

But Worthing was determined. Some people would have called him pig-headed and obstinate, but he undoubtedly had excellent cause to be highly incensed. He was not judging the stockbroker by unreliable gossip; the information he had received was positive and accurate. Marcombe had basely and deliberately tricked him, but took care to remain on the safe side of the law throughout the whole transaction. The stockbroker had performed his swindle under the cloak of a business speculation. And Worthing was all the more incensed because he had trusted Marcombe so implicitly; he had never doubted the man's word. Marcombe was a bluff, genial man by nature—outwardly; but inwardly he was crafty to the very core.

"The thing's got to be done, so it may as well be done straight away," declared Worthing firmly. "What's the good of hanging about until after Christmas? Besides, I feel just in the mood for the blackguard now. I can talk to him freely, and hit straight from the shoulder!"

Ethel Worthing looked startled.

"Oh, but you're not going to fight——"

"No, no; I don't mean literally," interjected Worthing, with a smile. "As a matter of fact, I would not soil my hands by laying them on his unclean carcass. But you can't realise how furious I am, Ethel. That man—that infernal traitor! I trusted him as—as I trust you, and all the while he was robbing me of the money I have laid by. It isn't as though it were a big amount, because it is comparatively small—small to him. That simply makes it all the more contemptible. I am going to Marcombe, and I am going to tell him exactly what I think of him—and I sha'n't pick and choose my words either."

"But what good will it do?" asked the girl anxiously. "Don't do anything rash, Clive, for my sake. What good will it do to tell Mr. Marcombe what you think of him? He won't return your money——"

Worthing drew something from his pocket and tapped it grimly.

"I fancy he will," was his quiet reply. "Marcombe has no more right to my money than a common burglar has. If I take the case into the law-courts I shall be beaten; but I sha'n't do anything so silly as that. I am going to try a game of bluff, and I have a shrewd idea that it will come off."

Ethel jumped up with a little gasp.

"What's that you've got?" she asked huskily.

"Nothing. That is to say——"

"Oh, it's a revolver!" she cried, with panting breath.

He replaced it in his pocket, took her by the shoulders, and gently pressed her back into the chair. Then he kissed her and smiled.

"I oughtn't to have shown you that." He laughed, but with a trace of grimness. "Don't be nervous, Ethel dear. It is a revolver, but I am not going to kill him. I tell you it's just a game of bluff. As I said before, Marcombe is an arrant coward, and one sight of this revolver will set him shivering."

"But Clive—Clive darling, it might go off——"

"It won't go off if I don't let it," he interjected. "And I promise you, little girl, that I am not going to do anything foolish. I don't hate the man; I loathe him, that's all. I am not going out with murder in my heart, and you must not be worried."

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Before she could reply he quickly left the room, and donned his overcoat and hat in the hall. And when he returned into the drawing-room she was crying quietly.

"Now, now! This won't do, you little silly!" cried Worthing, bending over her and pressing her shoulders. "I sha'n't be gone long, sweetheart. Marcombe's place is only in the next suburb—just a walk. I'll be back"—he glanced at the clock—"I'll be back before ten o'clock. Now, don't worry, will you?"

"I shall worry, Clive," she replied quietly, looking at him tenderly and earnestly. "Oh, won't you give it up? Won't you stop at home with me? I am so afraid——"

"But you musn't be afraid, Ethel."

"I am, Clive—I am!" she insisted. "I don't know, but I seem to have a positive assurance that something dreadful will happen. Please—please stop——"

"No, I am going," was Worthing's firm interruption. "And when I come back you'll tell me that I did the right thing. Good-bye, little sweetheart, and don't worry!"

He kissed her again and then quickly left the room. He smiled rather grimly as he paused in the hall to turn the collar of his coat up. After all, his wife's anxiety was only born of her love for him. Dear little girl! She would be quite in agreement with his own view when he got back, he thought.

Worthing opened the door, and a whirling smother of white flakes seemed to envelop him. He could scarcely see the opposite side of the quiet street, and everything—pavement, roadway, trees—was dazzlingly white.

"Ye gods, it's a real Christmas!" muttered Worthing, closing the door and walking noiselessly in the snow to the gate. "Hang Marcombe for the brute he is! But the thing's got to be done, and I may as well get it over!"

He started off down the street, the snow fluttering down thickly all round him. The flakes fell in countless thousands, and so covered the ground quickly. Already there was a thick coating of snow on everything exposed.

There were very few people about, for it was getting late now. Moreover, Clive Worthing did not find it necessary to traverse the principal shopping thoroughfares. Victor Marcombe's residence was only a comparatively short distance away, and could be easily reached in twenty minutes by sharp walking. But to-night, owing to the thick snow, it was fully half an hour before Worthing found himself at his destination. The flakes were still whirling down mercilessly, but he was warm enough, owing to the brisk exercise of walking. Traffic was practically nil in this particular road—a quiet residential avenue—and the roadway was simply a white carpet from pavement to pavement. Everything was deadly silent. Worthing seemed to be quite alone, for he could not see another soul, and certainly did not look to see if his movements were being observed.

Yet, as he paused on the sidewalk opposite the railings of Marcombe's house, a pair of idly curious eyes were upon him. The owner was a police-constable, who was ensconced in a deep doorway of an outbuilding on the opposite side of the road, sheltered from the snow.

The constable took no particular interest in Worthing's movements, but as the latter was the only individual in sight he naturally attracted the policeman's attention. But Worthing himself was quite unaware that he was watched. As the young man paused he shook himself slightly, for his overcoat was smothered in snow, and the brim of his hat was quite overloaded. He paused because he observed a certain thing. He had visited

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Marcombe's house on one other occasion, and knew that the stockbroker invariably spent his evenings in his luxurious library. This apartment looked straight out across a short lawn on to the roadway, and there was an immense bow window. This window was now dimly illuminated, but Worthing knew that the lights were probably quite brilliant; they were merely hidden by heavy plush curtains. And the central window of the bow was slightly open at the top. Until this moment Clive Worthing had fully intended going up to the front door in the ordinary way, and sending his card to Marcombe by the servant.

But now a sudden thought struck him. In all probability, Victor Marcombe would not see him. He could, of course, force his way through the hall, but that would cause a commotion, and Worthing did not care for the idea of that. Moreover, even if Marcombe did see him, the stockbroker would be prepared.

"I've come here to give the brute a surprise," muttered Worthing. "By Jove! I might as well do it properly while I'm at it. He's an absolute funk, and nothing would please me better than to see him grovelling and shivering with fright. I'll make my appearance at the window, and give him quite a turn!"

And so, without even turning his head to see whether he was observed, Worthing slipped over the low iron railings, and set off straight across the snow-covered lawn.

The constable in the doorway suddenly woke up. He had, as a matter of fact, been very little interested in Clive Worthing's actions. But now it was different. No ordinary, peace-loving citizen scrambles over other people's fences at a late hour on a winter's night—especially such a night as this.

"Now, what's this?" muttered the constable, relieving the doorpost of his weight. "That's queer, anyhow! That feller don't seem up to no good, to my mind. I'll just keep my eye on him."

He moved noiselessly across the road, gazing keenly before him as he did so. This was necessary, for the night was very gloomy, and the whirling snowflakes obstructed the view to a considerable extent. It was only when the policeman reached the opposite pavement, in fact, that he again caught sight of Worthing's form.

The young man was in the very act of raising the lower sash of the window. It was very suspicious, to say the least of it—although the constable was rather puzzled. A housebreaker doesn't "crack a crib" by entering a lighted room. The policeman was rather inclined to treat the affair lightly, once he saw that Worthing had made for the lighted window, and not one of the darkened ones.

"Just a Christmas lark, mebbe!" thought Robert heavily. "Like as not the young feller's goin' to chuck a few snowballs. Still, I'll keep my eye open, just to see that everything's all right."

His open eye showed him that the stranger had already raised the sash, and was within the apartment. For the space of perhaps twenty seconds the window remained as it had been; then a sudden slit of light showed that the curtains had been parted. They closed, however, at once, falling back into place after Worthing had passed beyond.

The constable hesitated.

"Well, I don't rightly know what to do in a case like this 'ere," he thought ponderously. "Seems as if everything's all right on the face of it. But I've got a kind of notion——"

Crack!

The policeman gave a violent start.

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There was absolutely no mistaking that sudden sharp sound which broke the utter silence of the winter night like the crack of a whip. It was a revolver-shot! And it lifted the constable out of his lethargy with remarkable abruptness.

"Great guns! There's murder in there!" he gasped.

He grabbed at his whistle and blew a shrill blast. Then, without waiting another second, he hauled himself over the railings and ran quickly across the whitened lawn. The window was wide open, and the policeman fell through rather than climbed. And as he parted the heavy curtains a dramatic scene met his gaze. The apartment was large and lofty, and brilliantly illuminated by an electric light. All this, however, the constable scarcely noticed. His attention was riveted upon two figures in the centre of the room, close against the large leather-covered desk.

Clive Worthing was standing in a curious attitude, and he seemed dazed and bewildered. He was staring—staring at something which lay at his feet. A revolver was fixed tightly in his right hand, and the constable saw that his other hand was smeared with something red and wet.

And upon the floor lay Victor Marcombe—shot through the heart. All this the constable took in in one breathless moment. And he became subconsciously aware of a thumping at the door. Obviously, it was locked, and the servants, having heard the revolver-shot, were alarmed and trying to gain admittance.

"He is dead!" panted Clive Worthing, in a mere husky whisper. "Great heavens above! I have killed him—I have killed him!"

He looked up, with horror and consternation in his eyes—and he saw the policeman within six feet of him. The blue uniform, with the bright buttons and the snow dazzling in the electric light, seemed to madden Worthing to an amazing extent.

"I've killed him!" he grated out, in a harsh travesty of his usual voice. "I don't know how it happened! But he is dead—he is dead—"

"You've said about enough, young feller!" interjected the police-officer sharply. "You'd better hand me that revolver—"

The constable's loud tones had an astonishing effect upon Worthing. He seemed to realise, all in a second, that he was in the hands of the law. And he acted without a second's loss of time.

Panic-stricken with what he had done, and with the thought of the dreadful consequences, Worthing acted on the impulse of the moment, and without connected thought. But one thought at least throbbed in his brain above the confusion of all others.

He must escape—he must escape!

The revolver flew from his fingers and crashed heavily upon the constable's forehead. The man was not badly hurt, but the blow was a severe one, and he tumbled to the floor, stunned and incapable of action.

With a husky intake of breath, Worthing bounded over the constable's form, reached the window, tumbled out into the snow, and set off across the lawn at full speed.

He took the railings in one clean jump, but slid upon the snow as he alighted, and came down on his hands and knees. He was glad of this, however, for he was not hurt, and he grabbed up a handful of snow and wiped the ghastly blood from his fingers.

And then he ran as he had never run in all his life. Apparently, the policeman's whistle had not been heard; to all appearances, there was not a human being in sight as Clive Worthing raced madly down the street.

He had escaped!

The thought seemed to spur him on the more, and he ran without think-

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ing where he went or what direction he took. But, instinctively, his feet led him towards his own house. It was altogether too wildly awful for him to grasp the full meaning of what he had done. He had killed Victor Marcombe!

Yet he was not a murderer at heart—he had not gone to that house with any such intent. But he had killed Marcombe—he had committed the awful deed.

It seemed to throb through his brain like the beating of hammers, and he had no idea of the passage of time. But there was nobody on his track, and he did not seem to realise that the snow, although deadening his movements, was a fatal element in the night's happenings.

He had got clear away, but his tracks were upon the ground as clearly defined as though each step had been carved out. Snow was still falling thickly, it was true, but the hounds would be upon the trail before those tell-tale marks were obliterated.

And, almost before he knew it, he was outside the gates of his own little villa. He pulled himself up abruptly, and as he did so his thoughts cleared, and his mind became filled with horror. His wife! There was no time for him to stop—he must grab all the money available and flee.

He was at the door while he was still thinking, and fumbled nervously for his key. But then he saw that the door was opened, and that Ethel was upon the doorstep, with a shawl wrapped round her shoulders. She had been waiting for him. Poor little girl! And this was the way in which he had returned—a murderer!

“Let me get in!” croaked Worthing hoarsely. “They’re after me, Ethel—they’re after me!”

He staggered into the hall and slammed the door to behind him. The girl stood looking at him with large, frightened eyes. She clung to his arm tremblingly.

“What is it, Clive?” she asked in a whisper. “What is the matter?”

He pulled himself away roughly.

“Don’t touch me, Ethel!” he panted. “I am not fit—Don’t touch me! I have killed him—I have killed him!”

“Oh! Oh, Clive, my husband! What have you done? You can’t mean what you are saying—”

“Good heavens! It is only too true!” he groaned. “I don’t know how it happened, little sweetheart—I don’t know anything! But he was lying there—on the floor—shot dead! And my revolver was in my hand—”

The words choked in his throat, and he fell back against the wall, limp and shivering. But his wife—this girl of nineteen—showed more strength than he possessed. She did not faint, and she did not shrink from him. Instead, she gripped his arm fiercely, and shook him.

“I don’t believe it, Clive! Oh, I don’t believe it!” she panted. “You didn’t kill him—there’s some terrible mistake! But the police? Are the police after you?”

“No; I’ve shaken them off—”

“But the footprints! It is snowing, Clive, and they’ll follow you without difficulty!” she went on quickly. “Oh, Clive—my Clive—you must get away from here!”

She left him there and hastened upstairs. When she returned he was in just the same position. He could not realise it all, and scarcely noticed that she stuffed some money into his overcoat pocket. It was every farthing in cash they had in the house, but it was enough to see him to the other side of England.

And one minute later Clive Worthing had resumed his flight. Just one

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hurried kiss, and a fervent hope that he would get away safely, and he was out in the snow again. And Ethel Worthing was left in the house alone—on Christmas Eve—with the knowledge that her husband was fleeing from justice, a murderer!

And while she collapsed upon the doorstep, faint and heartbroken, her husband ran through the snow—ran for freedom and safety. It had been a terribly tragic parting, but the horrors of the night were not yet over. Even as Worthing raced away three constables who had been following his track caught sight of him. And they instantly followed, and blew their whistles as they ran. It was a chase now; a grim chase, with all the odds in favour of the pursuers.

But Worthing escaped them—escaped them only to meet an even more terrible fate. It seemed as though the higher hand of justice had something to do with the night's happenings. For within two minutes of the chase Clive Worthing became aware that the hounds of the law were close behind him. And he was within two hundred yards of a quiet suburban station.

Worthing's wits were amazingly acute during those tense moments. And he saw, through the smother of falling snowflakes, that a train had even at that second stopped against the platform. The lurid rays from the fire-box cast a vivid glare up into the dark sky. Like a man possessed, Worthing dashed on, and simply hurled himself through the booking-office, past the startled ticket-collector, on to the platform.

The train was already on the move—was, indeed, swiftly leaving the station. It was a time for desperate measures; it was either a risky chance or certain capture, for the police were already upon the platform.

Clive Worthing leapt forward on to the swiftly moving footboard, and grasped at a door-handle. With a great panting gasp, he pulled himself into an empty compartment, slammed the door, and sank back among the cushions utterly exhausted. But, for the moment, he had foiled his pursuers, and was provided with a brief but much-needed breathing space.

The tragic end to the night's events was yet to come, however.

By an amazing trick of fate the train in which Clive Worthing sat came to grief. The accident happened barely five minutes after the train had left the platform, with the fugitive seated in an empty compartment of the last carriage.

Owing to the snow and the carelessness of a signalman, an express train dashed up behind on the same set of rails. And the express crashed fully into the rear of the slow-moving suburban train. It was all over in ten seconds—but the result was appalling enough.

Yet, upon the whole, the wreck was not so severe as might have been expected. The engine, tender, and first two coaches of the express were derailed, and several people were injured, but there were no deaths.

The same did not apply to the suburban train. The rear coach was absolutely and utterly demolished; not a single compartment escaped destruction. Altogether, seven people were killed, and ten gravely injured. And among the former was Clive Worthing!

Owing to the shocking nature of the accident, scarcely one victim was recognisable, for the remains of the poor passengers were mangled and torn beyond description.

Clive Worthing, the murderer, was almost the first victim discovered. He had obviously been killed instantly, and was nothing but a mere mass of smashed human remains. Beside him and partly over him lay his overcoat and hat—proofs of his identity being in both.

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Clive Worthing had performed a terrible deed, but retribution had followed with grim swiftness. He had paid the penalty for his crime, even within a hour of its execution.

CHAPTER I.

Three Years Later—Another Christmas—Turned Into the Snow.

NELSON LEE filled his lungs with keen, crisp air, and when he breathed out again his breath hung upon the cold atmosphere like steam.

"Splendid air in this part of the country, Clifford," remarked the great detective. "And if this frost holds we shall have some skating, after all. It'll be a pity if a thaw sets in before the ice freezes to the necessary thickness."

Douglas Clifford nodded.

"It would be a pity, indeed," he agreed. "But I fancy the frost is set in for a decent spell. We'll hope for the best, anyhow. Nipper won't be satisfied unless he has some skating, I am sure."

"I'm not going back to smoky London until I've been on the ice!" declared Nipper emphatically. "That's flat, gov'nor! What do you say, Miss Eileen? It wouldn't be Christmas at all if we didn't have some skating thrown in."

Eileen Dare laughed softly through her dainty furs.

"Christmas in England is not usually a time of frost and snow, Nipper," she replied. "I don't remember many old-fashioned Yuletides, at all events. This year is exceptional. And we must make the most of the frost while it lasts."

"Let's hope it lasts weeks!" said Nipper cheerfully.

Nelson Lee smiled, and lit a cigar, after passing his case to Douglas Clifford. And Eileen Dare took hold of Nipper's arm, and confidently told the lad that the frost would certainly hold for another week. And Nipper was mightily pleased, for he believed anything that Eileen told him without question.

The little party of four were walking briskly along a frost-bound country road, and tiny snowflakes were fluttering down from fleecy clouds overhead. The whole countryside was covered in a dazzling white mantle. And underfoot the snow was crisp and hard. It was, indeed, a glorious winter's morning.

Christmas was near.

And Nelson Lee and Nipper had decided—or, at least, Lee had decided—to "chuck up" work for the time being, and spend the holidays in the country. Perhaps the famous criminologist would not have left London but for an exceedingly pressing invitation to stay over Christmas with some old friends.

Lee required a holiday, and Nipper positively declared that he would be utterly useless during the whole of the ensuing year unless he and his master went down to Douglas Clifford's place for a fortnight.

This was certainly an exaggeration, for Nipper was as healthy as a two-year-old, and about as sprightly. But his master, knowing that they had both been hard at work for some months past, with scarcely a day's respite, decided to take the trip.

Moreover, Clifford would receive no denial. He and his wife had not been married so very long, and they were quite a young couple. They were immensely rich, and lived in a magnificent country house in Derbyshire, and were among Nelson Lee's most intimate friends. For he and they had

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experienced many adventures in the past—had worked together in strenuous times.

For Douglas Clifford was the young man who had assisted Nelson Lee so splendidly in the great detective's campaign against the one-time notorious Green Triangle League. That infamous brotherhood of scoundrels was now wrecked and dispersed, and Douglas Clifford had married the girl of his heart, and he knew that he would never regret doing so.

For Vera, his wife, was one of the most delightful of girls. She was, actually, the stepdaughter of Professor Cyrus Zingrave, who had been the controlling power behind the League of the Green Triangle. But Zingrave was dead, and Vera felt no remorse; for she had never cared for her stepfather, and had loathed him after learning his guilty secret.

Nelson Lee and Nipper's chase after Professor Zingrave was known the wide world over. The great scientist—the Green Triangle's chief—had been run to earth in Java, and had perished during a sudden volcanic eruption.

But all that was forgotten now. This was a merry Christmas-party, and the past was allowed to lie quiet. And there were other visitors at Clifford's house. Only two, it is true, for the party was a small one. And these two were made more than welcome because they were great friends of Nelson Lee; that was quite sufficient for Douglas Clifford to tender them a cordial invitation.

The pair were Eileen Dare and her elderly maiden aunt, Miss Esther Gilbey. It had really been Nipper's suggestion originally. The lad positively declared that the holiday wouldn't be a holiday at all without Eileen. And so she had been asked to come, and had gladly accepted.

For Eileen Dare was a girl in a thousand. She had assisted Nelson Lee in many knotty cases, and had proved her detective ability time and again. And she needed a holiday badly enough, for even now she was in the midst of an important campaign against her father's enemies.

Her father, Mr. Lawrence Dare, had been murdered by a gang of highly placed villains who privately called themselves "The Combine." This was by no means an organised society, but merely a number of influential City men who had banded themselves together for the purpose of personal gain. And they had killed Eileen's father as surely as though he had been stabbed to the heart. Actually, Mr. Dare had been sentenced to death as a traitor to his King and country, and had died of heart failure shortly before his sentence was to have been executed. But, in the eyes of Heaven, he had been murdered. And Eileen had sworn that she would make every scoundrel suffer.

That her words were not idle ones had been amply proven. To Nelson Lee's surprise, Eileen had displayed amazing powers of deduction and detection. And already she had dealt effectively with many of her enemies. It was only a few weeks since she had exposed Sir Caleb Hurst's gambling-den. Hurst had been one of the chief members of The Combine, and his loss would be felt keenly. But there were still many others for Eileen Dare to settle with.

And so this holiday in the country was just what she needed. And now, this morning, some days before Christmas, Douglas Clifford himself and three of his guests were out for a morning stroll.

Snow lay everywhere, and it was hard and set, for the temperature had been well below zero for three days past—very unlike that night, three years before, when Clive Worthing had paid the penalty for his crime in the railway accident near Cricklewood.

For then the snow had been soft, and a thaw had set in at once. Now

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the whole countryside was in the grip of a hard frost, and there was every prospect of skating at an early date.

As the little party reached the top of a rise Nelson Lee saw a large house upon the brow of an adjoining hill. It was a splendid building, and surrounded by a delightful wooded park. No doubt there was a drive leading up to the main door, but this was indistinguishable from the grassland owing to the all-covering snow.

"Fine place, that!" remarked Nelson Lee, pointing with his walking-cane. "One of your neighbours, I presume, Clifford? One of the old county families?"

Clifford shook his head.

"Oh, no; the fellow's quite a newcomer," he replied. "That's the Manor, you know, and I suppose one could call the occupant a neighbour. But Vera and I haven't had much to do with him. He has only been in possession about six months."

And the subject would have changed, but Nipper put in:

"But what's the joker's name, Mr. Clifford?"

"Desmond, I think," was Clifford's reply. "Yes, that's it—Hector Desmond. I don't like the man; although, to be fair, I must admit I've only met him once."

"Hector Desmond," repeated Lee. "Dear me!"

"You know him?"

"Not personally," replied Lee. "Only by repute. I think your judgment is excellent, my dear fellow. The less you have to do with the tenant of the Manor, the better. I hate insinuations, as a rule, so I'll give you a few details regarding Mr. Desmond some other time."

As Lee spoke he glanced at Eileen Dare, and saw that a little cloud had appeared upon her pretty brow. Always charming, Eileen was looking her very best this morning. She was attired in a warm tweed walking-costume, with exquisite furs, and a little fur toque to match. Indeed, it would have been very difficult to find a prettier girl in the whole of England than Eileen. Clifford would have said that his wife was prettier. No doubt Vera was exceedingly charming, but Eileen was daintier and sweeter.

And now, all of a sudden, that little cloud had appeared upon Eileen's face. The girl was, as a matter of fact, just a little upset at being acutely reminded of her grim work at such a time of festivity as this. For she knew well enough that Mr. Hector Desmond was an associate of the rogues who termed themselves The Combine.

Desmond was not actually one of their number, and so Eileen was not "up against" him. But he was, nevertheless, more than distantly connected with some of their shady enterprises. And he lived here—within a couple of miles of where Eileen was staying! Not being a member of The Combine, he had not interested Eileen sufficiently enough for her to inquire about his country house. But she knew now, and was rather sorry she did, for during this fortnight she wished to forget her work completely.

As they walked on, however, the frown disappeared from Eileen's brow, and she was soon smiling and cheerful again.

And after a while Clifford paused before a narrow country lane.

"I think we'll make a circular tour of it," he remarked cheerfully. "If we take this lane it will lead us round the hill on which the Manor is placed, and bring us round to the other end of the village. A little further round, perhaps, but it's a delightful walk."

"We'll go just where you take us, Mr. Clifford," smiled Eileen.

The lane was narrow, and evidently very little used, for its surface was almost spotless: only a few pedestrians had left footprints in the thick snow.

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The hedges, snow-topped and high, were thick, and the lane wound considerably. And as the quartette marched along abreast the snow began falling more thickly, but the flakes were still very small.

The summit of a small hill was reached, and then the lane took a sharp turn to the left. And down in the hollow thus suddenly revealed a curious sight met the gaze of Clifford and his guests.

The hollow was just a little sheltered, but the snow lay thickly enough, in spite of this; and, set a little back from the road, stood a sweetly pretty cottage. Trellis-work covered the front walls, but this was now smothered with drifted snow, and the roof was just one white expanse. Smoke was lazily ascending from the single chimney-stack in the very centre of the roof, and a more peaceful spot could scarcely be imagined.

But just now there seemed very little peace. There were signs of activity in the shape of two roughly clad men who were engaged upon a surprising task. They were, in short, carrying articles of furniture out of the cottage and stacking them upon the roadside!

"Well, this is a rummy time to be shifting quarters!" remarked Nipper. "And fancy piling all the stuff in the road, too! They might have waited till the van came along!"

The quartette were nearer now, and they could see more distinctly. And it was now apparent to them that a young woman was standing upon the garden path, near to the house, with a child in her arms. She was standing motionless, as though stunned for some reason.

Douglas Clifford frowned.

"H'm! I can't quite understand this," he remarked. "I had no idea that Mrs. Lethbridge was moving from the Dell. She's one of Desmond's tenants, you know," he added, by way of explanation. "Ethel Lethbridge, her name is—a young widow, little more than a girl."

"She seems quite lady-like," said Eileen interestedly.

"Oh, I assure you Mrs. Lethbridge is by no means an ordinary cottager," Clifford hastened to say. "I don't know her exact history, but she was certainly born of gentle parents and has been hard hit—possibly owing to the war. I believe she is very poor indeed—makes her living by writing short articles for the weekly magazines, but is evidently having a hard struggle to make ends meet."

They were nearly opposite the cottage gate by this time, and it just chanced that the two men were out in the road setting down a heavy chest of drawers. Clifford paused, and one of the fellows evidently thought that he was going to be addressed.

"Can't help it, sir," he said apologetically. "Narsty business to be a-doin' of Christmas-time. But it's Mr. Desmond's orders, an' 'e's the landlord!"

"What do you mean?" asked Clifford, puzzled.

"Why, this 'ere ejectin'——"

"Ejecting!" put in Nelson Lee sharply. "Do you mean to say that this poor woman is being forcibly ejected from her cottage—being turned into the snow practically at Christmas-time?"

"Mr. Desmond's orders," growled the man uncomfortably. "I don't like a-doin' of it myself, but Mr. Desmond says as Mrs. Lethbridge 'as to go out—so out she goes! It's only a matter of a few shillings——"

Douglas Clifford simply quivered with anger.

"Upon my soul! I have never heard of such brutality in my life!" he exclaimed, stepping into the gateway and barring the men's path. "Do you hear this, Mr. Lee? This poor woman is being forcibly turned out of her house because a few shillings rent is owing!"

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"I can't believe it!" said Eileen amazedly.

"You say that Mr. Desmond has instructed you?" demanded Clifford of one of the men.

"Yes, sir. 'Go to Mrs. Lethbridge,' says Mr. Desmond, 'an' get the fifteen shillings rent that's owin'.'" replied the man. "That's what 'e says to me an' my mate. 'And if the woman don't pay,' he says, 'turn her an' all 'er sticks out into the snow!'"

"The rotter!" gasped Nipper furiously. "Oh, the howling rotter! Fancy turning a woman and a kiddie out a few days before Christmas just for the sake of fifteen bob! I'd like to have five minutes alone with him!"

And Nipper was not the only one who was indignant. Clifford and Lee and Eileen were amazed at such harshness. And the case was even more cruel than they first supposed, for the man who was in charge went on talking.

"I can't make out what's come over Mr. Desmond, sir," he said, addressing Clifford. "He ain't much of a man, I know. But this is the limit. An' Mrs. Lethbridge told me that she'd 'ave the money an' over by Saturday, seein' as she's gettin' a cheque for some writin' or other. Seems it's been delayed——"

"Did Mr. Desmond know that?"

"I told 'im myself," replied the man.

"And yet you are here performing an act which for base cruelty I have never seen the like!" snapped Clifford. "You miserable brute! You are just as much to blame for having any hand in the affair. If you dare to enter that house again without my permission——"

"What's it got to do with you, anyhow?" demanded the fellow aggressively, changing his tone. "You look arter your own business!"

Clifford was in no mood to bandy words with the man, and he noticed that Eileen had already stepped forward and was talking to Mrs. Lethbridge. She was quite a refined young lady, certainly no older than twenty-two, and sweet-faced and gentle. The child in her arms was well wrapped, but she herself was shivering.

"You must let me help you," Eileen was saying softly. "Please—please do! I am staying with Mr. Clifford at the Elms, and you can repay the money to him just when and how you please."

Tears welled into Mrs. Lethbridge's eyes.

"I can't refuse," she said simply. "Oh, how good of you! I didn't know what to do. I—I was dazed with it all. I never dreamed that Mr. Desmond would take such a terrible step as to turn me out into the snow. I shall have money at the end of the week——"

"Yes, yes; of course," said Eileen quickly, pressing five pounds into the other's palm. But Mrs. Lethbridge protested strongly, and said that she would certainly not take more than one pound.

"Oh, well, we will talk about that later," smiled Eileen. "For the present we will see about your furniture. Oh, I feel so incensed I hardly know what to say. To think that a man would act so harshly at this time of the year—or, for that matter, at any time of the year. It is so paltry!"

But when Eileen turned away she found that Clifford had already paid the rent owing—and a quarter's rent in advance into the bargain. The man could do nothing but accept the money and sign the receipt.

"Now," said Clifford grimly, "you'll put that furniture back exactly where you found it!"

"That ain't part of our business——"

"By Jove, I'll show you whether it's part of your business if you don't look sharp!" thundered Clifford hotly. "You may have been acting under

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orders, but that fact makes your own part in the affair none the less despicable! You took this furniture out of Mrs. Lethbridge's house by Desmond's orders. You will now replace it—exactly as you found it—by my orders!”

The man growled out something under his breath, but offered no further objection. Nelson Lee, who had been standing by all the while, smiled grimly to himself. He thoroughly approved of Clifford's tactics, and was ready to lend a hand if the pair of hired rascals objected. Nipper, too, was ready to go for the fellows “baldheaded,” as he described it.

Every piece of furniture was replaced precisely where it had been found, and then the two men took themselves off with surly expressions. It was quite plain to Nelson Lee and Eileen—and to the others as well—that the ruffians were disappointed at having been frustrated in their designs. Possibly they had suddenly remembered that they would receive a sound rating from Mr. Hector Desmond when they reported the incident.

“It seems that we arrived at a most opportune time,” remarked Nelson Lee smilingly, as he and his three companions stood within the cosy little sitting-room of the cottage. “I am only sorry, Mrs. Lethbridge, that we did not arrive earlier. You have been humiliated in a most outrageous manner.”

But the young widow smiled happily.

“Thank Heaven I have such good friends!” she exclaimed quietly. “I didn't know what to do. It all came so suddenly—so unexpectedly. I never thought that Mr. Desmond would be so harsh. Oh, but I do not like to talk about it!”

“He cannot touch you now for a long time to come,” said Eileen, pressing the young mother's arm. “And you must not try to thank us, Mrs. Lethbridge. After all, we have only done a simple humane action. I do hope you will not be placed in such a dreadful position again.”

“And if that brute tries any nonsense again,” put in Clifford grimly, “come up to the Elms at once, Mrs. Lethbridge. As it is, he is powerless so far as turning you out of the house is concerned. And will you do me the honour of accepting an invitation to come to a little party on Christmas night?”

Eileen looked at Clifford with smiling approval, and Mrs. Lethbridge almost broke down again. She had been on the verge of panic just a little while before, but now these newly-found friends caused her to realise that there were good people as well as bad in the world.

“Oh, I cannot bother you!” she replied, flushing slightly. “And there's little Clive. He would be such a nuisance——”

“Come, come!” protested Clifford. “We shall be only too pleased to see both your son and yourself. I am positive that my wife will heartily agree that little Clive is one of the bonniest boys in the kingdom!”

And five minutes later the visitors left the Dell—as the cottage was called—and continued their walk. They were feeling happy at having performed a good action; and Eileen had compelled the young widow to keep the five pounds she had pressed into her palm. But they were all filled with anger and astonishment that any man could have turned a young mother and her child out into the snow, destitute, merely because a sum of fifteen shillings was owing for rent. It was not only profoundly harsh, but the act of a dastardly brute.

It almost seemed as though there might be something behind it all. But how could that be? What possible reason could Hector Desmond have for displaying the basest cruelty to one of his poorest tenants? What was Ethel Lethbridge to him?

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During the remainder of the walk home both Nelson Lee and Eileen Dare, at least, thought deeply on the subject. They knew something of Desmond's past record; they knew that he was connected with Haverfield and Bradford and Ross, and the rest of the combine.

But Lee and Eileen did not know, and formed no idea, of the dramatic events which were to follow that painful but seemingly unimportant incident.

CHAPTER II.

Hubert Desmond's Anger—Scheming for a Fortune—Mrs. Lethbridge's Past.

MR. HECTOR DESMOND was sitting in a big swivel chair before the desk in his library at the Manor. This was a noble apartment, and a cheerful log fire blazed in the grate, sending warm, ruddy flickers out into the room and upon the ornamented ceiling. The windows were closed, and snow was piled against them upon the sills. And right away into the distance, down in the valley, stretched the long vista of frost-bound country.

The library was rather blue with hazy cigar smoke, and close to Desmond's elbow stood a tray bearing a whisky decanter and a soda syphon.

Hector Desmond himself was neither large nor small, and his age might have been anything between thirty-five and fifty: probably it was nearer the latter. He was clean-shaven, and he wore a constant smile—it was habitual. But there was nothing genial in that smile, for it was cynical and cold. And his eyes were pale grey and cruel-looking. Yet at times Desmond could be one of the most genial of men—and at others a harsh, heartless brute.

He was reading now, and looked up with a frown as there came a tap at the door, and his butler presented himself. Desmond laid his paper down sharply.

"Well, Baines, what is it?" he demanded, with curt abruptness.

"Megson says he must see you, sir," replied the butler respectfully.

Desmond waved his cigar.

"Bring Megson in to me," he ordered, and within a minute the man to whom Douglas Clifford had spoken entered the library, fumbling uncomfortably with his hard bowler hat.

"Have you carried out my orders, Megson?" asked Desmond pleasantly. "I don't like turning people out as a rule, but that woman's becoming an infernal nuisance. She will find a place for herself and her brat before the night comes. There are always sympathetic fools ready to take compassion upon paupers——"

Megson shuffled uneasily.

"I am sorry, sir, but Mrs. Lethbridge ain't turned out," he exclaimed. "Not as I'm to blame in any way. I was doing the job right enough with the help of my mate when a young lady and two gents and a boy came up——"

"What's this?" snapped Desmond harshly. "A young lady and two men and a boy? What are you babbling about? Who were they?"

"Three of them I never set eyes on them before. But the other was Mr. Clifford, of the Elms——"

"Clifford—Clifford!" rapped out Desmond. "Wasn't my son there? Didn't Mr. Hubert arrive upon the scene?"

Megson shook his head.

"I never saw nothing of Mr. Hubert, sir," he replied. "And Mrs."

Clifford and the young lady were right furious, and came near to laying hands on me—leastways, Mr. Clifford did. He paid the arrears of rent, and three months in advance as well. I have come straight up here——”

The door suddenly burst open, and a coarse-looking young man strode in with a face which plainly betokened anger and disappointment intermingled.

“The whole thing’s been messed up!” he exclaimed heatedly. “Oh, you’re here, Megson. Get out—and be quick about it!”

The man looked at the elder Desmond inquiringly, and the latter jerked his head towards the doorway. Megson was only too glad to escape from the library. When the door was closed Hubert Desmond flung his cap upon the chair and swore forcibly.

“What’s the matter?” demanded his father. “I cannot make much of Megson’s rigmarole. Hasn’t Mrs. Lethbridge been turned out? Didn’t you go to the rescue as we arranged——”

“How in thunder could I?” snapped the younger man. “I didn’t want to make my appearance too soon, or Mrs. Lethbridge might have guessed things. And while I was waiting that fellow Clifford came along with three friends. Of course, they all stopped and had a look on.”

“And went to the rescue, I suppose?” said Desmond bitterly.

“Yes, they paid the rent and forced Megson and his men to cart all the furniture back,” replied Hubert, with a savage glare. “The whole game’s been simply spoilt. I didn’t have a chance to show myself at all.”

Desmond lit another cigar thoughtfully.

“Well, it’s no good getting into a fury, Hubert,” he said. “I don’t see that anybody is particularly to blame—except, perhaps, yourself.”

“I?” roared the other.

“Don’t shout at me. Yes, you. When you saw Clifford and his friends coming you might have guessed that they would have interfered. You ought to have gone forward at once and carried out our original plan.”

“Do you take me for a fool?” growled the younger man. “I didn’t see the crowd until they were practically at the gate—and then it was too late. So I simply remained behind the hedge and watched. Well, what’s to be done now? Our object isn’t gained, and it’s impossible to turn the woman out again.”

Hector Desmond chewed his cigar thoughtfully.

It was obvious, from the conversation between father and son, that the harsh measures with Mrs. Lethbridge were really only part of a pre-meditated plot. The widow had been turned out of her cottage for the especial purpose of allowing Hubert Desmond to arrive upon the scene and offer his financial aid. The object of this scheme was to get Hubert into favour with Mrs. Lethbridge. But why? For what earthly reason did Hubert Desmond wish to earn Mrs. Lethbridge’s gratitude?

The truth was, after all, simple.

When Desmond had acquired the Manor property he had found that the tenant of the little cottage—the Dell—was Mrs. Ethel Lethbridge. That had meant nothing to him at the time, but since then certain facts had been revealed to him—facts which startled him to begin with, but which pleased him afterwards.

Only a month before Desmond had learned that the young widow had inherited a fortune amounting to a huge figure. He had learned this item of news from the very solicitor who had the whole affair in hand, and, upon Desmond’s advice, the solicitor had so far said nothing whatever to Mrs. Lethbridge herself. She was in complete ignorance of the fact that she could have bought up the Manor, lock, stock, and barrel, should she

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have chosen. She was living in that little cottage, supporting herself by writing chatty articles for certain third-rate magazines.

The motive for allowing her to remain in ignorance of her inheritance was quite clear—but it was a cunning, scheming motive. She was a widow, and a girl of good parentage and upbringing. She would make any man a wife to be proud of. And Hector Desmond saw no reason why his son should not woo her and win her while she still thought she was poor. Afterwards—after the ceremony had taken place—it would not matter a jot whether she knew or not. It was, in short, a plot for Hubert Desmond to gain possession of her fortune.

Both father and son had talked the matter over, and had fondly imagined that Mrs. Lethbridge would simply jump at the chance. She was poor, and had scarcely a relation in the world. They thought that she would not hesitate a moment when her landlord's son came and offered her marriage. Hubert himself was content to carry the thing through, for Ethel Lethbridge was a delightful girl, and he really admired her. But his admiration was coarse and brutal, and he could not realise that she would rebuff him.

But she had done so—time and again. For two or three weeks Hubert had been trying to get into her good books, but she had shown him plainly enough that she disliked him, and he never really had the slightest opportunity of making any definite advance.

And so, as a means of gaining his end, Hubert had suggested to his father the plan which had so sadly miscarried this morning. It happened that Mrs. Lethbridge's rent was a little behind, and in the ordinary course of things Hector Desmond, harsh though he was, would never have troubled himself about it. But now it provided a weapon to wield with considerable force.

Accordingly, the father had caused Mrs. Lethbridge to be ejected from the cottage, and the son was to have come up in the nick of time to the rescue. Hubert had intended paying the rent, and sending his father's men off curtly. No doubt the plan was a sound one, and Mrs. Lethbridge would certainly have been grateful to Hubert—for she would not have guessed the depth of the plot. It would have provided Hubert with a starting-point for his overtures; he would have earned her gratitude and regard, and after that he prided himself that it would be a simple matter to persuade the girl to marry him. Once married, she could be freely told of her inheritance. She would, of course, then know how she had been tricked, but it would be too late for her to take action.

And now, solely owing to Eileen Dare's and Clifford's intervention, the little plan had gone all wrong.

"It's just the one chance we had, pater," growled Hubert savagely. "Just the one chance. The girl won't look at me, of course, and takes care to keep out of my way. Naturally enough, she thinks I have some sinister motive in approaching her, and I really don't see what we can do. I'd better give it up as a bad job."

"And lose the fortune?" snapped Desmond. "You young fool, don't you realise that the woman's worth practically a quarter of a million? She's three times as rich as I am—and you talk about giving it up! Somehow or other, Hubert, you've got to marry her! And the marriage must take place before she knows anything of the fortune—that's obvious."

The young man lit a cigarette, and shifted his position.

"I can't force her to marry me, can I?" he growled. "I've done my best, pater. Besides, there's that stigma against her—I've got to think of that. It's bound to come out after we're married—"

"Utter nonsense! It's impossible for that old wound to be reopened," was the father's curt interjection. "Her name is Ethel Lethbridge, and nobody knows her husband was Clive Worthing."

"Her name is Worthing——"

"It used to be. But since her husband met his just deserts she adopted her maiden name," Desmond continued. "Hang it all, boy, what does it matter if she were the wife of Clive Worthing, the murderer? She's none the worse for it. Even if the truth does leak out there will be no reflection cast upon her."

"But it's not exactly pleasant, whatever you say," objected Hubert.

His father rose and tapped him upon the shoulder.

"Don't be absurd, my boy. There's nothing unpleasant at all. I shall see that none of the girl's past life is ever brought to light. The fact that she's the widow of Clive Worthing is immaterial. She's rich—tremendously rich—and that's all that matters. If you marry her you'll be in a far better position than I am—you'll be a rich man for life."

The younger man's eyes gleamed greedily.

"Richer than you, eh?" he exclaimed. "Why, the allowance you give me will be a mere nothing compared to the allowance I shall give myself! I'll give you a few lessons in how to spend money, pater. Yes, by George, I'll see the thing through!"

It was a big inducement indeed.

And the father and son fell to scheming how they should gain their object. No time must be lost, for time was precious. And in some way or other Ethel Lethbridge's consent had to be obtained. It was a knotty problem, and required much thought.

CHAPTER III.

The Face Against the Window-Pane—The Vanishing Footprints.

DARKNESS fell complete and absolute.

By seven o'clock in the evening the night was as black as the Stygian valleys. Snow was falling steadily from a dull sky which completely obliterated the stars. The moon would not rise until several hours later, and so the countryside was enshrouded in pitchy gloom.

It was still freezing hard, and Nipper was rather elated to find that the barometer showed no sign of change.

But, black as it was outside, within the drawing-room of the Elms everything was brilliant and gay and cheerful. Clifford had had his house fitted up throughout with electricity. As Nipper expressed it, the "juice" was manufactured on the premises. And in the drawing-room a superb electrolier cast down a warm glow from its numerous shaded lamps.

It was the interval before dinner, and the party were gathered in the drawing-room for a little singing and playing. Mrs. Clifford had just finished playing a delightful solo upon the piano, and she was now accompanying Eileen in a song.

The girl-detective sang very sweetly, and she held her listeners enthralled. Her voice was not powerful enough for a concert platform, but it possessed a singular charm which delighted the company.

Everybody, in fact, was bright and happy.

Needless to say, nobody knew that the young widow was really the wife of Clive Worthing, the murderer who had met an untimely fate three years previously. The affair had caused a little sensation at the time, and Nelson Lee himself had been somewhat interested. But it was all dead now, and

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even if Vera had known Mrs. Lethbridge's real identity she would have been none the less cordial. The poor girl was to be pitied rather than condemned.

It was Christmas-time, and good cheer abounded. But that night an incident was to occur which left an uncomfortable feeling that all was not right. The incident, in itself, was not so very startling.

Mrs. Clifford smilingly excused herself after Eileen had finished her song. To tell the truth, Vera was going off to a store-room to fetch a music-album which contained a favourite solo, and it was during her absence from the drawing-room that the thing happened.

Softly humming to herself, Vera walked across the wide lounge hall and entered a long passage which led to another wing. This passage was wide, and there were three big windows at intervals upon the right-hand side, all looking out upon the snow-covered lawn.

The passage was illuminated by low candle-powered electric lamps, and these were drastically shaded, so that no rays should penetrate into the night outside.

Vera was walking quickly, her silken skirt rustling as she moved. Curiously enough, she was thinking of her own happiness, for she and her husband loved one another passionately. Their courtship had been a strange one, as past records have shown, and their love had been tried to the uttermost on many occasions.

But those days were past for ever now—the days when her dreadful stepfather had been alive—the days when the League of the Green Triangle had flourished like a foul blight throughout the Kingdom.

Vera laughed softly, and sighed. And then, with a little catch of her breath, she came to an abrupt standstill.

It was almost as though her thoughts were being answered, as though a breath of the past had come back to remind her of those troublous times. She had drawn opposite to the last window of the passage, and there, pressed against the lower window-pane, was a face!

Vera stood stock still, her heart beating wildly.

For a fraction of a second she thought that a tramp, possibly, had found his way into the grounds of the great mansion; but then, as she stared, her eyes grew large, and it almost seemed to her as though her heart ceased its beat.

For, wildly impossible though it seemed, she recognised in that face the features of her dead stepfather—Professor Cyrus Zingrave!

He had been clean-shaven, and had possessed a high and noble brow. But this man, whose face seemed to be part of the night itself, wore a straggling black beard, and his brow was hidden by a low-worn cap.

But the eyes! It was the eyes which transfixed Vera Clifford's attention. Never had she forgotten the eyes of Professor Zingrave. They had always had a strange fascination—an appearance of wonderful power. If Vera had been requested she could never have described the eyes of her stepfather. But now she recognised them in an instant.

The eyes of this man—this stranger in the night—were the eyes of Zingrave!

It was all over in a moment. Vera saw the face, recognised it, and as she looked it seemed to fade away into the surrounding blackness. Could it be a vision? Had she really seen the face, or was it merely the outcome of the thoughts which had just been passing through her brain?

In any event, the shock was too much. Vera staggered forward, and all her pent-up feelings found an outlet in a terrible scream of horror. It rang

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out clearly and with intensity, and the air quivered with the throbbing sound.

And Vera fainted. She reached the window-ledge, and sank upon it limply and as pale as a ghost. She was strong-minded enough, brave enough, but the sudden shock had been altogether too great for her to bear.

And those in the drawing-room heard that scream just as they were smiling at the conclusion of a humorous song rendered by Nipper. Douglas Clifford jumped to his feet, his face blanching.

"Great Heaven! What was that?" he exclaimed tensely.

"A servant, probably, frightened by a mouse."

"No, Lee; that was no servant," said Clifford quickly. "It was a scream of absolute terror, and my wife——"

But Eileen was already at the door. Instead of conjecturing, the girl-detective was bent on finding out for herself. And in two seconds they were all hastening across the hall, Aunt Esther bringing up the rear, holding up her hands in alarm and anxiety.

In the hall the butler had just made his appearance.

"Did you hear it, Dixon?" demanded Clifford.

"That I did, sir!" replied the butler in a quavering voice. "It fair chilled my marrows it did! Came from the north passage, I believe."

Clifford, his mind in a whirl of anxious doubt, sped along the passage and suddenly uttered a low cry. The next moment he was bending over his wife, and Eileen was tenderly stroking Vera's forehead.

"She has fainted," murmured the girl softly. "Nipper, fetch some water!"

Nipper was off like a streak of lightning, and while he was fetching the water Vera was gently carried into a reception-room near by and laid upon a soft couch. Nelson Lee, who was something of a doctor, made a brief examination.

"Well, Lee?" asked Clifford, with quivering lips.

"There is no need for you to worry, my dear fellow," was Lee's quiet reply. "It is merely a fainting fit. Mrs. Clifford has received a sudden shock, I should imagine. She has been frightened suddenly and unexpectedly. She will soon be herself again."

And then Nipper came with the water, and Eileen fetched some brandy. It was an anxious time, but after five minutes' careful attention Vera uttered a sigh and opened her eyes. Her cheeks were not pale now.

"He has come back," she murmured fearfully. "Oh, Douglas, he has come back——"

"Don't talk, dear!" said Clifford gently. "Tell us all about it when you are better."

Vera said no more for the moment, but refused Eileen's offer to take her up to her own apartment. Vera was strong-minded, and very soon she was able to sit up and compose herself. But there was a strange look of dread in her eyes, and she clung to her husband's arm instinctively. The others gathered about, anxiously awaiting to hear what Vera had to say.

"It was my stepfather!" Vera said, almost in a whisper. "It was Professor Zingrave himself! He is not dead——"

"Hush, darling! You do not know what you are saying!" said Clifford, interrupting her. "Professor Zingrave! He has been dead for many months, and it is quite impossible that he should come to life. He was a clever man, but——"

"I saw him!" said Vera, with a shiver. "His eyes—they were looking at me through the window. Oh, I saw him as plainly as I see you!"

Nelson Lee found Nipper staring at him amazedly, and the detective

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moved a little closer to the couch. Eileen Dare, who knew very little of Lee's campaign against the League of the Green Triangle—at least, little of the inner details—was frankly astonished.

"I really think you must have been mistaken, Mrs. Clifford," said Nelson Lee quietly. "I do not doubt for a moment that you saw the face against the window, but it is incredible to suppose that it belonged to Professor Zingrave. Such a supposition, in fact, is not to be thought of."

Vera looked at Nelson Lee very strangely.

"You know me, Mr. Lee?" she asked quietly. "You have proved that I am not a girl of fancy?"

Nelson Lee nodded readily enough.

"During the strenuous days of our fight against the Green Triangle I have had many proofs of your level-headedness, Mrs. Clifford," he replied.

"Well, Mr. Lee, I want you to believe me when I tell you that the face I saw belonged to my stepfather," was Vera's reply. "I am not given to imagination, and I know that I have not made a mistake. Impossible though it seems, Professor Zingrave is alive. He is here! Oh, I am so frightened!"

Clifford bent over his wife tenderly.

"But you must not be frightened, little girl!" he said softly. "And now you really must go up to your room for a little while. Good gracious, you are shivering even now! Miss Dare, will you be kind enough to look after Vera while Mr. Lee and I look into this affair?"

And in spite of Vera's protestations she was taken up to her own apartment, where Eileen and Aunt Esther tenderly cared for her. Meanwhile, Lee and Nipper and Clifford stood out in the passage and discussed what had occurred.

"It's queer—infernally queer!" growled Douglas Clifford, lighting a cigar. "I can't quite get the hang of it, Lee. Vera's about the last girl in the world to imagine things. Well, I suppose we'd better have a look outside, just to satisfy ourselves."

"We will go at once," Lee replied, with a puzzled frown. "I am glad that your wife is strong-minded, Clifford; but, personally, I honestly believe that she is mistaken. Indeed, how can it be otherwise? It is absurd to suppose that Professor Zingrave is alive. Both Nipper and I saw him perish with our own eyes."

"He was swallowed up by a terrific torrent of lava," said Nipper. "I expect Mrs. Clifford saw a tramp, or somebody else who had no right in the grounds. Anyhow, gov'nor, let's hurry outside and see if there are any footprints. This snow ought to tell quite a clear story."

Clifford started.

"By Jove, I forgot the snow!" he exclaimed. "Of course, the footprints will be as clear as daylight. We'll settle the thing straight off, Lee. We'll follow the footprints until we come up with the man who made them." Then with their collars turned up, they ventured out into the blackness of the night.

Lee was armed with an electric torch, and as he opened the great door he received something of a surprise. He had known that snow was falling, but he thought that the downfall was comparatively slight. Now, however, a great smother of whirling flakes drove into his face.

"Phew!" ejaculated Nipper. "It's coming down thicker than ever!"

"Yes, and if I'd known it I wouldn't have wasted a second!" growled Lee. "Hang it all, why didn't I think of this?"

"What difference does it make?" asked Clifford.

"My dear fellow—the footprints! With snow falling at this rate they

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will be obliterated in no time. But we will do our best, at all events. Possibly the trail will still be distinguishable," said Nelson Lee, striding forward. "That is, of course, if your wife really did see a face."

The snow was falling with intense thickness. Myriads of flakes seemed to fill every square yard of space, and in less than a minute the trio were white from head to foot. The detective's torch cast a white beam through the still whiter flakes, and they trudged through drifts of snow which had collected against the house wall.

The third window of the north passage was soon reached. A gravel path ran alongside the passage, flush with the wall. This was, of course, choked with snow, and formed one white expanse. But suddenly Lee quickened his pace, and then paused, holding his torch perfectly still.

"Footprints!" ejaculated Nipper. "So there was somebody, guv'nor! How rotten—they're nearly filled up already!"

Deep impressions made by a man's boots were clearly visible directly below the window. There were many of them, as though the man had tramped about within a small space for some little time. Possibly he had stamped his feet in order to keep them warm.

"Ah! Do you see?" exclaimed the detective. "The man, whoever he was, came straight across the lawn to this window, and went back the same way. As you can see, there is a line of prints coming to the house, and one going away."

The trio moved forward a little, and it was easily seen that the intruder had evidently remained near the window for some little time. This was quite obvious by the fact that the outgoing footprints were much more clearly defined than the others. Indeed, the incoming prints were all but obliterated by the snowfall.

Walking quickly, Nelson Lee and his two companions followed the tracks right across the two big lawns, through the Italian garden, and up to a point where the exterior wall was fairly low.

Nelson Lee directed his torch-rays upon the parapet of the wall, and here the snow told its own story. At this point it was broken and uneven, clearly showing where the stranger had clambered over. But the snow was falling so thickly that in a very short time it would be difficult to distinguish the break.

Climbing over, the trackers picked up the trail of footprints once more. But now it was only possible to see the single line of receding tracks. But these were the ones they wanted to follow, and they quickly walked along the narrow lane which skirted the wall.

After walking half a mile the footprints died away, and were finally lost. The heavy snowfall was responsible for the marks being obliterated, and it was clearly absurd to walk on under the circumstances.

"We've lost him!" exclaimed Lee, with a frown. "And I don't think the slight delay made any difference. We should only have been have to follow a short distance further, in any case. With snow coming down at this rate the task of tracking the fellow is an impossible one."

"And we don't know who he is, even now!" grumbled Nipper. "What's to be done now?"

There was only one thing to be done, as a matter of fact. And that was to return to the Elms empty-handed. And during that walk Nelson Lee was strangely uneasy. Had Vera been an ordinary imaginative girl he would have dismissed the affair with scarcely a thought.

But Vera was just the opposite. She was level-headed, and Lee had never known her to give way to panic. Why was she so sure that the

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face had been that of Professor Zingrave? Was it possible that Zingrave was indeed alive?

Lee clearly remembered how the Professor had died. He had disappeared over a high ridge while a volcanic eruption was taking place. And less than a minute later that ridge had become a glowing mass of white-hot lava. For Zingrave to have escaped seemed an impossibility.

But Nelson Lee remembered one thing. *He had not seen Zingrave actually die!* He had not seen the master-criminal's remains after death. Zingrave had been simply swallowed up, and everybody had taken it for granted that he had perished. But had he perished?

For the first time Lee began to have just a faint suspicion of doubt. And during his walk home to Clifford's house the great detective was vastly perturbed. He felt uneasy and unsettled, and had an idea within him that his holiday at the Elms was to be dramatic and perilous.

As events turned out, Nelson Lee was certainly correct!

CHAPTER IV.

Desmond's Visitors—An Amazing Development—Desmond's Strange Behaviour.

WHAT a night! When it snows in this part of the country, Desmond, it does so in earnest!"

The speaker was Mr. Sydney Bradford, and he had just stepped into Hector Desmond's library, accompanied by a tall, elderly, distinguished-looking man. Desmond shook hands cordially with Bradford, and looked at the other inquiringly.

"Oh, this is a friend of mine, Desmond," said Bradford, waving his hand. "I am sure you will extend your hospitality to him. Let me introduce Mr. Henry Faversham. This is Mr. Desmond, my dear chap."

The two men shook hands, and Desmond eyed Faversham curiously for a moment. The stranger was a quiet-looking man, and not the sort of companion Desmond would have expected Bradford to bring. As for Faversham himself, he was perfectly at his ease, and calmly helped himself to one of Desmond's cigars from a box upon the table.

"Bradford told me I should find you a good fellow, Mr. Desmond," he said easily. "Let's hope we get on well together. Just to set your mind at ease, I had better mention that I am quite in Bradford's confidence. I know all about the Lethbridge woman affair."

"Oh, indeed!" said Desmond, frowning. "Well, we'll discuss that later. What sort of a journey did you have? Rather rough, travelling by motor-car, wasn't it?"

The three men seated themselves round about the huge fire, and for some little time the conversation ran along ordinary, every-day channels. And then the gong sounded for dinner, and Mr. Henry Faversham was introduced to Mr. Hubert Desmond, who was rather surprised to see the elderly stranger.

Hubert and his father had known that Bradford was coming, but they had not expected him for two or three days. And they certainly had no idea that he would bring a companion with him. Evidently something unusual had turned up—at least, so the Desmonds supposed.

The four men were the only diners, for Desmond was a widower, and there were no other guests. During dinner there was a feeling in the air that something was wrong. Bradford seemed uneasy, and his host was quite convinced that he was only awaiting the opportunity to talk on the subject which had brought him so unexpectedly.

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Sydney Bradford was one of Eileen Dare's principal enemies; he was a member of the infamous combine which the girl detective was fighting. Desmond was not, but he was certainly quite as great a scoundrel. It had been Bradford who had told Desmond of Ethel Lethbridge's inheritance. Bradford was a solicitor, and the young widow's affairs were completely in his hands.

Some little time before Bradford had paid Desmond a visit, saying that he had been brought into the country on business. He was there, in fact, to communicate some news to Mrs. Clive Worthing, who was living in a small cottage called the Dell under her maiden name.

For some reason Hector Desmond had been greatly startled. Ethel Lethbridge was one of his own tenants, and he had hitherto taken no interest in her whatever. He had certainly not had the slightest notion that she was the widow of Clive Worthing. He had acquired the property only shortly before, and Mrs. Lethbridge had been living there then.

But Desmond had calmed himself, and Bradford had gone on to say that his business with Mrs. Worthing—to give her her right name—was of a very important nature. He had, in short, journeyed to Derbyshire in order to tell her that she was the sole legatee under a distant relative's will—that she possessed a fortune worthy of a duchess.

Naturally enough, Desmond had been surprised. That one of his tenants should turn out to be a rich heiress was surprising enough in all conscience. And for some reason Desmond was all the more interested because the woman was Clive Worthing's widow.

That visit of Bradford's had been quite an ordinary one, and it was purely a matter of chance that he had told Desmond of his mission before seeing the girl herself.

And then a pretty little plot had been hatched—a plot which is already known. Desmond had told his legal friend to wait a few weeks before enlightening Ethel Lethbridge. It would do no harm, and certainly no law would be broken. There was no danger whatever in carrying out the scheme.

In short, Desmond saw no reason why his son should not reap the benefit of this unexpected fortune. He had simply to marry the widow before she became aware of her wealth, and directly after the ceremony it would not matter a jot if the truth came out at once.

But an unexpected hitch had occurred, for the girl had not fallen at Hubert Desmond's feet as both father and son had fondly imagined she would. She had, in fact, shown Hubert only too plainly that she did not care a toss for him, and that she detested his clumsy preliminary overtures. As a last resort the eviction idea had been tried. But, thanks to the intervention of Eileen Dare and her friends, that, too, had failed.

And now Sydney Bradford had unexpectedly come down from London. Both the Desmonds were sure that something unpleasant had occurred, and they were uneasy. But what was Henry Faversham doing there? Why had Bradford brought him? The Desmonds were soon to learn.

After dinner the four men adjourned to the library, lit cigars, and scated themselves. Bradford was very grave, and it was plain that he had something of a serious nature to discuss.

"First of all, I wish you to thoroughly understand, gentlemen, that my friend here is acquainted with the full facts," commenced the solicitor slowly. "Faversham can be trusted right through, and you may be assured that he is not down here merely as a listener. He is going to help me and I will tell you how in due course."

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"But what's wrong?" asked Hubert anxiously. "I suppose the whole thing's no good, Bradford?"

The solicitor removed the cigar from his lips.

"Not exactly that," he replied. "To tell you the truth, I am going to give you both a shock. You must prepare yourself to hear a very amazing revelation. It is a development which is not only astounding, but staggering!"

The elder Desmond swore.

"Confound it all! Get it out!" he snapped impatiently.

"Give me time—give me time," was Bradford's rejoinder. "I shall be some minutes yet before I come to the point. It is necessary for me to go back almost three years. In the first week of the New Year following the tragic death of Clive Worthing, a stranger walked into my office and gave me a sealed letter, with the instructions that it should be opened by me on the fifteenth day of this month of this year. He paid me a large fee, and I took the letter, and stowed it away. That's clear, isn't it?"

"Quite clear," agreed Desmond. "Well, the fifteenth was at the beginning of this week. You opened the letter, of course?"

Bradford nodded.

"On the morning of the fifteenth I opened the letter," he agreed. "The stranger—who did not give his name—had told me that further instructions were enclosed in the sealed letter, and that the fees which he had originally paid me would cover all expenses. I found a short note within the packet, together with another letter, also carefully sealed. And the note simply instructed me to find Mrs. Ethel Worthing, and to hand her the sealed letter upon the 24th of this month—that is, Christmas Eve."

Desmond looked puzzled.

"I don't see anything particularly amazing in that," he remarked. "I presume you have come here to fulfil your charge? Have you any idea what the letter contains?"

"Yes. I opened it."

"You opened it?" said Hubert, staring.

"Exactly," was the calm reply. "Oh, that may sound unscrupulous and dishonourable, but I thought the circumstances were exceptional. By George, they are! But you must understand that I opened the letter mainly for your sake, Desmond."

"For my sake! How the thunder do you make that out?"

"Naturally enough, I thought that the letter was connected with Ethel Worthing's inheritance," replied Bradford. "Surely that was an obvious supposition? And if I handed it to her without knowing its contents, your little scheme would be knocked on the head."

"Of course. But what did the letter contain?"

The solicitor leaned forward.

"That letter was from Clive Worthing himself!" he said deliberately.

"Written before his death?" asked Hubert.

"Obviously. Dead men don't write letters!" said Bradford. "But you don't seem to grasp the significance of what I said. That letter was written by Clive Worthing himself—and it was written after his supposed death!"

"Supposed death!" snarled Desmond suddenly. "Curse you, Bradford, why can't you be straightforward! Worthing is dead! He was killed——"

Desmond paused, panting, and sank back in his chair rather confusedly. The others were certainly surprised at his unexpected outburst.

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"Of course Worthing is dead!" he went on huskily. "He was killed in the railway accident. What do you mean by saying 'supposed' death, Bradford?"

"I mean that Clive Worthing is alive!"

Hector Desmond leapt to his feet.

"Is this a joke?" he snarled hoarsely. "You fool, Bradford. I—I mean to say—why, it is absurd!" he added, again confused. "You know as well as I do that Clive Worthing, the murderer, is not alive!"

Bradford looked at the other curiously.

"I was under that impression, I confess," he answered. "But you asked me to speak bluntly, and I did so. Must I repeat my assertion? Clive Worthing, the murderer, is alive and well. That's the absolute truth."

Hector Desmond laughed mirthlessly.

"Well, I shouldn't have thought it," he muttered. "Worthing alive—eh? How do you know, Bradford? How, in Heaven's name, do you know?" he added, with sudden fierceness. "What proof have you got?"

"The proof of the letter I have already referred to. If you have concluded these outbursts, I may, perhaps, be allowed to proceed," said the solicitor smoothly. "I found that the letter had been written on the first of January—a week after Worthing had been 'killed.' And the very wording of the letter itself—the information it contained—was proof positive without anything else. I have the letter here."

"Show it to me!" rapped out Desmond. "Show it to me!"

"Not just yet. It is quite short, and simply tells Mrs. Worthing that her husband will return to her on this forthcoming Christmas Day. He will return to her under another name and in a new identity, and will by that time have atoned for his crime. That's the gist of it."

Hubert Desmond stroked his chin.

"But I'm hanged if I can see the object of the message," he remarked. "If Worthing's coming back himself on Christmas Day, why should this letter be delivered on Christmas Eve? It seems pointless."

Sydney Bradford smiled.

"The point is there, but you have missed it," he said. "Worthing, in fact, was rather shrewd. He foresaw that if he suddenly appeared before his wife, three years after his death, she would probably have about ten fits in succession. Accordingly, my instructions were to hand this letter to her the day before his intended arrival. Don't you understand? Mrs. Worthing would then be prepared for the joyful reunion, she would have got over the shock, and would be ready to receive him."

"A murderer!" sneered Hubert.

"My dear young friend, they are husband and wife, and I believe they loved one another very sincerely," said Bradford quietly. "You may wonder why Worthing has left his wife in ignorance of his miraculous escape for three years; yet it is easily understood. In his letter he says that he did not consider himself fit to go to her until he had atoned for his crime. And so for three years he determined to go right out of the country, and do good in every direction possible. And by this Christmas, to use his own words, he would have 'cleaned his soul,' and would be fit to return to the one woman he loved."

There was a short silence. The elder Desmond lay back, chewing his cigar until it was a mere unsmokable rag. Henry Faversham seemed rather bored, and Hubert was plainly interested, but somewhat puzzled.

"That's the long and short of it," concluded Bradford. "To all intents and purposes, Worthing is dead, and, but for the fact that I opened the letter, not a soul on earth would have known of his escape, except his wife."

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She, of course, would have been taken out of the country at once. Worthing swore before Heaven that he did not mean to kill Victor Marcombe. He is morally innocent of the crime, and takes it for granted that his young wife is still true to him."

"So the whole game's no good?" said Hector Desmond at last. "You have come here, I presume, Bradford, to inform me that our scheme for acquiring the widow's fortune is off? Since Worthing himself is alive, it is obviously impossible for his wife to marry again."

The solicitor glanced at Faversham.

"No," he replied softly. "It is impossible. We are now coming, in fact, to the real object of my visit. I have a plan to suggest to you—a plan which will overcome all the seeming insuperable difficulties which now strew the path."

Desmond started.

"Is there danger?"

"Not a scrap—if we are cautious," interjected Bradford. "But it will necessitate a general agreement among ourselves—a conspiracy, to be frank—and only caution will be needed. I, for one, am ready to risk my liberty to achieve our end. It's a big scheme, Desmond, but it's certain of success!"

CHAPTER V.

Bradford's Scheme—A Famous Character—The Plot is Concocted.

CLIVE WORTHING was alive!

It was certainly an amazing revelation. And Sydney Bradford, who was an unscrupulous scoundrel, had made his startling statement quite calmly and smoothly. But he was a solicitor, and usually chose his words with ease. Bradford was, of course, a member of The Combine, and was an even greater rogue than Rudolph Stebbing, whom Eileen had already dealt with. He, too, had been a solicitor, but his villainies had been his own undoing.

Bradford's story of the sealed letter was quite simple. Clive Worthing, finding himself alive, had deliberately concealed the fact from his wife because he thought it better so. And he had gone to Bradford, thinking the latter was an honest lawyer, and had instructed him accordingly. It was Worthing's evident intention to return for his wife this very Christmas-time.

But behind that simple story there was another.

How had Worthing escaped? Nobody had ever doubted that the murderer had met his fate that awful Christmas Eve, three years before. His hat and other articles of clothing had been found upon the remains of an unrecognisable form, and it had been known that he sat in the very last coach of the train, which had been demolished.

As a matter of fact, Worthing had had a miraculous escape. Yet, when reviewed from every standpoint, he only escaped solely owing to his own efforts. It was not a marvellous stroke of pure luck.

As it had been generally known, the coach in which he sat had been smashed to matchwood. Not a single occupant of that coach escaped death or terrible injury. How, then, had Clive Worthing done so? The very fact that it was an impossibility for anybody to have escaped left no room for doubt regarding his fate.

But the actual truth was extremely simple, and, indeed, only logical. Worthing had flung himself into the train at the last moment. He had known that police were on his track, and after he had recovered his breath he realised to the full his perilous position.

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One thing was certain: When the train reached the next station he would be arrested, for the police would certainly telegraph information through. And as soon as Worthing had realised that he had acted.

It was necessary for him to escape from the train before it reached the next station. Accordingly, he opened the door of the compartment, stepped upon the footboard, and fully intended leaping upon the permanent-way. He was desperate, and quite ready to take that step. And, as it happened, that step was necessary—necessary to save his life! For, while he was standing upon the footboard in the driving snow, he saw the second train thundering up behind on the same set of rails. Worthing knew at once that a terrible disaster was inevitable; he knew that he himself would be among the certain victims.

And so, without a second's hesitation, he had jumped, jumped only a few moments before the collision occurred. The snow saved his life, for he plunged into a deep drift of it, and was not ever bruised. The snow which had betrayed him to his pursuers had turned his friend now! And, even as he picked himself up, the dreadful crash occurred. The fugitive's brain was very keen that night, and it dawned upon him that it would certainly be supposed that he had been killed. He had raced forward in the snow, and had found some poor fellow lying among the wreckage, dead, and mangled beyond recognition. It had taken Worthing only a few moments to remove any identification papers which the dead man's clothing contained. And he had left his own coat and hat upon the remains, and had vanished into the darkness only a few seconds before rescuers arrived. Thus it appeared that Clive Worthing had perished, and police and public never doubted otherwise.

And now, after three years, he intended returning. But it seemed that events were not to go as he fondly imagined. He was quite unaware of his wife's good fortune, and he never dreamed that others would take an interest in her. Yet such was the case—rogues were bent upon securing the fortune of which even she was in ignorance.

The fact that her husband was alive had only just become known to them, and that, it would seem, would have put a complete stop to their scheme. For to carry the plan out it was necessary for Hubert Desmond to marry Mrs. Ethel "Lethbridge." But how could Hubert marry her now?

Sydney Bradford, at least, had not come to the end of his resources. The scoundrelly solicitor was ready and willing to go to far greater lengths to accomplish the end he and the Desmonds had previously discussed. For Bradford, as it happened, was in need of money, and he would take good care—being a lawyer—that he would receive a good proportion of the spoils.

Originally he would not be able to demand an equal share in Ethel Worthing's fortune. But if the others entered into his new scheme—which was absolutely criminal—they would have to agree that he received fully one quarter. This would amount to practically sixty thousand pounds—with trimmings—and Bradford was quite ready to go to the lengths he proposed for such a sum.

And in the library of Desmond's house, while the snow beat against the window-panes, Bradford's fresh plans were discussed. He had said that only caution would be needed, and that it was a big scheme. He was right enough there, for it was a murderous, dastardly plot.

"In a sentence, the situation is this," said Bradford, after he had lit another cigar. "Hubert has got to marry Mrs. Worthing, and Worthing himself must never be allowed to return to his wife. At present she thinks he is dead, and must never know anything to the contrary."

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The elder Desmond started.

"You're not suggesting to kill——"

"I'll explain my scheme as I go along," interjected Bradford calmly. "You needn't look at Faversham in that way; he's in this business as much as we are. He is here, in fact, to perform a very important task. Now, Mrs. Worthing may know that a letter is to be delivered to her on Christmas Eve."

"How?" demanded Hubert.

"I don't know how, but there's a possibility," was Bradford's reply. "Therefore she must receive the sealed package on Christmas Eve; she must receive a letter from her dead husband."

"Are you mad?" grated Desmond. "If she received that letter——"

"I did not say that letter," cut in the solicitor. "That, of course, would be fatal. But she must receive a letter in Clive Worthing's handwriting, which will lead her to be even more convinced than ever that he is dead, and which will, moreover, materially assist Hubert in his matrimonial overtures."

"You're talking sheer nonsense!" growled the elder Desmond. "Such a letter would be a forgery. We can't forge Worthing's handwriting. We could make an attempt, perhaps, but his wife would see through the trick in a moment."

Bradford shrugged his shoulders.

"Not if the forgery were executed well enough," he replied. "Now, listen! This forged letter will be dated some weeks before Worthing supposedly died, and it will have been presumably placed in my hands for future use, if necessary. There is nothing extraordinary in that. Men do very queer things with lawyers every day, and this would appear to be quite straightforward."

"I don't quite understand."

"You will when I have finished. In that letter Worthing will say that in the event of anything happening to him he would be peaceful in his grave if his widow married Hubert Desmond. What would be the result of such a communication? I don't wish to fog you, but just think it over."

"I'm not fogged," declared Hector Desmond. "Everything is as clear as crystal. Such a letter as you say would have tremendous influence. The young widow would get a letter from the past, a letter from her dead husband, and she would undoubtedly go to great lengths and sacrifices in order to fulfil his wishes. And the fact that you, a well-established lawyer, presented the letter, would cause her to entertain no suspicions. She would, I believe, marry my son without further demur."

Bradford smiled, and lay back.

"Well, there you are!" he exclaimed comfortably. "My plan strikes you as being effective, then? You think that everything would be satisfactory?"

Hubert growled under his breath.

"Satisfactory so far as it goes," he replied. "But it doesn't go far enough, Bradford. Just think of the difficulties!"

"I have thought of them."

"Well, how do you propose to get over them?"

"Quite easily," was Bradford's reply. "But what are the difficulties you have in mind?"

It was Desmond senior who replied.

"There are two which stand out above all others," he replied. "Two which, to my mind, seem quite insurmountable. Firstly, there is the matter of the forgery. I don't see how a letter can be concocted in Clive

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Worthing's handwriting. A signature, perhaps, but not a whole letter. That spoils the scheme from the very start. And secondly, how is Worthing himself to be prevented from arriving on Christmas Day?"

Bradford's eyes narrowed.

"There is one way," he replied significantly. "One certain way. If this game is to go through that one certain method must be adopted. I think you grasp my meaning?"

Hubert Desmond caught his breath in.

"But that would be mur——"

"Silence, boy!" snarled his father, with sudden intensity. "Bradford is right—Bradford is quite right! Worthing must be stopped, and stopped in such a way that the truth can never come out. I agree heartily on that point."

Henry Faversham glanced at the door, and then spoke for about the first time.

"Are we private here?" he asked calmly.

"Quite."

"Then what the deuce is the meaning of all this roundabout talk?" asked Faversham composedly. "I hate walking round the point. Why not be straightforward? Clive Worthing has got to be killed—that's the truth, isn't it?"

"No need to talk about it so boldly——"

"Why not?" smiled Faversham, stroking his grey beard with an air of boredom. "Bald language is the best in the end. To further this pretty little plot Clive Worthing has got to be killed. Do we all agree on that point?"

"I agree heartily!" said Hector Desmond quickly. "The man is a murderer, and he would have been hanged in the ordinary course. So what difference does it make?"

Faversham smiled.

"Not a bit," he replied, with perfect sang froid. "Not a little bit. The job will, perhaps, be a little difficult, but I'm going to attend to that detail myself. You may leave Worthing completely in my hands!"

"You!" repeated Hubert, staring.

"Exactly. You fellows needn't trouble yourselves about Worthing," was Faversham's reply. "You'll have your own part of the business to look after. I'll look after mine."

"By George! I knew you were a cold-blooded fellow, Faversham," said Bradford candidly, "but you really take my breath away. And what about the forgery?"

"That is my concern, too," replied the elderly newcomer. "I may not look like a forger as you see them in the Scotland Yard portrait galleries. But I assure you, Mr. Desmond, that I'm quite an expert at the game. It is a little hobby of mine to practise penmanship."

Both the Desmonds stared incredulously.

"But you couldn't forge Worthing's handwriting," said the elder bluntly.

"I think I can. Bradford has an excellent copy for me to work by," replied Faversham coolly. "Is this letter here a specimen of your own excellent calligraphy, Mr. Desmond?" he added, picking up a sheet of paper from the desk.

"Yes," replied the host, glancing at it.

Without another word Faversham picked up a blank sheet of paper and a pen. He wrote several lines of writing upon it at almost normal speed, and his audience watched, believing it impossible that he could be copying

A CHRISTMAS OF PERIL

the original. To forge a letter effectively one would need to work laboriously for hours.

"How's that?" said Faversham with a smile.

"He tossed the page across, still wet, and watched the Desmonds and Bradford with an amused glint in his eyes as they stared at the written word. Hector Desmond himself uttered a gasp of sheer amazement.

"This is my handwriting!" he stuttered. "This—this is not a forgery at all! My—my signature! By thunder, I am lost for words!"

It was indeed startling. The letter, which Faversham had written with such perfect ease, was an exact reproduction of Desmond's own writing. Every stroke of the pen was precisely the same, and Desmond himself would have been willing to swear that he wrote the letter with his own hand.

"Do you think I can write the necessary letter?" smiled Faversham.

"You must be a genius!" gasped Desmond.

Faversham nodded.

"I am!" he replied evenly. "That's just the word, my dear man. I am an absolute genius at anything connected with penmanship. But I merely do it as a hobby—I can't help myself, you know. But I may as well put my gift to good advantage now that the opportunity presents itself."

"Well, you're the limit!" said Hubert, staring.

"If my powers are of any service to you, gentlemen, you are at liberty to use them," went on Faversham. "You must not suppose that I am offering my talents gratuitously, however. There are four of us in this little plot, and we must all share equally."

Hubert Desmond started up.

"But I'm going to marry the girl——"

"The easiest part of all," put in Bradford sharply. "Your task, Hubert, will be simplicity itself. The girl is, after all, of gentle birth, and she will make you a better wife than you deserve. And we, who take all the risk, must certainly be compensated—or the whole scheme drops at once."

Hubert's father nodded in agreement.

"That is only fair," he remarked. "The scheme has changed its aspect now, and we must alter our views accordingly. Faversham, in fact, is more than entitled to his quarter share—for he is to commit the forgery and to—er—attend to Clive Worthing into the bargain."

Henry Faversham chuckled at the words, for he would have preferred plain speaking. He was rather amused, too, at the way in which they were all discussing the sharing of a fortune which was still a long way from their grasp. But, with Bradford's legal aid, there was no reason why the plan should not be carried out in all its aspects.

For Faversham, although appearing to be such a respectable elderly gentleman, was nothing of the kind! His true identity was even unknown to Bradford himself. The solicitor had become acquainted with Faversham some little time before, and the pair had become so intimate that they had already "worked" more than one criminal dealing. And Faversham had never thought it necessary to enlighten the solicitor of his real identity.

Yet this man was none other than Douglas James Sutcliffe, the cleverest forger the world had ever seen—the man whom Scotland Yard had been vainly trying to capture for months past. The man whom Nelson Lee himself had had so many tussles with. And in those tussles Lee had generally emerged victorious.

Yes, the man was Jim the Penman!

He had been quiet for some little time past, but had scented possibilities

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upon Bradford confiding this plot to him. Jim the Penman was a callous scoundrel, and a man of extraordinary ability. The killing of Clive Worthing was nothing to him. Both Nelson Lee and Nipper had often enough seen that Sutcliffe could perform the most fiendish acts without turning a hair.

The quartette talked long and earnestly. Worthing could, of course, be simply handed over to the police—who would be only too glad to get hold of him. But that would only make matters worse, for Ethel would certainly not marry Hubert Desmond, knowing that her husband was alive.

And the idea of the forged letter was a sound one. Its effect upon Ethel Worthing would be tremendously telling.

And for some strange reason Hector Desmond was singularly anxious for the whole "business" to go through. Clive Worthing must be killed! Desmond was emphatic upon that point. If nothing else was accomplished—if everything else fell to the ground—Clive Worthing must die!

But why was Hector Desmond so concerned regarding Worthing's fate?

What did he know of the young man to make him fall in with this dastardly plot so readily and so easily?

CHAPTER VI.

A Morning Walk—What Nipper Saw—The Motor-Car Mishap.

NELSON LEE and Nipper were out alone, taking a brisk morning walk. It was frosty still, and the snow lay thicker than ever upon the ground. The sky was clear now, and the prospects of skating were more rosy than ever.

But Nipper was not so keen on skating as he had been. There were other things to fill his mind—particularly the incident of the unknown man who had frightened Vera Clifford on that night of the heavy snowfall.

Nelson Lee, too, was much exercised in mind over that strange incident. He had turned over in his mind the possibilities, and had come to the conclusion that a bare likelihood existed of Vera having been right in her assertion. It was just possible that Professor Cyrus Zingrave was alive.

The odds were all against such a thing, but still, it was not absolutely out of the question. And if Zingrave were alive, it was not extraordinary that he had come to this quiet Derbyshire village, where his daughter lived.

Vera herself would not be persuaded from her original statement.

She had recovered from the first shock, but she was uneasy and troubled. She said that she knew—positively knew—that her step-father was alive.

Lee forced himself to forget Professor Zingrave for the moment; but, as it chanced, the matter was to be brought back to his mind very vividly within five minutes. And it was Nipper who brought it back.

Lee and Nipper were taking quite a long walk this morning, and had left Clifford's house fully three miles behind. And they were now stepping out along a quiet lane which would ultimately lead them into the main road. And as they turned a curve a small wayside inn came into sight. It had been hidden up till that moment by a projecting farm building.

The inn was quite close, and looked extremely picturesque with the snow over everything. Nelson Lee and Nipper drew abreast, and were on the point of passing when the door of the bar-parlour opened, and a heavily-overcoated figure appeared. The stranger emerged from the doorway, lighting a cigarette as he did so.

Nipper looked at him casually, and at that moment the man lifted his eyes, and Nipper stared straight into them.



Wildly impossible though it seemed, Vera recognised in that face the features of her dead stepfather—Professor Cyrus Zingrave!—(See page 19.)

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What happened next was surprising. The man, who was bearded, backed quickly into the inn again, and Nipper stood stock still. His stoppage was so sudden that Nelson Lee had proceeded a few paces before he noticed that the youngster was not still by his side. Lee turned back and looked at the lad.

"What's wrong, Nipper?" he asked.

"Great guns!" gasped Nipper. "Did—did you see him, guv'nor?"

"See whom?"

"That man! That man who was standing in the doorway——"

"No, I can't say I took any particular notice of him," replied the detective.

"Why, Nipper, whatever is the matter? Upon my soul, you seem to be startled! Have you seen the man before?"

Nipper stepped forward and gripped his master's arm.

"Let's get away, sir," he muttered. "By gum, Mrs. Clifford was right—dead right!"

The words sounded significant, and Lee gave his young assistant a sharp look. Nipper did not speak again until they had got out of sight of the inn. Then he paused abruptly, and faced the detective.

"I've just seen Professor Zingrave, guv'nor!" he said quietly.

"By James!" Lee could not say anything further at the moment.

"I'm not mistaken, sir," Nipper went on eagerly. "That chap was Professor Zingrave, or—or I'll eat my boots! His face was quite different, but I'll stake my last farthing on his eyes. There's not another chap in the world with eyes like Zingrave!"

"I quite believe that, Nipper," Nelson Lee replied. "But are you sure? You did not see his face for long, remember, and we were only just talking about Zingrave. It is just possible that you may have let your imagination run riot."

Nipper looked somewhat impatient.

"I don't often make mistakes, guv'nor, do I?" he asked bluntly. "And I think I've seen Zingrave enough to know his chivvy again."

"But you didn't see his 'chivvy,' as you call it——"

"Well, his eyes," Nipper persisted. "Of course, Zingrave has grown a beard by now—or it may be a disguise. But he can't disguise those eyes of his. Mrs. Clifford must have seen them just as I did."

They continued their walk for some moments in silence, and then Lee tapped his young assistant upon the back.

"I suppose I must take it for granted, then, that the professor did not die," he remarked. "Both you and Mrs. Clifford swear that you have seen him. What a pity I didn't notice the man myself. But I'm hanged if I know what to do, Nipper. Zingrave is wanted by the police, or will be as soon as they know that he is in the land of the living."

"Why not go back and——"

"No, I don't think we'd better go back, young 'un," said Lee thoughtfully. "If Zingrave is in this neighbourhood I don't suppose he will take alarm just because he saw us. And if we went back he would undoubtedly be on his guard. No, our best plan is to do nothing for the moment. This afternoon, however, I will make rigid inquiries."

And so the pair proceeded on their walk with their thoughts again fully occupied with Professor Cyrus Zingrave, ex-Chief of the League of the Green Triangle. It was a puzzling business altogether, and Lee could only suppose that Zingrave was in the neighbourhood because his stepdaughter lived there.

But that morning walk was to bring forth other excitement before home

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was reached; and, curiously enough, Lee and Nipper were to be plunged into the midst of stirring adventures which they had certainly never anticipated.

They were both fully occupied in their thoughts, and did not talk much, and in a very short while they emerged from the lane and came out upon the main road. This was hard and solid, for traffic was fairly frequent. Moreover, the surface was decidedly treacherous.

Just where the lane joined the main road the latter dipped into a steep hollow, and the main road here took a fairly sharp turn. Therefore, any vehicle coming from the direction of London was forced to turn a sharp corner after descending the hill.

Lee and Nipper were not prepared to experience an adventure at that moment; but it came, all the same. As they looked up the hill they saw a single seater motor-car appear over the brow. It was travelling fairly fast, and came down the hill at good speed.

Had the road been in its normal condition the speed would have been quite moderate. But Lee stood quite still as he watched. As a matter of fact, the detective more than half expected that which happened a moment later. The man in the car, too, realised that he was driving rather incautiously; but he realised it just too late.

He applied the brakes sharply in order to decrease the speed, and that, in the circumstances, is just what he ought not to have done.

It was all over in a moment. The car skidded bodily to the side of the road, mounted the wide grass bank, and overturned on its side in the snow with a crash, and the occupant was thrown violently out, and would have escaped injury but for an unfortunate stroke of ill-luck.

At that very spot a telegraph post was implanted in the ground, and the motorist thudded into it, head on, with tremendous force. The concussion as his head met the telegraph post could plainly be heard by Lee and Nipper, who were some little distance away.

"Great Scott!" Nipper exclaimed, in a startled voice. "That hasn't done the fellow any good, I'll bet! Did you hear that crack, sir?"

Nelson Lee did not stop to reply. He ran quickly across the road, and along until he came to the spot where the accident had occurred. Nipper was hot on his master's track. Not another soul was in sight.

The motor-car itself was practically undamaged, so far as vital parts went. Mudguards and lamps were smashed, and the wind-screen was shivered to atoms. But everything else was intact. Nelson Lee, however, did not pay any attention to the car at the moment. He went over the still form which lay in the snow.

He felt the stranger's pulse, and examined the formidable bruise which was already showing upon his head. The detective pursed his lips and then allowed the unconscious man to fall back while he pulled out his brandy-flask.

"It is not very bad, Nipper," he said. "Just slight concussion, I believe. The man will recover within an hour, at most. Apparently he is not an experienced motor-driver, or he would not have taken that hill at such a speed with the road in this condition."

"He'd have been all right if he hadn't bunged the brakes on," declared Nipper. "Well, sir, what's to be done?"

Lee forced a little of the brandy between the stranger's lips, and then replaced his flask in his pocket.

"I think we had better see if the car is still useable, my lad," said the detective crisply. "If so, we will put the stranger into it and take him to Clifford's house without delay."

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Fortunately the accident had not turned out to be a serious affair, and Nelson Lee and Nipper soon discovered that the car was capable of being driven. They set it upon its wheels, and Lee ran it forward a few yards to make sure. Then the unfortunate motorist was placed inside, and Lee and Nipper started off for the Elms.

They had no idea who the stranger was. He was bearded, but not elderly. The beard was neatly trimmed, and he was well dressed, and his clothing seemed to have a Colonial cut about them.

Probably it has been guessed that the stranger was none other than Clive Worthing. This, indeed, was the case. The trimly bearded stranger was the man who had apparently gone to his death three years before.

It was a curious trick of Fate which had caused him to reach Nelson Lee and Nipper in this dramatic fashion. Needless to say, he was not known by his own name now, and there was nothing on him to prove his real identity.

But he was Clive Worthing, changed and comparatively well off. He was not rich, but during his three years of banishment he had worked hard, and had done his utmost to atone. Worthing had never felt himself really guilty of killing Victor Marcombe. He had not intended committing murder, and he had told himself a thousand times that he must have fired the shot by accident.

And all the time—throughout the three years—he had known exactly where his young wife was and how she fared. He had been sorely tempted on many occasions to make an end of the pretence and tell her the truth.

But he remembered the letter that he had entrusted to Sydney Bradford, the solicitor, and decided that it would be better to wait.

He had arrived in England after a trip abroad only a week back, and had been strangely impatient. He knew well enough that Ethel was now a mother, and he longed to see his little son.

And at last he had been unable to keep himself away longer. It was near the appointed time now; Christmas Eve would soon be here, and Worthing had decided to be near at hand. He would wait; but there was no reason why he should not be close by.

And this morning he had determined to motor past the little cottage where his wife lived. Perhaps he would be able to catch a glimpse of her—that, at least, would be something.

He remembered vividly enough that his wife had refused to believe him guilty even on that terrible night so long before. It seemed an age ago since he had clasped her in his arms; but, thank Heaven, only a few days more were to pass before he would do so again.

Hundreds of times Worthing had sat for hours upon end thinking—thinking of that one night. He had tried to call to mind everything that occurred, but it always failed. He only knew that Victor Marcombe had laid at his feet, that he had gripped the revolver, and that his hand had been smothered in blood.

It must have been Providence itself which brought that accident about. It was not serious, but it was to mean more to Clive Worthing than he had ever conjectured in his wildest dreams. It was to mean everything to him—everything in the world.

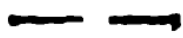
When he opened his eyes again he found himself in Douglas Clifford's cosy study. Clifford himself was there, and Eileen Dare was talking in a low voice to Nelson Lee. The girl had just finished bathing Worthing's ugly bruise, and her tender ministrations, no doubt, had brought him round the sooner.

And when he was able to speak he expressed his gratitude to the kind

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people who had cared for him. And he told them that he was Mr. Philip Yorke. This was the name he had passed under for three years, and the name which he thought he was to bear during the remainder of his life.

And his true identity was never guessed at. Why, indeed, should Clifford and his guests connect this well-dressed stranger with poor Mrs. Lethbridge, of the Dell? How could they possibly know that the two were really husband and wife?



CHAPTER VII.

A Modest Fireside—Jim the Penman's Error—A Compact.

IT was evening—just the time when the last flush of daylight was waning in the western sky. Everything was strangely peaceful, and the frost had set in keener than ever.

The firelight flickered warmly and cheerfully in the dim sitting-room of Mrs. Lethbridge's cottage. It was just that hour before the lamp was lit, and before the blinds were drawn.

Ethel Worthing—to give her her right name—was sitting by the fireside in the one easy-chair she possessed. Upon her knees lay her little baby son, and she smiled gently as the firelight illuminated his chubby little features.

Often enough Ethel sat by the fireside of an evening, and it was about the only time she allowed herself for a quiet rest. Little Clive would be put to bed before long, and she loved to sit with him on her lap before tucking him into his cot.

The girl was greatly changed since those happy days of the past. She seemed many years older, but had lost none of her old charms. And it was not hardship which had made such a big difference; it was the great sadness which had marred her married life at its very outset.

For Ethel still passionately loved the man she thought to be dead. She told herself that he was innocent, and she would have taken him back to her heart without a single reproach.

But that was never to be, she told herself. There were tears in her eyes as she sat looking at her little son. In the firelight, more than at any other time, she could recognise the features of her husband. Oh, how cruel it all was!

But she had her son—thank Heaven he had been spared to her! Those happy times she had dreamed of in the past were never to come, but she had been at least granted a certain measure of happiness.

“Oh, if Clive could be here!” she murmured softly. “How happy we would be! How glorious Christmas-time would seem. Instead of that—”

She paused, with a little sob, for Christmas was the cruellest time of the whole year for her. It was on Christmas Eve that he had died, and the festivities of Yuletide always seemed to her to be a mockery.

And as she rose at last, to put little Clive to bed, she glanced at the darkened window, and saw that snow was again falling in dense whirls. The heavy clouds had come up, and they were emptying themselves of their burden.

At that time, too, a strange incident occurred almost outside Ethel Worthing's cottage. She knew nothing of it, but it was very closely connected with her and her future life.

Outside the wind whistled shrilly, and the snowflakes scudded down in

blinding masses. Already severe, the weather promised to be even more wintry. Many old residents of the neighbourhood gravely shook their heads and declared that the night to come would be a terror.

The snowfall was no longer a gentle affair, but promised to grow into a harsh, cruel storm. It had come suddenly, too, for, twenty minutes before, the sky had been fairly clear and the wind moderate.

And the incident already spoken of occurred practically opposite the Dell. This was situated in a very quiet spot, and no other house was visible in either direction. The lane itself was little used, and wayfarers were few. Yet the lane was a short cut from Clifford's house to the neighbouring village.

As the snow commenced to fall in earnest a muffled up figure trudged through the smother from the direction of the Elms, his head down, and his hat jammed firmly on his head, with the brim turned down.

Even in the dim gloom it was obvious that he was no ordinary villager. The very manner in which he walked, the way he carried himself, told of higher associations. He wore a great fur overcoat, moreover, and that smacked of some cold Colonial climate.

And, coming from the opposite direction—from the village—another figure turned the corner in the lane. This second man was none other than Mr. Henry Faversham, Hector Desmond's guest.

Jim the Penman, in fact, was hurrying to the Manor. He did not like a snowstorm any more than anybody else, although he was as hardy as a mountain trapper. The master-forgery was thinking of the plot which was even then in the course of final formation. And Jim, coming suddenly upon the fur-coated stranger, made a very natural error.

The two men saw one another at the same moment, when they were a few yards apart. Jim the Penman kept straight on, but the other halted and looked at the tiny cottage, which snuggled back in the hollow.

In reality he was thinking of entering the garden in order to avoid passing Sutcliffe. But Jim assumed otherwise. His ready brain worked swiftly, and a thought came into his mind which alarmed him considerably.

Who was this fur-coated stranger?

What was he doing here—at Ethel Worthing's cottage—actually on the point of entering the gateway?

The answer came readily enough to Jim the Penman's acute and suspicious mind. The stranger was Clive Worthing himself! The man was Clive Worthing—and he was just about to enter the Dell, where his wife was waiting!

It was an alarming thought.

Yet Jim's mistake was pardonable, under the circumstances. It was too dark for him to see the fur-coated man's features, but not too dark to observe the fur coat itself, and the general impression of Colonial effect.

Who else but Clive Worthing would be dressed thus?—who else but Clive Worthing would be at this particular spot—of all spots? In the "dead" man's letter, which Sydney Bradford had opened, he said that he would not come until Christmas Day. But that was no guarantee that he would not arrive sooner.

Jim, in fact, concluded within two seconds that the stranger was Worthing himself, and that he had decided to ignore the letter, and go to his wife at once! And the whole scheme to obtain Ethel Worthing's fortune would be ruined!

If Worthing entered the cottage all would be lost!

The prospect of abandoning the whole infamous project, just when it

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seemed certain of success, maddened Jim the Penman to a point of fury. He was certain—positively certain—that the stranger was Worthing. And he was on the very threshold of his wife's door! Unless something drastic was done—

Jim the Penman did not think further. The many thoughts had swept through his mind with the speed of lightning, and he was now close alongside the man in the fur coat. The latter laid his hand upon the latch of the cottage gate, and Jim's last doubt was gone.

The forger acted desperately—on the spur of the moment. Without a sound, and giving no hint of his intention, he spun round and flung himself upon the stranger. The attack was so sudden that the latter went down in the snow without a cry.

"Keep quiet!" snarled Jim hoarsely. "I know you, Clive Worthing!"

"You fool! I am not— Ugggh!"

Jim's fingers closed over the other's throat, and the words dwindled into a harsh gurgle. But the unknown man, whoever he was, possessed a surprising amount of strength. He kept Jim the Penman's hands full, although the forger prided himself that he was as strong as two ordinary men.

Sutcliffe forced his victim down into the thick snow, wondering how he should silence him for the time being. Jim's evil brain already saw that to kill Worthing would be astonishingly simple. With such an amount of snow on the ground the dead man's remains could be hidden without the least trouble.

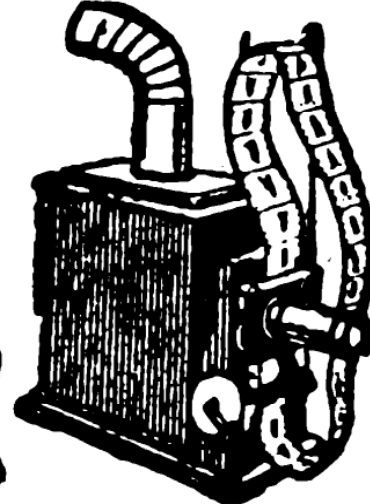
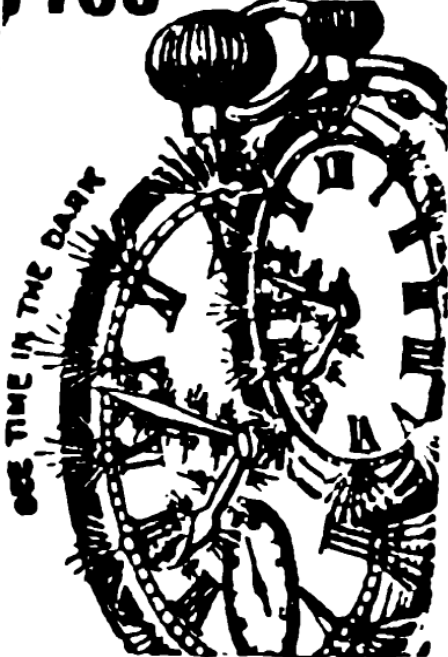
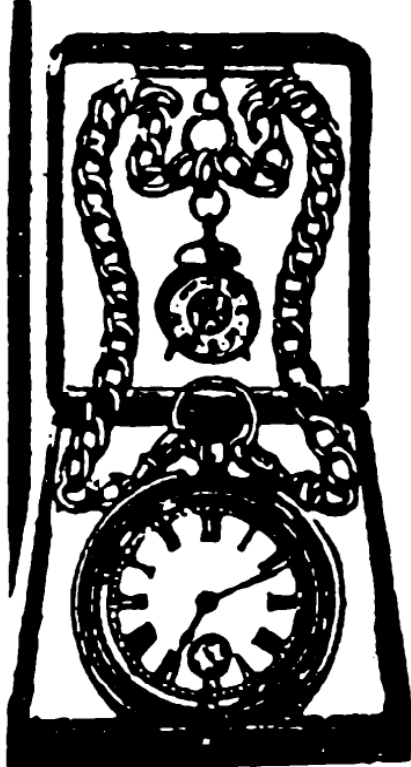
But suddenly Jim started. The stranger's face was staring right up

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at him. What little light there was from the night sky showed Jim that the other man was elderly and bearded. And his eyes were gleaming with a strange light—which caused a kind of cold shiver to run down the forger's back.

It was a novel experience for him, and he thrust his face down closer. Then he saw the eyes more distinctly, and the nose and the mouth. And Jim the Penman seemed to recognise those eyes and those features. He remembered many photographs, only there was no beard—

“Professor Zingrave!” gasped Jim abruptly.

He released his hold as though the stranger's throat had suddenly become red hot. And the man wriggled round and half raised himself upon his elbows. He panted heavily, and the snow fell upon his face thickly.

“You—you murderous brute!” he croaked. “You half killed me—”

“I am sorry. I apologise with all my heart!” said Jim, rising, and helping his companion to rise. “I mistook you for somebody quite different, professor. But this is indeed a surprise. I was quite under the impression that you were dead!”

And Sutcliffe chuckled as he remembered the similarity between this case and Clive Worthing's. Zingrave was supposed to be dead—and he was alive. And Worthing was supposed to be dead—and he was alive. It was rather striking.

“You are mad!” grated the other. “I am not Professor—”

“My dear man, you need fear nothing!” laughed Jim softly, brushing the snow from his overcoat. “And please don't deny your identity. I have been anxious to meet you for a long time past—at least, I was anxious to meet you before your reported death in Java. I am proud, professor. I am a man after your own heart, I believe.”

“Who—who are you?” asked the other, struck by Jim's tone.

“That we will go into later,” was the forger's reply. “But I am a man of your own class, Zingrave—a man who laughs at the police, and who believes in every kind of villainy. You see, I am quite frank with you. And I should be honoured to become better acquainted with such a masterly rogue as yourself!”

The stranger was plainly at a loss to understand his companion's cool candour.

“You are outspoken—” he began.

“Why not? And I beg of you to return the compliment.”

“Very well. I am Professor Cyrus Zingrave. It appears to be useless denying it, since you are so positive,” said the fur-coated man. “But you will oblige me by being a little more communicative. My position is none too secure—”

Jim the Penman took Professor Zingrave's arm.

“Ah! We will have a little chat, eh?” he suggested smoothly. “A chat as we walk? I am confident enough to hope that we shall hit it off together. And if you will help me in a little matter you will find that your position is quite solid.”

“I must know more!” said Zingrave curtly.

“Exactly. And we will form a compact,” was Jim's reply. “As we walk we will talk; and if we do not come to an arrangement it is open to us to part, and go our different ways. Is it a bargain?”

“You are a strange fellow,” said the professor, half suspiciously. “However, I agree to what you say. It is a compact.”

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And the two men—the two greatest master-criminals in England—walked off into the driving snow, arm in arm, and talking quietly and earnestly. The snow whirled down, and swallowed them up in its cold embrace.

CHAPTER VIII.

Eileen On the Track—Mischiefs Afoot—What Eileen Overheard.

“O H, what a bother! And I thought it was going to be such a clear, fine night!”

Eileen Dare addressed the words to herself, and pressed on against the driving snow with her furs drawn tightly around her.

She was on her way from the village to the Elms.

When she had started out the sky had been clear, and the wind almost a light breeze. Eileen had been to the little post office for some stamps and to post a couple of letters. Nipper had promised to go with her, but the lad had gone off to inspect the ice on the lake—within Clifford's estate; but as the lad had not returned at the appointed time, Eileen had journeyed to the village alone.

While on the return journey the evening sky had become dark and clouded, and snow had commenced to fall thickly. The wind, too, was rising with every minute, and Eileen was forced to fight her way forward—for the wind was driving the stinging snowflakes right into her face.

She knew that she was near the little hollow in which Ethel “Lethbridge's” cottage nestled. The girl half thought of taking shelter there until the sudden storm had passed. But she realised that the weather was becoming worse every moment, and it would be better for her to get straight home.

It was really impossible to see much. Darkness had descended before its time, and the snow made it difficult for the girl to lift her face. But as she commenced descending the hill into the hollow, she caught sight of a man's tall figure in the gloom ahead.

She was hurrying rapidly, and saw that the tall man was walking at about the same pace. Therefore she kept the same distance behind him. And he, owing to the wind and the snow, had no idea that the girl was just behind.

Eileen did not give the matter a thought. There was certainly no reason for her to suspect that the next few moments would make all the difference to the night's happenings.

Looking up, she saw that the man had disappeared round the bend, the snow-covered hedge hiding the lane beyond. She turned the corner, and lifted her face mechanically. The snow was thick, and nothing but the smother of white flakes met her gaze. Then, as she moved forward again, an icy gust of wind seemed to clear a space in the air for a moment.

And now she saw two men—two men quite close together. There was nothing surprising in this—nothing to wonder at. They had as much right to the road as she. But that which happened the next instant was surprising indeed.

For, without warning, the tall man she had seen first of all flung himself bodily upon the other, and forced him to the ground. Eileen was so surprised that she ran forward a few paces, and then came to a halt.

Dimly through the falling snow she saw the men struggling on the ground.

"Oh, what shall I do?" murmured Eileen, in alarm.

Her first thought was that the tall man was a tramp, a vagabond of the road, and that he had taken advantage of the lonely spot and the smothering snow to attack a helpless wayfarer.

Eileen ran forward, her feet making no noise in the soft snow. Vaguely she thought of assisting the unfortunate man who was attacked. Perhaps the unknown assailant would flee when he saw another person near by.

The girl detective was quite close now, although the two struggling men were quite unconscious of the fact. How could they know her presence? The snow silenced and hid everything beyond a ten-foot limit.

And then, before Eileen could reveal herself, a startled exclamation came to her ears in a gasping, amazed voice. It was:

"Professor Zingrave!"

"You—you murderous brute!" croaked another voice. "You half killed me——"

Eileen stepped back quickly and was soon hidden in the snow. Her mind had suddenly changed its trend of thought. Those words were strangely significant. Professor Zingrave!

She remembered the incident when Mrs. Clifford had seen a face at the passage window. Vera had been positive that the face had belonged to her stepfather. And now, by a remarkable stroke of chance, Eileen was within a few yards of Professor Zingrave himself. She quickly decided that it would be unwise to show herself.

All her detective instincts were to the fore. She remembered that Hector Desmond was associated with her enemies—the men who had killed her father—and she vaguely connected Zingrave with Desmond.

Could it be possible that some mischief was brewing?

Why had the tall man sprung upon Professor Zingrave? Was it a mistake, or was the tall man a police-officer? Eileen hardly knew what to think at the moment; but she shrewdly decided to watch and see what transpired.

She stepped forward and stood close against the hedge. From here, half sheltered from the snowstorm, she was astonished to see the two men stroll off together, arm-in-arm! And they had been fighting on the ground a minute previously!

Obviously something was afoot. Eileen followed at an easy distance behind, and the falling snow helped her to a large extent. The pair had no idea that they were being cleverly shadowed.

Eileen's suspicions were more than confirmed, for in due course the gates of the Manor were reached, and Zingrave and his companion turned into the short drive. The subdued lights of the big house showed dimly through the snowflakes.

For a moment Eileen hesitated. Should she follow further? Her indecision was only momentary. She quickly realised that the facts were decidedly significant, and that it would be wise on her part to follow the thing up.

With extreme caution she followed the men and saw them enter the house by the big main door. Zingrave seemed to hesitate as he was about to enter; but he finally went in, and the door closed.

"Now what is to be done?" thought Eileen, standing still with the snow whirling madly round her, driven by the high wind. "I wonder which room they have gone to? Oh, but it will be impossible to overhear anything

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with this wind howling round the house. I suppose I shall have to give it up at once."

But Eileen didn't give it up. Once she was fairly on the trail—as she was now—she did not care to tamely admit defeat, and retire. In all conscience the night was a terrible one for her purpose. Yet, in a way, the wind and snow helped her, for it was morally certain that nobody would see her lurking in the Manor grounds, and it was safe to predict that her movements would not be heard.

But what was the use of her staying? Even if she located the room in which Zingrave and his companion were talking, she could not hear anything. The window might be wide open, but the howl of the gale would drown every other sound. And it was quite certain that the window would not be open. Therefore, what was to be done?

Eileen thought quickly and decided to have a look round the house, and then hasten to the Elms and inform Nelson Lec. The celebrated detective, with his superior experience, would probably suggest a plan.

It was safe enough for Eileen to carry out her plan. She fought her way against the storm, and plodded through seven or eight inches of undisturbed snow. Her tracks would be covered very quickly.

Round the bend of the house she saw a subdued light through the haze of snowflakes. It seemed to be partially concealed by heavy curtains. And when she got nearer she made a discovery which caused her heart to beat quickly with eager hope and excitement. Silently and quickly she drew near to the window.

"Oh, if only the door proves to be unfastened!" she murmured tensely.

For she had seen that the lighted window was not exposed to the open. It was, in fact, within a small conservatory. This was in total darkness, but the glass was clear, and the big French windows of the interior room could plainly be seen. A glass-topped door gave admittance to the conservatory itself. This was quite an ordinary arrangement, such as may be seen in countless country houses.

And when Eileen turned the handle of the door she uttered a little sigh of dismay, for it would not budge. It was locked! The girl stood in the snow, already numbed, and bit her lip with vexation.

"What a pity!" she murmured disappointedly. "Oh, what a pity!"

Then, as she gently pushed on the door again, she felt it give slightly at the bottom. This seemed to prove that it was secured at the top, and act at the lock, in the centre.

The door was, in short, bolted at the top. Nothing short of a violent charge would break it open, and Eileen certainly could not charge the door herself. And, even so, the noise would be fatal.

But the shrewd girl was not defeated.

As she looked up she dimly saw that there was a fanlight over the door, and this was not flush with the framework. It was closed, but not tightly closed. It seemed to Eileen as though the wood had become swollen by dampness, and refused to fit into the framework.

Her eyes were gleaming now—gleaming with a sudden idea. Feeling carefully, she found that there was a little ledge running round the conservatory, where the glasswork started. It was the task of a moment to climb up so that she could reach the fanlight with her right hand.

With a little persuasion she succeeded in opening it, and then she inserted her arm inside and reached down. It was a tough job, and several attempts were failures. But at last, when Eileen was on the point of giving it up,

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her outstretched fingers, reaching down, touched the small brass bolt which secured the conservatory door. Fortunately, it worked easily, and she slipped it back.

She dropped into the snow, and paused for a moment to regain her breath. She was tense with excitement now, for she had so far met with unexpected success, and when she tried the door again it opened at once. The wind whistled, and Eileen wondered if those within the room beyond would notice anything wrong.

But she was embarked upon the adventure now, and she did not hesitate. She slipped into the conservatory and softly closed the door. Then, moving silently forward, she reached the big French windows which gave admittance to the apartment.

The whistle of the wind was now subdued and quiet. Voices could clearly be heard, and Eileen was further satisfied to see that the curtains did not fully meet. It was possible for her to obtain a glimpse of the inner room. Directly in front of her sat Professor Cyrus Zingrave, and by his side was Jim the Penman. Half the face of Hector Desmond was visible, and sometimes the whole of it, as he moved his position.

And the words of the men, as they talked, came faintly, but distinctly, to Eileen Dare's acute ears.

"And so, gentlemen, you will realise that I am only too ready to give you any assistance necessary," a soft, silky voice was saying. "You know my position, and I know yours. We therefore understand one another."

Eileen had sometimes heard Nelson Lee refer to the silky, smooth tones of Professor Zingrave, and she recognised those tones very easily now. It was apparent to her that her delay in getting into the conservatory had caused her to miss a certain amount of the conversation. Zingrave was evidently on intimate terms with his companions.

"There is one point you have not mentioned," said Hector Desmond. "Why did you make as if to enter the cottage garden when Mr. Faversham neared you?" It was that move on your part which caused him to mistake you for Clive Worthing."

Eileen saw Zingrave smile.

"Perhaps you are aware that Mr. Nelson Lee is staying with my step-daughter's husband, at the Elms?" he replied. "In the gloom I could not see who the stranger was, and I suspected him of being Lee, therefore I had no wish to meet him face to face."

Jim the Penman chuckled; but it was a grim sound.

"Nelson Lee is a clever man, but he will not interfere in this affair," he said. "I have had many encounters with Nelson Lee on various occasions, and I can safely say that he is a man to steer clear of. Not that I am afraid of him. I only emphasise the fact that he is an extremely astute detective. I would sooner have the whole of Scotland Yard on my track than that one man!"

Eileen smiled to herself. It pleased her to hear that tribute to her friend. And she saw a cloud appear for an instant on Zingrave's face.

"I, too, have learned to respect Lee," he exclaimed smoothly. "A remarkable man, gentleman, a tenacious fellow. But we need not fear him. He is down here on a holiday, and he certainly has no suspicion of what is afoot. But we will not talk of him; we have other matters to go into. As a commencement, let me relate how I escaped a ghastly death; afterwards you shall enlighten me regarding this little plot you are engineering."

Eileen clenched her little fists tensely. It was obvious to her that her

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efforts had not been wasted. What was she about to hear? What plot was it that was being engineered?

For several minutes she listened to Professor Zingrave's silky notes. He explained how Nelson Lee had tracked him to the island of Java, and how he had escaped from the steamer at the last moment. After an exciting chase on a rickety little railway, Zingrave had taken to the rough, hilly country.

And, even while Lee was on his trail, a slumbering volcano had suddenly awakened into life. Zingrave vividly described the eruption, and then told of his escape. As Nelson Lee had surmised, the professor had escaped death by a marvellous stroke of fortune, assisted by his own quick-wittedness.

"I was standing on a ridge," Zingrave said softly. "Below me, and some little distance away, were Nelson Lee and his assistant, the lad Nipper. From where they were standing it appeared as though the ridge was unbroken, but, within two yards of me, a kind of gulley ran right round the hillside. I saw that horrible molten lava roaring down upon me, and I dropped—I dropped into the gulley."

"But how did you escape?" asked Jim the Penman interestedly.

"Knowing the frightful danger, I ran along the gulley with all speed," replied the professor. "It circled round the hill somewhat, and I was, of course, quite concealed from view. When, a few seconds later, the lava roared over the spot upon which I had been standing, I was fully a hundred yards away and in comparative safety. But I knew that the lava would spread rapidly, and, by making a long detour, I finally managed to get round to the other side of the hill, and lurked there for days. I was quite sure that Lee believed me dead."

The professor went on to describe how he had escaped from the island, and how he had knocked about the world for some months. Finally, being pressed for money, he had come to England, and had decided to see his stepdaughter. She was rich, and he felt sure that he would be able to wring a large amount of money from her. But he had not had the opportunity of seeing Vera alone.

"I shall not attempt to see Vera again," concluded Zingrave. "She suspects that I am alive, but it is nothing more than a suspicion. Nipper, too, saw me, but he cannot be certain. For a consideration I am fully prepared to assist you in your own schemes. I understand a certain individual has to be removed?"

Eileen saw the supposed Faversham bend forward. Jim the Penman, indeed, took it upon himself to explain matters. Eileen, of course, had no knowledge of his real identity; but that was of minor importance.

"I will state the facts in a nutshell, to begin with, and then enlarge upon them later," commenced Sutcliffe. "I mistook you, Professor Zingrave, for a man named Clive Worthing—a murderer."

"Exactly, exactly!" put in Desmond, eagerly leaning forward. "A murderer, professor. He was believed to be dead, but we know him to be very much alive."

"The cottage where our little tussle took place," continued Jim the Penman, "is occupied by a young widow named Mrs. Ethel Lethbridge. She is one of Desmond's tenants. In reality, her name is Mrs. Ethel Worthing—the wife of the murderer."

Eileen was intensely interested by this time. She was learning much!

"And where is this Worthing?" queried Zingrave.

"We do not know, at the moment," was Sutcliffe's reply. But, to get to the rock-bottom facts. A friend of ours, Mr. Sydney Bradford, the well-

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known solicitor, has made it known to us that Mrs. Worthing has come into a fortune of something like a quarter of a million, and it had been arranged that Desmond's son, Hubert, should marry the widow, and thus obtain the fortune legally."

Zingrave nodded, and Eileen felt her heart beating more quickly. So Sydney Bradford was concerned in the plot! And Bradford was a member of The Combine, and one of the enemies she had pitted herself against. The girl was more pleased than ever that she had ventured upon this daring enterprise.

"Bradford, however, made a startling discovery," Jim's voice continued. "He learned—I will tell you how later—that Clive Worthing was still alive, and that he would return to his wife upon this very Christmas Day. That, of course, completely upset our plans. We have, therefore, decided to prevent Mrs. Worthing knowing that her husband is still alive, and to deal with him effectively before he can go to her. That, in brief, is the little scheme. In plain words, Clive Worthing must be killed, and Ethel Worthing must be forced into marrying Hubert Desmond. We shall all then share largely in the fortune. It is a pretty, complete plot, but one which will pay us excellently.

"But this murderer, Worthing?" asked Zingrave. "How is it he was not hanged? Or sent to prison?"

Jim the Penman described how Worthing had effected his escape on that memorable Christmas Eve, three years ago.

"Since then he has been in no fear of the police, for he was supposed to be dead," said Sutcliffe. "From his own letter—which is in Bradford's keeping—it is clear that he has been doing his utmost to atone for his crime. His identity is, of course, dropped, and he is now known to the world as Mr. Philip Yorke. The one great drawback in the whole affair is that we don't know where the fellow is, and how he will make his appearance. That is why I sprang upon you outside the gate of his wife's cottage."

Eileen saw Professor Zingrave's eyes grow narrower.

"Dear me! It appears that I shall be of some service straight away," he remarked, with a silky chuckle. "When I met you, Faversham, I was on my way from the Elms. I had intended seeing Vera at all costs, but the snowstorm caused me to realise that it would be foolish to hang about Douglas Clifford's grounds. But, while there, I at least obtained an interesting piece of information."

Eileen knew what it was well enough!

"Interesting?" said Hector Desmond questioningly.

"Very. This morning there was a motor-car accident not far from here," said Professor Zingrave calmly. "The motorist was stunned, and was conveyed to Clifford's place by Nelson Lee and Nipper. And his name, my friends, was Mr. Philip Yorke!"

Desmond jumped to his feet.

"Then—then Worthing is at the Elms?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Precisely. Mr. Clive Worthing is staying at the Elms."

"Ah! But he will be leaving to-night?" asked Jim the Penman quickly.

"No. I was informed by a stable boy that the motorist would remain with Mr. Clifford for several days," was Zingrave's reply. "He will, in short, remain at the Elms until Christmas Day!"

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"By George! This information has simplified things amazingly," declared Jim the Penman, slapping his knee. "We can now make our final plans with certainty, and be assured that they will not miscarry!"

CHAPTER IX

Captured!—Lost in the Blizzard—Nelson Lee and Nipper Get Busy.

EILEEN DARE was filled with a great exultation. She had followed Zingrave and Jim the Penman not knowing what would come of the adventure. She had indeed, scarcely hoped that anything concrete would result.

Yet, to her amazement and indignation, she understood that a foul plot was even on the point of being consummated. For a full half-hour longer she had remained in the dark conservatory listening to the men who were talking beyond the French windows. And Sutcliffe and Desmond had explained everything fully.

Eileen now knew as much as they knew themselves. The fact that Zingrave was a new accomplice, and that he had to be told of the plot, was very gratifying to Eileen. For under other circumstances she would certainly not have been provided an opportunity to learn the full facts.

One thing she could scarcely believe. It seemed utterly preposterous to speak of Clive Worthing as a murderer. She had seen Worthing—under his new name of Philip Yorke—and had found him to be a strikingly frank and open gentleman.

But this was a point which Eileen resolved to clear up as soon as ever she returned home. She was thankful that she had learned of the plot, and all her sympathies were with the poor little widow of the Dell. These rogues were plotting to deprive her of husband and fortune at one blow, and Eileen resolved to leave no stone unturned to prevent the carrying out of the dastardly scheme.

But fate, having been kind to Eileen for so long, turned against her at the very moment when she was on the point of taking her departure. Fate had led her to this spot; but fate was to make sure that she would not leave it undetected! After such success as she had achieved, it was extraordinarily galling.

For Eileen was discovered.

She had resolved to make her escape while she was still safe—to hasten to the Elms and inform Nelson Lee of her discoveries. She felt that by remaining she would learn no more, but only endanger her position.

And the girl, inwardly excited and exultant, stepped lightly across the stone flooring of the conservatory, and laid her hand upon the handle of the door. She knew quite well that those within the room knew nothing of her presence, and did not even suspect that their secrets were known to an outsider. Eileen felt quite safe as she prepared to leave.

And then, as she turned the door-handle, she received a tremendous shock. The door opened forcibly, and she was thrust back with such violence that she almost fell. The dim figure of a man stood before her, smothered in snow almost from head to foot. Eileen recovered her balance and stood panting heavily.

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"What are you doing here?" demanded a suspicious voice. "One of the housemaids, I suppose?"

"Let me pass!" panted Eileen tensely. "Let me pass!"

"Not just yet, my lady," said Hubert Desmond—for it was that young blackguard. "Hi! Pater, pull this curtain aside and let some light in here!"

Eileen's heart almost stopped beating. She was trapped now—trapped hopelessly. She had heard Hubert lock the door, and she dimly saw him put the key into his pocket. And even while her confused brain was endeavouring to think of a way out of the tangle, the curtains were thrust aside, and the conservatory became flooded with light.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Hubert Desmond in amazement. "You—you are Miss Dare, from the Elms? Well, I'm hanged! What in thunder are you doing in this conservatory, my fine young lady?"

"I—I was sheltering from the snowstorm——"

Eileen could get no further, for at that moment the French windows burst open and the elder Desmond and Jim the Penman stood in the open doorway. Hubert gave Eileen a push which propelled her forcibly into the inner room.

"Hubert! What, in Heaven's name, are you doing?" rapped out the young man's father. "Who is this young—— Upon my soul, it is the girl who is staying at the Elms—Miss Eileen Dare! She is Nelson Lee's lady assistant!"

Jim the Penman caught hold of Eileen very gently.

"Hold on, my dear fellows," he exclaimed smoothly. "Hubert will no doubt explain if we give him time. Or, perhaps, Miss Dare will be good enough to enlighten us."

"I don't know much, anyhow," said Hubert bluntly. "I've just come up from the village, and I was passing round the house to the side door when I happened to glance into the conservatory. I saw a dim figure there, and so I investigated. I found this girl just about to leave."

Hector Desmond turned white.

"We have been talking!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "She must have overheard every word of our conversation. Good heavens, how came she to be in the conservatory? How long has she been there?"

Eileen smiled contemptuously.

"I have been there for nearly an hour, Mr. Desmond," she replied with the utmost calmness. "I do not feel inclined to make up a false story. Why should I? I have heard every word that was uttered, and I know of the scoundrelly plot you have engineered against poor Mrs. Worthing!"

The four men exchanged quick glances.

"She knows everything!" gasped Hubert, in alarm.

"That is very unfortunate—for Miss Dare!" put in Professor Zingrave with singular significance. "It is obvious that the girl was alone, and that she has had no opportunity of communicating her information to anybody else. We have nothing to fear, my friends. It is she who will suffer."

"But what can we do?" began Desmond.

"Zingrave is quite right," said Jim the Penman, who had also remained calm. "Since Miss Dare had placed herself in this unfortunate position she must not grumble if she finds herself in a still more perilous predicament. Obviously it is impossible for us to let her go. I have heard quite a lot of this young lady, and I am convinced that she is as dangerous as

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the whole official detective force put together. In many respects this charming girl is as clever as Nelson Lee himself!"

"You are very flattering," said Eileen mockingly.

"Not at all. I never descend to flattery," replied the forger suavely. "I am merely stating a well-known fact. I am afraid, Miss Dare, that your position is not only perilous, but absolutely hopeless!"

"You mean——?" said Hector Desmond, purposely breaking off.

"I mean that for the safety of ourselves, Miss Dare must suffer," said Douglas James Sutcliffe. "It is apparent that if we let her go free we shall, one and all, be hopelessly involved. We shall find ourselves in terrible trouble. And I, for one, have no intention of giving up this whole project because this girl happens to have got wind of it!"

"But—but——"

"My dear Desmond, I admit the situation is very unfortunate," said Jim. "But there is no sense in getting into a panic. Miss Dare knows too much—therefore she must be rendered harmless!"

"Good gracious, Faversham!" stammered Desmond. "You—you don't mean to——"

"Don't get panicky!" snapped Jim the Penman curtly. "Hubert, hold the girl and see that she doesn't get away, Zingrave—Desmond. Just step over to the fireplace for a moment."

Eileen, brave but terribly alarmed, was left in Hubert's care. He grasped her roughly, and she knew that an attempt to escape would be worse than useless. She saw "Faversham," Desmond, and Zingrave talking earnestly together against the blazing log fire. Desmond was the only one who seemed ill at ease. But, as Eileen watched his expression, the alarm left his eyes, and he nodded several times.

"Yes, yes!" she heard him say. "It is an awful course to take. Faversham, but it is, as you say, necessary. And there is no risk—no risk at all! On such a night as this——"

He lowered his voice, and a few moments later the three rogues came across the room, and Eileen was confronted by Professor Zingrave. The man who had once been Chief of the Green Triangle was fairly small in stature, but he had an imposing presence, nevertheless. His high, noble forehead was unchanged, but a rough, straggly black beard gave him an unkempt appearance. But he had purposely allowed his beard to grow, in order to avoid recognition. To the world at large he was dead, and Zingrave did not believe in taking chances.

"I am afraid you have blundered badly, my dear Miss Dare," he exclaimed silkily. "If you will step over to this chair——"

As Zingrave spoke he grasped Eileen's dainty wrist. Exactly what happened afterwards the girl detective had no clear recollection. But there seemed to be a slight, stinging pain in her wrist, and the whole room melted into a hazy blur before her eyes. Then she fell limply into Professor Zingrave's arms. He lifted her with surprising ease, carried her across the apartment, and laid her full length upon a soft lounge.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Hubert Desmond, with staring eyes. "What have you done? She—she——"

"She is merely drugged, my young friend," interjected Zingrave softly. "An hour—two hours—possibly three hours, and she will recover without the slightest ill-effects. Just a little harmless drug of my own invention."

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It has the advantage of being very easy to apply, and the sufferer has no chance to struggle."

As the professor spoke he took from his hand a tiny brass instrument, which had been fixed between two of his fingers. It seemed to be a minute hypodermic syringe, and he placed it in a little leather-covered case which he took from his waistcoat pocket.

"Now, Fayersham, don't waste time," went on Zingrave. "I understand you are going to prepare the car? It is a terrible night—but splendidly suited to our purpose. Upon my soul, Desmond, you are quite pale! What is there to worry over? This girl will never be able to reveal her secrets—we are all safe."

"What—what are you going to do with her?" asked Hubert huskily.

Less than ten minutes later Eileen was quickly carried out through the conservatory into the black night. Here Desmond's big limousine was standing on the drive directly opposite the conservatory door. Eileen was placed inside, limp and helpless, and both the doors locked.

Jim the Penman was there, muffled up in a huge motoring coat. He jumped into the driving seat, and Hubert Desmond, also well protected from the weather, took his place beside him. Then, without a word being said, the powerful car started off through the snow. Hector Desmond and Zingrave returned through the conservatory, locking the doors behind them as they went.

The snowstorm, instead of blowing over, had now become even more violent. The wind had risen to a piercing gale, and no sign of the sky was visible in any direction. Everything was a whirling smother of snow flakes.

Indeed, the elements could not be better suited to the vile plan which Jim the Penman had suggested. Eileen Dare was dangerous—she knew altogether too much. Therefore she had to be silenced! But how? Frankly, the scoundrels did not like the idea of murdering her in cold blood. But the knowledge that it was necessary to kill Clive Worthing made this second crime all the easier. If exposure did come, then the punishment would not be more severe because Eileen Dare, too, had perished. Besides, by carrying out Jim's plan, Eileen would absolutely disappear, and if she ever was discovered, it would be generally supposed that she had perished by accident, and not through foul play.

The car ploughed its way along the deserted road, and managed to maintain a fairly moderate speed. Its destination was not so very far distant—merely a matter of about twelve miles. And here a vast stretch of barren moorland country lay deserted and at the mercy of the blizzard.

Already violent, the storm seemed ten times as furious out upon the moor. There was not a house or a cottage for miles in either direction. The road itself was only distinguishable from the surrounding whiteness by the single row of telegraph poles which lined one side of the road. And many of these were blown down, and the wires confused and tangled.

When in the centre of the moor, the snow-smothered limousine came to a halt. Conversation between Jim the Penman and Hubert was almost impossible, for the wind howled and drove the snow like something solid before him. The two men lifted Eileen's unconscious form out of the car, and then staggered away with the girl on to the moor itself. The snow lay thick, and the men plunged into drifts which reached their waists, and Jim the Penman abruptly called a halt.

"This will do," he shouted, in order to make himself heard. "Another

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ten yards, and we should place ourselves in the same predicament as the girl will find herself in. The lights of the car are almost invisible even now. Once we lost them I doubt if we should ever locate them again."

Hubert Desmond looked round him fearfully, and realised how sure this plan was. Eileen was to be left in the snow, out upon that moor. It would be utterly impossible for her to reach any dwelling-place. She would perish in the snowstorm, and if she was ever found it would be naturally supposed that she had lost her way.

The girl was flung down without ceremony, but the soft snow received her like an icy bed. And, looking round, Hubert saw the headlights of the motor-car gleaming dimly and vaguely through the maze of snowflakes.

"Let's get back!" shouted the young man, with chattering teeth.

He was not so thick-skinned as Jim the Penman, and the idea of leaving Eileen there made him feel sick and faint. But this was not because his nature rebelled against the idea, but because he was a coward.

And there Eileen was left—left to die!

The car returned the way it had come, and already the tracks caused by the outward journey were obliterated completely. When morning came there would be absolutely no trace—no clue which would lead to discovery.

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But Jim the Penman had overlooked one important fact. It was not the scoundrel's fault that he had overlooked it, for it was a contingency which would not have been suspected by any man.

But even while the car was returning after performing its dastardly work, Nelson Lee and Nipper were out in the cruel elements, searching for Eileen. They had no clue as to the girl's whereabouts, and so they searched haphazard. Every inquiry had been in vain.

The hour was not yet late—indeed, it was comparatively early in the evening. But darkness had descended at four o'clock, and it almost seemed as though midnight was approaching. Yet when Jim the Penman and Desmond were nearing the Manor on the return journey the hour was no later than eight o'clock.

It was an hour previous to this that Nelson Lee had become really alarmed. Nipper had arrived back from the lake in the afternoon in order to accompany Eileen to the village—as they had arranged. But the young beggar had been late, and he was greatly disappointed to find that Eileen had gone without him. He was furious, too, and prepared a very elaborate apology for Eileen when she returned.

But darkness came on, and the storm showed signs of increasing, and Eileen did not come back. Naturally enough, Lee and Clifford and Vera thought that Eileen had stayed in the village in order to shelter from the snow. But even this was not quite in keeping with Eileen's character. Lee felt sure that the girl would have braved the elements rather than wait in the village.

At six o'clock, however, Nelson Lee felt uneasy. Something seemed to tell him that all was not right. Why had Eileen not returned? The storm was terrible now, the snow whirling down like something solid.

Lee sent off one of Clifford's coachmen to the village, to ascertain if Eileen was still at the post office. Or perhaps she had sought shelter at Mrs. Lethbridge's little cottage. Just before seven, however, the coach-

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man returned, and reported that Eileen was at neither place. The girl had left the post office just before dark—just before the storm came on. And nobody could say where she was.

And Nelson Lee's uneasiness turned to alarm. Nipper was positively frantic, and suggested that search parties should be sent out in all directions, scouring the countryside. But Lee did not think this course necessary. Perhaps Eileen would turn up presently with quite a commonplace explanation.

All the same, the great detective decided to venture out with Nipper. He did not exactly trust Clifford's coachman. The man was honest and reliable enough, no doubt, but he had probably made careless inquiries.

And so he donned his heavy overcoat and heavy boots, and he and Nipper went out into the night. Clifford offered to come, but Lee told his friend to stay and entertain Mr. Philip Yorke, who was now almost himself again.

But Nelson Lee's inquiries were as fruitless as the coachman's. The latter had evidently performed his task well, for the only definite news which Lee could get was that Miss Dare had visited the post office just before dark, and had left almost at once.

Nipper was terribly upset. He told his master that Eileen must have lost herself in the snow, and was probably wandering aimlessly along the snow-swept lanes. Lee did not think this, but he resolved to go for a walk to a neighbouring hamlet. Here, perhaps, he might learn something. At the post office he had been told that a resident of the hamlet—a shopkeeper—had left the office at the same time as Eileen. Therefore, there was a slim chance that the shopkeeper would be able to give a little further information. He might at least be able to tell Lee which direction Eileen had taken.

So the detective started off, Nipper by his side, through the stinging snow. The blizzard was now violent in the extreme, and reminded Lee of a night he had spent in the Highlands of Scotland. The very roadways were choked with the ever-increasing snowdrifts. Before morning, if the storm lasted, the whole countryside would be snowed up.

As they walked, Lee and Nipper were forced to plough their way through eighteen inches of snow, while at places it lay to a depth of three and four feet. Their destination—the hamlet—was situated over the hill on which the Manor was situated, and it was necessary for the searchers to pass the Manor gates.

But Nelson Lee was not thinking of Hector Desmond at that anxious time. Why should he connect Eileen's disappearance with Desmond? Lee knew absolutely nothing of the vile plot which was being hatched. He had no notion that his old enemy, Jim the Penman, was near by. He had no notion that the motorist at the Elms was in reality Clive Worthing, the murderer.

As Lee was forcing his way along he thought he heard the laboured beating of an automobile engine ahead. But it was difficult to hear anything above the howl of the wind, and Lee was not certain. A few moments later, however, two dim spots of light showed ahead, eerie and ghostly through the smother of snow.

Nelson Lee grabbed Nipper's arm.

"Come to one side, young 'un!" roared Lee into the lad's ear. "They won't be able to see us——"

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He paused, for the lights suddenly disappeared. They had, in fact, turned abruptly to the left, and Lee remembered that he was close to the Manor gates. The motor-car had evidently turned into the drive.

The gates were closed, however, and the car was still standing in the road when Lee and Nipper came up. They, of course, were in total darkness, and neither Jim the Penman nor Hubert Desmond had any idea of their presence, for the two scoundrels were just home from their ghastly journey.

Nelson Lee paused in the roadway. He had not come to a halt because he was curious or because he thought the occupants of the car could help him, but because the car itself was practically filling up the road, and it was difficult to pass.

A figure appeared in front of one of the dimmed headlamps.

"... right now," came a few wind-flung words. "Gates . . . open. Ye gods, what . . . night, Faversham! That girl . . . never find . . . way . . . moor . . . this snowstorm! We're as safe . . ."

Then the car moved forward, and Nelson Lee stood stock still. Nipper gave his master a nudge in the small of his back. The lad was struck by the way in which the motor-car had disappeared. The swiftly descending snow smothered everything in an instant. Every sight of the car had vanished within ten seconds.

"Get a move on, gov'nor!" shouted Nipper impatiently.

Lee turned to the lad.

"Didn't you hear, Nipper?" he exclaimed tensely.

"Hear what, sir?"

"A few words uttered by the fellow who stood before the headlamp," said Lee. "I did not catch the whole sentence, but the wind carried most of it to my ears. By James! It is almost inconceivable, Nipper!"

"What is, gov'nor?" roared Nipper. "I didn't hear anything!"

"The words were disconnected, and were roughly these," was Lee's reply. "'Ye gods! What a night, Faversham! That girl will never find her way off the moor in this snowstorm. We are as safe as—' I lost the rest of the sentence, Nipper."

Nipper stared at his master in the darkness, and gripped his sleeve.

"Oh! Do—do you think——?"

"Those words were terribly significant," interjected the detective. "Just consider the facts, my lad. Miss Eileen has disappeared without any apparent cause. We know that Hector Desmond, who occupies the Manor here, is associated with the 'Combine'—if not actually one of them. And we have just heard Desmond's son say that 'the girl' will never find her way off the moor! Nipper, Miss Eileen has been kidnapped and taken to the neighbouring moor—to perish in the snowstorm!"

"The devils!" gasped Nipper wildly. "Oh, the fiends!"

"There is not a shadow of a doubt! And I am not surprised!" declared Lee grimly. "Possibly a member of the 'Combine' is staying with Desmond—Melville Ross, or Roger Haverfield—and this terrible plot is the result."

"But—but—what's to be done——"

"We must go to the moor at once!" rapped back Lee, crisply.

Nipper didn't stop to inquire how his master proposed getting to the moor in such a blizzard. He simply kept by Lee's side as the latter ran

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forward through the snow. The detective was thinking deeply as he ran. And, could Nipper have only seen it, there was an expression of terrible anger upon his usually immobile face.

Within fifteen minutes Clifford's house was reached. The latter's big touring motor-car was ready for instant use, and almost at once Lee, Nipper, and Clifford were off. Clifford insisted upon joining in the search.

During that ride through the blackness and the furious elements nobody spoke. Lee sat behind the wheel, and he sent the car roaring along at a reckless, dangerous speed. But every second was of value, and Lee took chances. And at last, after what seemed an eternity, the moor was reached.

The wind was just as high now, but the snow was finer, and not so thick. It was possible to see ahead for quite a hundred yards, but both Lee and Clifford, as the car came to a standstill in the centre of the bleak, chill expanse, realised fully the dull hopelessness of the project.

Eileen was here somewhere—but where? Everything, on every side, was white with snow. Drifts lay seven, eight, nine feet deep on every side. The very road was indistinguishable from the moor itself. Without the aid of the car lights it would not be possible to tell road from moor. The telegraph-poles would be invisible in the pitch blackness of the night.

"Oh, gov'nor, it's—it's hopeless!" said Nipper, almost sobbing. "She's lost on this—this waste of snow! We might search for hours without finding a trace of her. And by this time——"

Nipper stopped, his throat choked.

"What shall we do, Lee?" asked Clifford huskily. "If we search in all directions I don't see that we can do any good. And we must stick together, or we shall find ourselves in a similar plight to that of Miss Dare."

The vast barren wastes which stretched away on every side seemed to unnerve Clifford and Nipper; and even Nelson Lee was tense with the utter hopelessness of the task. And yet Eileen was here! Oh, it was——

And then Nelson Lee let out a roar of sudden hope.

"An idea!" he shouted. "It is the only possible chance—the only shred of hope. Clifford, are the headlights of this car electric?"

"Yes," replied Clifford, jerking the collected snow from his face. "but I don't use them now on account of the lighting restrictions. They're in perfect order and give a tremendous light."

"Are they both lit by the same switch?" rapped Lee.

"Yes. But, what the thunder——"

"Take them off the brackets," went on the detective crisply. "You take one, Nipper. That's it. The wire gives you a certain amount of play, doesn't it. Ah, splendid! You can turn the lamp in all directions."

"But I can't see what——"

"You'll see in a moment, young 'un," said Lee, interrupting again. "Now then, both of you. Slowly cast the lights round so that the beam sweeps the moor on every side. You stick to the left-hand side of the road, Nipper, and you the right, Clifford."

As Nelson Lee spoke he turned the switch, and the two powerful beams shot across the dazzling snow like miniature searchlights. They could have been seen from any spot within a mile, at least.

And then Lee made clear to his companions his amazingly 'cute idea. He "played about" with the switch continuously, as Nipper thought, and kept turning the lights on and off. But suddenly Nipper jumped to it.

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"The Morse code!" he yelled.

He watched excitedly, and saw that Lee was spelling out continuously, time after time, the one word, "E-I-L-E-E-N." Short flashes and long flashes: It was a call of hope, flashed across the wastes of snow in all directions. If Eileen was alive, and within sight of those lamps, she would assuredly see the signal, and would come to the spot. She was well acquainted with the Morse code.

The minutes sped by, and Lee worked the switch untiringly, in spite of the fact that his fingers were numbed and frozen. Nipper and Clifford, too, were almost too icy cold to hold the great headlamps. But they persevered without a grumble, and watched anxiously and with vague hope.

Would the signal be seen?

At first Nipper was wild with elation, but as the minutes lengthened and the situation remained the same the lad became dully despondent again. The wind was howling across the moor like a thousand demons, carrying with it choking clouds of fine, biting snow. It seemed to drive right into the flesh, stinging and cruel.

And then Douglas Clifford suddenly caught his breath in, and held his lamp firm and steady. He turned his head sharply.

"Leave the light on, Lee!" he shouted. "I think I can see— Yes, yes! Miss Dare is coming! Do you see her, man—do you see—"

"Hurrah!" roared Nipper chokingly. "Oh, gov'nor, Miss Eileen's seen us!"

"Thank God!" Nelson Lee said quietly.

He left the switch, and plunged into the thick snow beside the road. Towards him, towards the car and the lights, a snow-covered, slight figure was staggering. And as Lee hurried forward the figure raised a hand bravely and waved.

Eileen Dare was saved from the cowardly death her enemies had planned for her!

Help had come in the nick of time.

CHAPTER X.

Eileen's Amazing Story—In the Night—Premature Congratulations.

TEN o'clock was striking when the party arrived back at the Elms. The snow was coming down as furiously as ever, and if Clifford's car had not been powerful it would never have forced its way through the choking drifts which constantly barred the narrow lanes.

Vera and Aunt Esther had been waiting with terrible anxiety, and they tenderly took Eileen upstairs and cared for her. The girl was almost exhausted, but she was brave and resolute. Nothing would alter her decision to come down into the drawing-room and relate her adventures. She said nothing so far, except to impress upon Nelson Lee the necessity for keeping her rescue absolutely quiet.

After half an hour had passed she came down, pale, tired-looking, but smiling. She was safe, and she knew that the urgency of the case was great. At all costs, Nelson Lee must be made aware of the foul plot which was being engineered at the Manor.

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The bearded stranger, Mr. Philip Yorke, was in the library when the party returned, but, acting upon Lee's advice, he repaired to the drawing-room. For some reason or other Eileen insisted upon his being present during the relating of her adventures.

It was a curious little scene in the drawing-room. Eileen was sitting upon the softest lounge, attired in a delightful rest-gown. She was surrounded by countless cushions, and next to her sat the comfortable figure of Aunt Esther. The old lady was looking grave and troubled.

Clifford sat with his wife, and Nelson Lee and Nipper occupied a settee, next to which an easy-chair was drawn up containing Philip Yorke. His head was bandaged, for the blow he had received was rather serious.

And in front of the whole party a roaring fire blazed up merrily in a huge grate. After the cruel bitterness of the winter's night the comfort here was in striking contrast.

"I think I am more surprised than any of you at being here now," began Eileen softly. "But I am so glad that nobody outside the little circle here knows of my peril, and that I have been rescued. That is very important. On no account must anybody know that I am still alive."

"Even the servants have no idea of the night's happenings," said Nelson Lee quietly. "While we were looking for you, Miss Eileen, those who remained at home raised no alarm, and none of the servants saw you enter. You warned me beforehand, and I therefore took the necessary precautions."

Eileen looked straight at Philip Yorke.

"Before I say a word about what has happened to-night, it is necessary for me to make this gentleman's identity quite clear to all of you," said the girl with simple directness. "Please do not think that I mean anything unpleasant, but you will see that it is absolutely essential that the plain truth should be told at once.

Philip Yorke started forward in his chair.

"What do you mean?" he asked, half-fearfully.

"The name you have given us is not your own," replied Eileen. "I know your true identity, Mr. Clive Worthing, and it is better that everybody here should know also. But I am your friend, Mr. Worthing. I believe you innocent."

Clive Worthing—to call him by his right name—was on his feet now, and his face was pale and his eyes filled with alarm.

"How did you know?" he demanded hoarsely.

Nelson Lee had recognised the name at once, and he knew that he was sitting in the presence of the man who had murdered Victor Marcombe three years before, near Cricklewood. But the great detective remained quite calm.

"I admit that I am greatly surprised," he exclaimed. "But do not alarm yourself, Mr. Worthing. I place implicit trust in Miss Dare's opinion; and you have heard what she has said."

Worthing uttered a deep, deep sigh.

"Thank you, Mr. Lee!" he muttered fervently. "I thank you from the bottom of my heart for those words. I felt, all along, that you would not turn against me if you knew the truth, and that I was content to remain in this house with you."

Mrs. Clifford and Aunt Esther were plainly puzzled, and Clifford, too, did not exactly follow the trend of the conversation. And so Worthing, in brief sentences, explained who he was and what his crime had been. He

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did so with such frankness, with such honesty, that they knew him to be a true gentleman. The idea of Worthing being a murderer seemed too preposterous for serious thought.

Eileen commenced her story, and explained what had happened previous to her entering the conservatory at the Manor. Vera Clifford was in no way surprised to learn that her scoundrelly stepfather was still alive. But she was, nevertheless, a little startled to know that Professor Zingrave was so near.

"I remained in the conservatory for a long time," continued Eileen. "I overheard so much that I almost thought that I was dreaming. But I was brought back to life when Hubert Desmond faced me and forced me into the room. With scarcely any delay the rogues decided that I should die. There were the two Desmonds, a man named Faversham, and Zingrave. Sydney Bradford, I believe, will arrive to-morrow."

"A pretty collection!" commented Lee grimly.

"I don't know exactly what happened, but Professor Zingrave suddenly took hold of my wrist," went on the girl-detective. "I just remember feeling a slight stinging pain, and then I must have swooned. Of course, the professor drugged me in some ingenious way of his own, for when I awoke I was out upon the cold moor—alone and lost. I was nearly frozen, too, and for fully five minutes it was utterly impossible for me to use my limbs. Indeed, I was almost buried in the snow."

"The brutes!" wrapped out Nipper with fierce vehemence.

"It is evident that you came to your senses very soon after your enemies had left the spot," said Lee, "otherwise you would certainly have died as you lay in the snow. And it is equally obvious that they placed you quite near the road."

"But how was I to know that?" asked Eileen. "It was fully ten minutes before I was able to stagger to my feet, and the snow was coming down so thickly that I could not see an inch in front of me. Oh, the blackness was terrible, and the wind drove the snow into my face with such force that it stung me like the lash of a whip. I suppose I must have wandered blindly about, plunging into snowdrifts, and getting out again, for fully an hour. But it seemed to me like an eternity. Oh, I cannot possibly describe how truly terrible it all was. But I knew—I knew positively—that unless help came very quickly I should succumb to the cold and exposure."

"And then you saw the gov'nor's signal?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"At first I could not understand it," replied Eileen. "I merely saw a tiny point of light flickering in and out through the snowflakes. But I went towards it as fast as possible, and then at last I recognised the code, and read my own name. Oh, I wish I could describe to you the relief which filled me as I understood. But what a clever idea! But for that I should never have been found!"

"You have had a wonderful escape, Miss Dare," said Clive Worthing. "But will you tell me how you knew my real name? Will you tell me what you overheard at the Manor? For it was there, of course, that you learned the truth."

Eileen nodded.

And then, in very simple language, she told of the villainous plot she had overheard. She told of the fortune which Mrs. Worthing had inherited, and how the Desmonds had plotted to obtain it. And Eileen enlightened Worthing as to Sydney Bradford's real character.

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"The base scoundrel!" exclaimed Worthing furiously. "So he opened my letter?"

"Yes, he opened your letter, Mr. Worthing," was Eileen's reply, "and another plot, fifty times as base, was the result. The man Faversham is to forge a letter to your wife, purporting to come from you, and urging her to marry Hubert Desmond. And you yourself are to be killed. That has all been arranged. I, having heard everything, was sentenced to death as well. I heard them arrange to break into this house and murder you to-morrow night. I do not know their precise plans, but I know that somebody is to enter your bedroom window at one o'clock and murder you in your sleep."

"By George!" ejaculated Worthing. "And my wife—my dear little wife! I wish to Heaven I could go to her with a clean soul. But I, too, am a foul outcast. Perhaps I deserve no more consideration than they," he added bitterly.

But Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I have come in contact with many criminals, Mr. Worthing," he said smilingly. "I have encountered some famous murderers. But in you I see no trace whatever of the criminal. If you did kill Victor Marcombe, then you did so in self-defence or by accident. I am willing to swear that your act was not premeditated."

"I don't know how I killed him!" muttered Worthing. "Oh, I have tried to remember—I have tried to bring back to my mind what actually occurred on that fatal night. I killed him, but not by intent. I swear before my Maker that it was accidental. And it seemed to me that Providence was kind in giving me an opportunity to escape the law."

"You are dead to the world now," was Nelson Lee's quiet remark. "You have been punished enough, and it is not my place to judge you. I am your friend, Mr. Philip Yorke."

Worthing was almost overcome, but he bravely kept himself under control. And after he had composed himself somewhat Eileen filled in all the details of her story. Nelson Lee was thoughtful when Henry Faversham was mentioned again. He asked Eileen to describe the man, and the girl did so.

"It is just possible—in fact, probable," mused the detective. "It was Faversham who planned all the murderous details—it is Faversham who is forging the letter which is to deceive Mrs. Worthing. Surely, Nipper, these characteristics remind you of a very old friend of ours?"

"Jim the Penman!" said Nipper abruptly.

"Precisely. The enterprising forger who has run up against me on many occasions," said Lee smoothly. "Upon my soul, I believe Sutcliffe is mixed in this affair as well. Jim the Penman and Professor Zingrave! Dear me, a more scoundrelly pair does not exist in this world."

Eileen declared that she felt so comfortable that she was quite prepared to remain in the drawing-room until a definite decision had been come to. A discussion followed, and a final arrangement was arrived at.

It was agreed to let the enemy think that their plans were running smoothly, and to spring the bomb-shell upon them when the attack on Clive Worthing was attempted the following night. In this way Lee would be able to collect his facts together and have the case complete in every detail.

But a terrible hitch occurred. That night Clive Worthing's life was attempted! Both Lee and Eileen were positive that that dreadful move

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would not be attempted until the night following—for Eileen had distinctly heard everything arranged.

For some reason, however, Desmond and his precious confederates decided to strike at once. And they struck so cunningly, so skilfully, that there was not one iota of evidence to point in any direction.

Lee and Nipper were sleeping together in a large double-bedded apartment. By two o'clock the lad was sound asleep, but his master was otherwise occupied. Lee had switched off the light, and was sitting before the dying fire in his dressing-gown and slippers, enjoying a pipe.

And he was thinking over this sudden maze of villainy which had come to his notice. The plot had been brewing for weeks, and he had only become aware of it at the eleventh hour. But that was just the time when he could step in and frustrate the evil designs of Desmond and his associates. It was a Christmas plot, and Lee determined that it should bring happiness, and not misery. On the morrow he would make complete arrangements, and he was exultant when he thought of roping in two such big game as Professor Cyrus Zingrave and Douglas James Sutcliffe—for Lee was almost sure that the man who called himself Faversham was Jim the Penman.

And then, above the roar of the wind, Lee heard a gasping cry for help. It came from the next room, which was occupied by Clive Worthing. In a second the criminologist was upon his feet, all his suspicions aroused. Knowing all he did, that cry had a very sinister sound in his ears.

He tore the door open, dashed out into the passage, and entered Worthing's room. As he did so a strong current of icy air struck him full in the face, accompanied by a few stray snowflakes. He switched the light on, and saw that the window was wide open, and the curtains were waving wildly in the wind.

Clive Worthing lay in bed, as though asleep. But his attitude was unnatural and distorted. With a terrible fear in his heart Lee crossed to the bed, and as he bent over the still form he became aware that Nipper was beside him.

The moments which followed were tense; and then Lee suddenly awakened into life.

"Poison!" he rapped out. "Great Heaven above, what a fool I was not to sleep with Worthing! I have been careless, Nipper—eriminally careless! I ought to have been prepared for a change in the enemy's plans."

"Is—is he dead, guv'nor?" panted Nipper fearfully.

"No, he is not dead, young 'un," replied Lee. "And, thanks to my knowledge of poisons, I recognise this almost unknown variety. It is not fatal if dealt with speedily. In an hour Clive Worthing will be dead—unless I put forth every effort known to science!"

Nelson Lee worked frenziedly. Probably no other man in the world knew more of poisons than he did. The great detective had made a special study of every known poison and its antidote.

This particular poison would have caused Worthing's death perhaps within one hour, and perhaps not until the expiration of twenty-four. But consciousness would never be regained, and death would be precisely as

though the victim had died from heart failure. Only a poison expert would have recognized the deadly symptoms.

Lee had dealt quickly with the case only owing to a stroke of extraordinary chance. If he had been sleeping Worthing's cry would not have reached him, and in the morning it would have been impossible to take action. As it was, however, Worthing's life was saved. Like so many poisons this deadly stuff was soon defeated if battled with immediately after it had been administered. By wasting no time Lee proclaimed Worthing out of danger after two hour's hard work. And soon after that Worthing recovered his senses sufficiently to tell what had occurred.

Deadly in action if left to take its course, the poison left the victim almost in a normal condition once it was cleared from the system. But Worthing had not much to tell. He had been awakened by somebody beside his bed, and had seen a dimly cloaked figure. Then it seemed as though a red-hot iron had seared the back of his neck, and he had cried aloud. Nelson Lee was quite convinced that the cloaked figure had concealed the identity of Professor Cyrus Zingrave.

And in the morning Worthing kept to his room. The servants were given to understand that Mr. Yorke had had a sudden seizure, and that he was unconscious and dying. And Eileen, too, kept to her room, and not a soul outside the little circle knew that she had returned.

Consequently the conspirators at the Manor congratulated themselves upon the success of their plans. Eileen Dare was harmless, and buried in the snow. And Clive Worthing was insensible and on the point of death. He would never recover his senses, and it could never be revealed who he actually was. Zingrave assured Hector Desmond that Worthing's death was absolutely certain. And for some reason the master of the Manor was strangely pleased.

But the rogues did not know that retribution was near at hand!

CHAPTER XI.

A Happy Reunion—Face to Face!—The Truth at Last—A Merry Christmas.

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Ethel Worthing's little cottage was well-nigh snowed up, but she was contented, in so far as she had a bright fire and her little Clive to remind her of her husband.

She was unconscious of the grim web of roguery which had been woven around her. And that web, drawn so tight at first, seemed about to envelop the poor girl, until the event happened which burst the whole thing asunder.

For in the early forenoon she received a distinguished visitor. It was none other than Mr. Sydney Bradford, the well-known London solicitor. He was suave and gentle in his manners, and strictly businesslike.

A CHRISTMAS OF PERIL

He explained that he had been given a letter three years and four months previously by Mr. Clive Worthing, with instructions to hand a sealed letter to Mrs. Worthing on the third anniversary of his death—should he die. Bradford sympathetically went on to say that Mr. Worthing had died on the Christmas Eve, three years before; therefore he—Bradford—had come to fulfil his undertaking.

Ethel was surprised, and was struck by the date on the sealed letter. It was the date of her wedding-day! But everything was so straightforward and legal that Ethel never had a suspicion that all was not right.

And, opening the letter, she found it to be from her dead husband. He had written it upon his wedding-day, Worthing explained, and had done so for a very special object. He asked his wife to forgive him for thus addressing her three years after his death; but he had purposely instructed the solicitor to wait that specified time, in order to allow her to settle down into her new life. Worthing explained that he did not suppose for one moment that the letter would ever be used; but it was a whim of his to write it upon his wedding-day.

And he seriously urged Ethel to regard with favour any attentions which Mr. Hubert Desmond might bestow upon her. Hubert Desmond, Worthing explained, was a dear friend of his, and it would allow him to lie peacefully in his grave if Ethel married the friend who had been so much to him.

Poor girl! She was confused and troubled. She did not guess the wiles and the cunning of the men who were plotting against her. And never for a second did she doubt that the letter had genuinely been written by her Clive. In truth, it was an amazing forgery.

And, as Jim the Penman had surmised, the letter had striking effect. Ethel, much as she disliked Hubert Desmond, was ready to sacrifice herself if it was the wish of her dear husband.

It was all terribly unexpected, and Ethel, with tears in her eyes, begged of Bradford to go. She promised him that she would consider the matter, and Bradford knew quite well that she would respect the wish expressed in the letter. She half promised as much before he left.

And Sydney Bradford went to the Manor and reported.

While he was there the second event of the morning happened—and it was to prove the greatest event in Ethel Worthing's life. She was given no opportunity to think and worry over what had just occurred, for Eileen Dare called upon her.

"Why, Mrs. Lethbridge," cried Eileen brightly, "you have been crying! And yet this is the happiest of all mornings for you!"

Ethel looked up with damp, red eyes.

"I—I scarcely know what you mean?" she exclaimed, not wishing Eileen to be worried with her troubles. "And I am so glad to see you, Miss Dare. I heard that you were lost in the snow——"

"But I was found!" said Eileen, smilingly. "And I have come here, Mrs. Worthing, to tell you a piece of joyous news. For somebody else is found, too. Oh, cannot you guess?"

Ethel was staring at her visitor with round, frightened eyes.

"You know—you know my real name!" she breathed. "Oh, what has happened? What news can you bring that is joyful to me? There is only one thing in the whole world which would fill my heart with gladness. I want my husband—my Clive! Oh, Heaven, how I want him! But he is dead——"

though the victim had died from heart failure. Only a poison expert would have recognised the deadly symptoms.

Lee had dealt quickly with the case only owing to a stroke of extraordinary chance. If he had been sleeping Worthing's cry would not have reached him, and in the morning it would have been impossible to take action. As it was, however, Worthing's life was saved. Like so many poisons this deadly stuff was soon defeated if battled with immediately after it had been administered. By wasting no time Lee proclaimed Worthing out of danger after two hours' hard work. And soon after that Worthing recovered his senses sufficiently to tell what had occurred.

Deadly in action if left to take its course, the poison left the victim almost in a normal condition once it was cleared from the system. But Worthing had not much to tell. He had been awakened by somebody beside his bed, and had seen a dimly cloaked figure. Then it seemed as though a red-hot iron had seared the back of his neck, and he had cried aloud. Nelson Lee was quite convinced that the cloaked figure had concealed the identity of Professor Cyrus Zingrave.

And in the morning Worthing kept to his room. The servants were given to understand that Mr. Yorke had had a sudden seizure, and that he was unconscious and dying. And Eileen, too, kept to her room, and not a soul outside the little circle knew that she had returned.

Consequently the conspirators at the Manor congratulated themselves upon the success of their plans. Eileen Dare was harmless, and buried in the snow. And Clive Worthing was insensible and on the point of death. He would never recover his senses, and it could never be revealed who he actually was. Zingrave assured Hector Desmond that Worthing's death was absolutely certain. And for some reason the master of the Manor was strangely pleased.

But the rogues did not know that retribution was near at hand!

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"I have said I am bringing you great joy," said Eileen, softly interrupting. "Cannot you understand what I mean, Mrs. Worthing? Will you have strength to bear it if I tell you at once?"

"Tell me—tell me!" panted Ethel, gripping Eileen's arm. "Oh, can it be possible that——" She broke off bitterly. "But he is dead! I sometimes thought it possible that it was all a ghastly mistake, but after these years——"

"He is alive!" said Eileen simply. "Your husband is alive and well, Mrs. Worthing, and he is here—he has come to you!"

Eileen had done her best to break the news gently, and she was intensely glad now when the door suddenly opened and Clive Worthing himself appeared. His eyes were shining, his whole frame throbbing with emotion.

"Ethel!"

He came forward with outstretched arms, and Eileen managed to slip past him, and so outside into the glorious winter morning. Just outside the gate she met Nelson Lee and Nipper, and told them of what had occurred.

And within the cottage, after the first heartfelt greeting, Clive Worthing clasped his wife to his breast, and pressed showers of kisses upon her lips and cheeks and hair.

"My darling!" he breathed fervently. "It has been a cruel time—a terrible weight. But I have atoned for the crime I committed, and it is now for me to make your life one round of happiness."

"My Clive!" she almost choked. "Oh, I—I am so happy!"

"The past is dead, and from now onwards we start a new life under a new name," said Worthing. "It is better, so, my brave little girl. How cruelly you must have suffered!"

But Clive Worthing suddenly turned his head, as a childish cry came to his ears.

"My little son!" he ejaculated proudly, and in another moment the little baby boy was clasped in his arms. It seemed as though his cup of happiness was brimming. But another great joy was to follow on that eventful Christmas Eve.

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Three visitors stood outside the main door of the Manor. They were Nelson Lee, Eileen Dare, and Clive Worthing. Watching from a convenient spot stood Nipper and Douglas Clifford—they were ready for any emergency. The door was opened by Baines, the butler.

"Yes, Mr. Desmond is in," he replied in answer to Lee's query. "The master is with young Mr. Hubert, in the library. Shall I——"

"We will go to Mr. Desmond without being announced, if you please," said Lee grimly. "Our business is urgent and cannot wait."

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A CHRISTMAS OF PERIL

And, to the butler's astonishment, Nelson Lee, Clive Worthing, and Eileen Dare strode across the hall and made straight for the library door. Lee knew which door to make for from Eileen's description of the house.

He flung the door open without ceremony. Hector Desmond stood before a blazing fire, a cigar in his mouth, and a smile of evil satisfaction upon his face. Hubert was lolling lazily upon a lounge.

"Why, good gracious! What is the meaning of this intrusion?" demanded Desmond, glaring at Nelson Lee, and then looking beyond. "Where is Baines— Ah! What—what— Am I dreaming—"

Desmond broke off pantingly, his cigar falling to the floor, and his face blanching with sheer terror. Hubert, too, was transfixed to his seat. Lee had purposely brought about this climax in order to surprise the scoundrels into confession. The great detective certainly succeeded!

"Eileen Dare!" croaked Hector Desmond. "I must be mad—mad!"

He had thought that Eileen Dare was lying dead in the snow, miles away. He had thought that Clive Worthing was lying cold in death at the Elms. And yet they were both here—both facing him!

And a sudden change came over Worthing himself. He stared at Desmond, and then strode forward.

"Great heavens!" he shouted. "I have seen you before! You were in that room at Victor Marcombe's house—"

"I didn't mean to kill him!" babbled Desmond, half-insane with terror.

Nelson Lee was on the man in a flash.

"Those words are a confession!" rapped out the great detective. "Your best course, Hector Desmond, will be to tell me the whole truth—and nothing but the truth. You killed Victor Marcombe, and you allowed the guilt to be fastened upon an innocent man. You cannot deny that, for it is the truth!"

But Desmond was in too pitiable a state to attempt denial.

"I killed him!" he breathed. "But I will swear that it was an accident! I thought Clive Worthing to be dead, and realised that there was no necessity for me to speak. It was an accident—an accident!"

Clive Worthing stood with shining eyes and squared shoulders. That moment was the greatest of his whole life. He was innocent! Even he himself had always thought himself guilty. And this sudden revelation was as amazing to him as it was to his companions.

Hector Desmond was utterly broken, and Lee had little difficulty in forcing the truth from him. Hubert sat listening, with dry lips and panting breath. For the first time he learned of that night in Victor Marcombe's house.

When Worthing had entered the stockbroker's window, three years before, he had seen Marcombe talking heatedly with another man—Desmond. Then the pair had noticed that Clive Worthing was with them. Thinking the intruder to be a burglar, Desmond had picked up a paper-weight, and had flung it at Worthing, stunning him.

And Victor Marcombe was furious. He had told Desmond that he had no right to act so dramatically. He had no wish for the police to be entering his house. The two men had bent over Worthing, and had found him stunned. And from his hand Desmond had taken his revolver. At the sight of the weapon Marcombe had become more furious than ever. He was nervous of revolvers, and endeavoured to get it away from his companion.

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But then the tragedy had occurred. In trying to force the weapon from Desmond's grip, the revolver had gone off, and Marcombe had been shot through the heart. Desmond, desperate and terrified, seeing that Worthing was just recovering, thrust the revolver into his hand and fled, locking the door behind him and taking the key.

And when Worthing had risen to his feet he had found the weapon in his hand and blood upon his other hand. Clive Worthing, in that terrible situation, *thought that he had killed Marcombe!*

It was a natural supposition. For he had been half-dazed, and had no clear recollection of what had occurred. He supposed that Marcombe had struck him, and that he had fired the revolver without knowing it. And it is only now—three years later—that he remembered that he had seen Hector Desmond in the room.

The truth was out at last.

When a search of the house was made there was no sign whatever of Jim the Penman and Professor Zingrave. The pair had taken alarm and disappeared. They had evidently escaped in good time, for when Lee confronted Desmond the house was surrounded by police. Sidney Bradford could not be arrested, for there was no direct evidence against him.

But the vile plot had been frustrated, and the two Desmonds, father and son, paid dearly for their share in it. The father was not hanged for the killing of Victor Marcombe, for it was clearly a case of accidental death. But on the other counts Hector Desmond was heavily punished.

But on that eventful Christmas Eve there was joy and happiness. Worthing was innocent, and his re-union with his wife was a thousandfold more delightful. The fact that she was tremendously rich was pleasing, no doubt, but just then they only thought of personal, human joy.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Worthing and their little son spent Christmas at the Elms with Douglas Clifford and his guests. The times of trouble and misery and hardship were over, and nothing but supreme happiness lay ahead.

It was indeed a joyous Christmas for all!

THE END.

NEXT WEEK

The NELSON LEE LIBRARY will revert to its original size and price, and will contain a magnificent Story of NELSON LEE and Dr. MORTIMER CRANE, entitled:

“The Mystery of the Closed Door;

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From the pen of the famous Author of “THE BLACK WOLF,”
and other fine Stories.

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THE ISLAND OF GOLD

A Story of Treasure Hunting in the South Sea Islands

By **FENTON ASH**

You can begin this Story to-day!

ALEC MACKAY, the hero of our story, with CLIVE LOWTHER, an old chum, and BEN GROVE, a hearty old "sea dog," are comrades in an expedition to the South Seas in search of a supposed treasure island.

They meet with many adventures, but their original quest appears hopeless until, one day, Alec and Clive are lost in a rocky and cavernous part of the island. They sit down to talk matters over, but immediately become the targets of a troop of huge apes, who throw pebbles at them from the rocks above. Alec examines one of the stones and finds it to be one of those for which the party is searching!

They fall in with a party of blacks led by a stalwart native named OLTRA, and an Irishman—one PETE STORBIN. They appear friendly, and Storbin tells Clive and Alec that Pedro Diego, a rascally "blackbirder," has got an eye on the chums' expedition, for what reason he does not know. The warning comes only just in time. That same day the enemy makes an attack; a desperate fight ensues, in which Oltra and his band play a great part.

(Now read this week's thrilling instalment.)

Oltra's Invitation.

THE doctor greeted them both cordially, and thanked them warmly for what they had done for his young friends.

"Be the powers!" cried Storbin, "they did as much for us as iver we did fur thim—ay, an' more. Didn't they relase the prisoners and take 'em away wid 'em, an' carry off their store av cartridges? It wor a foine stroke that!" he added admiringly. "An' it mint a lot to us aftherwards. "An' thin," he went on, warming up in his enthusiasm, "didn't they help us whin it came t' the foightin'! It's nate, pretty foighters they are, sorr—as pretty as iver I see—an' that's sayin' a lot!"

"I daresay it is," said the doctor, smiling at the speaker's way of expressing his views. "Well, you seem to have got on very well together—to have helped each other, with good feeling on both sides. And, that being so," he continued reflectively, "I have been thinking whether you—or some of you—might care to take service with me for a while. I want further help, and am willing to pay liberally for reliable men."

"As t' that, sorr," Storbin answered, "I daresay some av the bhoys moight loike to; an', I tell ye, ye can thrust thim wid yer loives. But me mather an' meself—av coorse we can't be away from our oiland fur long at a toime. There are affairs av state t' be looked afther, ye unnersthan'? Howsomever, I loikes yer company, an' I shall come over t' see how ye're gettin' on, and I wishes yez success."

The doctor could not repress a smile at the mention of the "affairs of

(Continued overleaf.)

state," but he could find no fault with the Irishman's decision. It was only what he had foreseen.

"Good!" he said. "Come and see us, by all means, as often as you like while we remain here."

Storbin interpreted all this to his royal master, who listened attentively and approvingly. For the matter of that, it seemed that this gentleman could chatter a little English, and he seemed a little hurt at not having been allowed an opportunity of showing off this accomplishment. So he made one for himself.

"Yes," he said, "we come see you. An' you come see us—at home."

"Come and see you—at your home," said the doctor graciously. "Why, that's very good of you. At present I don't know exactly where your home is, or how far away, but I should like to come very much when our work here is over, if we can manage it."

"You'd better, perhaps, say that over again to your master in order to make it clear," he observed in an aside to Storbin.

But Oltra quickly showed that he understood.

"Yes, yes," he said, nodding his head vigorously. "You come to my home. Come to tea. Come to tea. Bring—bring——" He hesitated and looked round. Then, in a burst of royal generosity, he added: "Bring 'em all."

"What, all my people? Bring them all to tea?" the doctor returned, much amused. "I'm afraid you'd want a pretty big teapot."

"Got big pot," the dusky chief promptly replied. "Got pot big as that!" And he held his hands as far apart as he could get them, to indicate the size of the pot.

"Sure, an' it's true," Storbin put in. "It's a moighty foine pot me mather's got. It's a heirloom. It's been handed down from his anchestors," he explained, "though," he went on reminiscently, "I doubt if it's always bin used for tay. I have heered as—but theer! P'raps ye can guess as well as I can tell ye." And he looked rather slyly at the doctor, and from him to Clive and Alec, who were with difficulty keeping from laughing.

"Yes, yes," the king confessed, nodding his head again. "Yes, yes; you come—try big pot?"

"All right, I'll come—if I can—and try the big pot," said the doctor graciously.

"I suppose it'll be all right—we are to try the pot—he's not to try the pot on us—to see how we fit it!" Alec whispered to Clive.

Storbin overheard, and, turning, favoured Alec with a very significant wink.

"Bring all the people you have with you round here presently," said Dr. Campbell. "I should very much like to see them. I can't walk far at present, but I can manage to hobble as far as just outside my tent."

Oltra promised with evident pleasure that the doctor's words should be obeyed, and then he went out, escorted by his major domo.

"They're a curious couple," remarked Dr. Campbell, after they had gone. "I wonder how many years they have lived and cottoned together like this? And I wonder how the black chief first came to take him up as his confidential adviser and——"

(Another thrilling instalment of this grand yarn next week.)