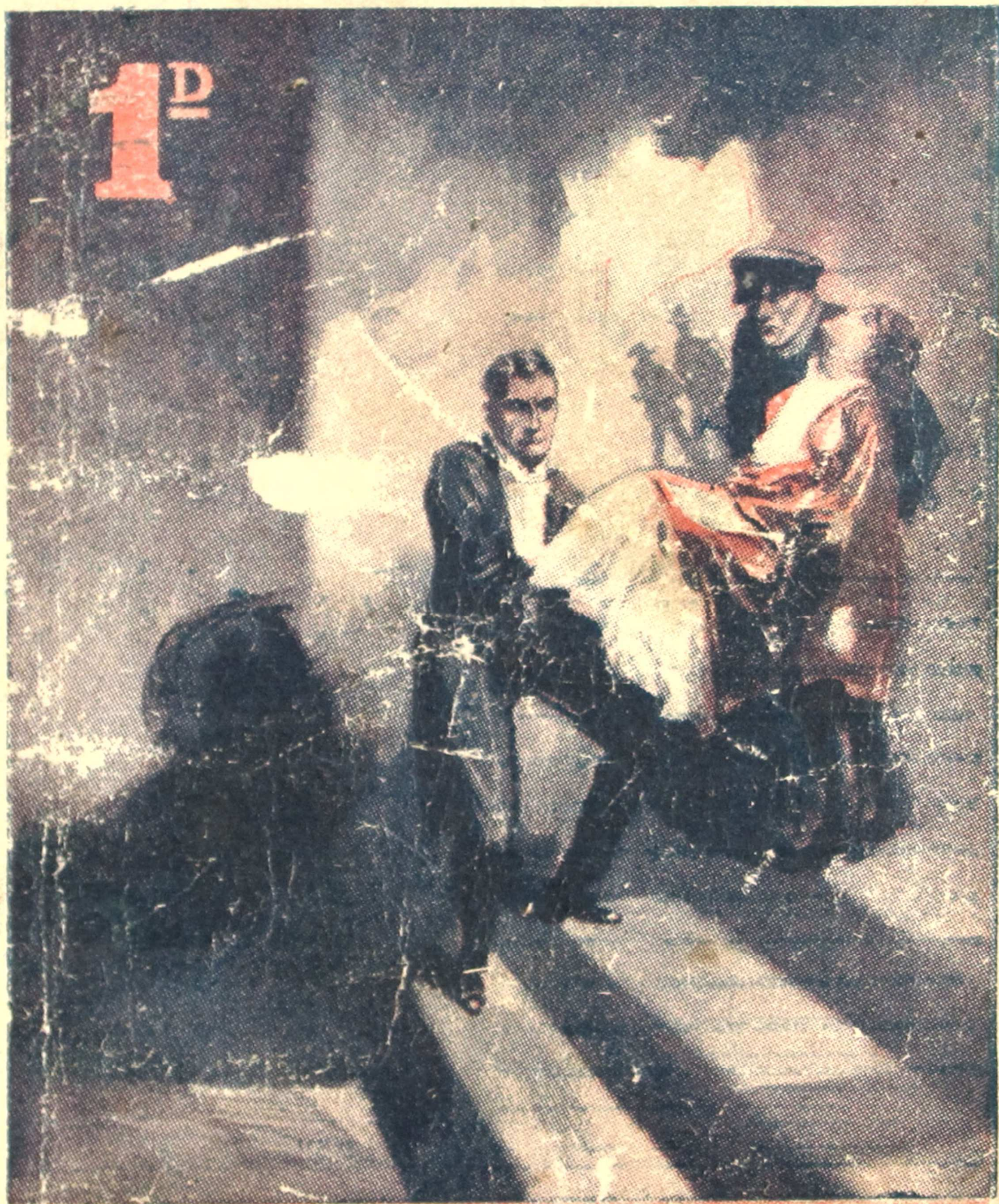


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THE ABDUCTION OF LADY MARJORIE!

Another Adventurous
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Grim Campaign against
"The CIRCLE of TERROR."

By the Author of "Fangs of Steel," "The Yellow Mask," etc.

CHAPTER I.

AT THE ART EXHIBITION—MR. WELLESLEY
DREX—LADY MARJORIE VANISHES.

THE Right Honourable the Earl of Elsington laughingly shook his head as he extracted a cigar from Sir Oswald Drapley's well-filled case.

"It's no good, my dear fellow," said the earl. "I'm not here to see the paintings, you know. My eyesight is terrible. I've just brought my little girl—she's rather keen on art."

"That's rotten, isn't it?" remarked Sir Oswald feelingly. "Surrounded by gems of art, and can't see one of 'em! By gad, Elsington, your eyes weren't so bad as all that when I was down at your place last year."

"No; they are much worse now," replied the earl. "I strongly suspect that I shall lose my sight completely—"

"Fiddlesticks!" interrupted Sir Oswald.

The two men were old friends, and so they were not restricted to formalities. They had met by chance at the Rayle Gallery, where many oil and water-colour paintings were being exhibited—for the benefit of a war charity.

Many famous people were viewing the pictures, and the exhibition was popular. At the time of the earl's meeting with Sir Oswald the gallery was rather crowded, and the throng was a talkative, cheery one.

It was the afternoon of a bright July

day, and everybody was feeling in good spirits. The Earl of Elsington, as he admitted, was not possessed of first-class eyesight. He was a slim, frail man of fifty-two, with kindly eyes and a clean-shaven face. He did not wear glasses, because glasses were of no use to him. His sight was far too weak.

Nevertheless, he was able to get about just as he liked—or, to be more exact, just as his daughter liked. For the earl and Lady Marjorie were inseparable. Lady Marjorie was just seventeen, and she was motherless. She carried her father everywhere, and he was a willing slave.

Lady Marjorie Hilling was a bright, active, joyous little soul. She carried laughter and smiles wherever she went. Nobody ever dreamed of taking Lady Marjorie seriously. She was pretty, and she was dainty. Her speech, if somewhat slangy, was delightful to listen to, and her father, least of anybody, never thought of correcting her. Unkind people referred to her as a "flapper," and that made her angry. For she detested the word, and was mightily indignant when she heard it.

But Lady Marjorie's indignation was really delightful, and it never lasted longer than a few seconds. She was quite small in figure, perfectly proportioned, and possessed of singular grace and charm. Her hair was thick and golden, and her eyes the deepest blue.

She adored paintings of all varieties, and had already dragged her poor father to practically every art exhibition in

London, notwithstanding the fact that he couldn't share in her pleasure.

But he was good-tempered, and was only too pleased to humour her. Often enough she had cried pitifully on his shoulder because of his affliction; and after that, as a rule, she had visited some great specialist or other, imploring that gentleman to restore her father's sight completely.

The earl always made light of his grave trouble, and told Marjorie not to worry her little head.

While he was chatting with Sir Oswald Drapley in the Rayle Gallery, Lady Marjorie was viewing the pictures in company with Lady Drapley and her two daughters. They went from exhibit to exhibit, criticising, admiring, or condemning. For Lady Marjorie, at least, was frank in her opinion, and always said exactly what she thought—even if the fortunate—or unfortunate—artist stood behind her.

"Oh, isn't this picture perfectly lovely?" she cried enthusiastically. "Isn't it just ripping?"

"Do you think so, Lady Marjorie?"

The girl had addressed her remark to Lady Drapley, but a deep, musical voice answered her. She turned in surprise, and then smilingly nodded.

"I didn't know you were here, Mr. Drex," she said. "How do you do? Father's somewhere about—have you seen him?"

"Not yet," replied Mr. Wellesley Drex. "I don't suppose I should ever have seen him in this great throng of people. But it is impossible to miss seeing such an individual as yourself, Lady Marjorie."

She puckered her pretty forehead.

"Is that meant for an insult or a compliment?"

"Oh, a compliment, of course," Mr. Drex hastened to explain.

"I don't see why I shouldn't be missed—I'm not very big, am I?" said the girl, with a laugh. "But never mind me. Just look at this lovely picture!"

"I was doing so—it is indeed beautiful."

Mr. Wellesley Drex, however, has his eyes upon Lady Marjorie, and he smiled as he spoke. She was unconscious of his meaning, and proceeded to point out the rare beauty of the painting.

Her father came up, and Mr. Drex was soon chatting with the earl. The two had met once or twice before at social gatherings, and the earl rather liked Mr. Drex. He was clever and genial, and always excellent company. Mr. Drex had lived most of his life in Bombay or Calcutta or Madras—the earl wasn't sure where—but it was somewhere in India. Drex was a retired merchant, and although not exactly one of the "upper ten," was admitted into the best society.

He was rather short, but carried himself with an air of distinction, nevertheless. A more jovial man did not exist, and he was an amazing conversationalist. For some months past he had been very popular in London's best society.

"Personally, I prefer Oriental art," he was saying to the Earl of Elsington. "I may be prejudiced, of course, having lived so many years in the East. But, to my mind, there is something wonderfully alluring in the art of the Orient."

"I am afraid I am not an able critic, Mr. Drex," smiled the earl. "My daughter, young as she is, appreciates art—real art—when she sees it, no matter whether it is Eastern or Western."

"Is that so?" asked the other. "I should like you to bring her down to my country place—just below Guildford, in Surrey. I have some splendid treasures there. Do you think you could persuade Lady Marjorie to—"

"Oh, are you talking about me?" asked the girl, turning on the two men.

"Is that wicked?" chuckled Mr. Drex.

"To talk about me? Of course, it isn't! But what were you saying?" demanded Lady Marjorie. "I have a right to know, haven't I?"

"Most certainly you have," agreed Mr. Wellesley Drex genially. "I was just asking your father if he would bring you down to my country place—Banham Towers, in Surrey. I have some quaint specimens of Oriental art."

"It is really a question of whether Marjorie will take me," smiled the earl. "I always do exactly as she tells me. Indeed, I am afraid to thwart her—"

"Oh, dad! What a terrible thing to say!" protested Marjorie indignantly. "You'll make Mr. Drex think that I'm an awful ogre!"

Both the men laughed heartily; Lady Marjorie wasn't much like an ogre.

"Well, will you come?" smiled Mr. Drex.

"Of course," said Lady Marjorie promptly. "But mind, if your treasures aren't interesting, I shall never come again. When shall we say—to-morrow? To-morrow afternoon, Mr. Drex?"

"That will suit me admirably," smiled the other.

"My dear, you should not be so impulsive," said the earl gently. "It may not be convenient for Mr. Drex to have us bothering him to-morrow—"

The girl laughed gaily.

"That's Mr. Drex's look out," she exclaimed. "If we're a bother to him, he has only himself to blame. But we sha'n't be a bother, shall we, Mr. Drex?"

"Most assuredly not!" declared that gentleman.

"There! We'll motor down," went on Marjorie. "And we'll go to your place to tea, Mr. Drex. I hope it'll be fine. It's rotten motoring in the rain. Shall we meet anyone else?"

"Nobody," said Mr. Drex. "I am a lonely bachelor, you see."

"All right then. Expect us at about four o'clock."

And Lady Marjorie, having arranged everything to her satisfaction, went off with Sir Oswald Drapley to the other end of the gallery. Later on, when the earl had parted with Mr. Wellesley Drex, he remonstrated with his daughter.

"You should have made the arrangement for next week, Marjorie," he said mildly. "It may not be convenient for Mr. Drex to have us to-morrow. But he would not tell us that, of course."

"How silly you are, dad!" laughed Marjorie. "We shall be in Norfolk next week!"

"Shall we, Marjorie?"

"Why, we are going to Lady Milhaven's house-party, aren't we?"

"Oh, yes. I believe you mentioned—"

"To-morrow's Wednesday," went on Marjorie, ticking the day off on one of her perfectly shaped fingers. "It is a free day."

"A free day, darling?"

"Yes. We haven't arranged anything for to-morrow," she smiled. "That's why I was so quick to tell Mr. Drex that we would be there. I don't sup-

pose his treasures will be much, anyhow. But, as he asked us, we had to go."

"But there are other days—"

"Thursday is booked," said Marjorie decisively. "And so is Friday, and so is Saturday. And on Sunday we're going to Norfolk, to Lady Milhaven's."

"I—I don't remember where we are going on Thursday?" said the earl mildly.

"Why, to Molly Jevons's party, of course!"

"Dear me! I believe you mentioned it, Marjorie."

"Of course, I did. And on Friday and Saturday we shall be with the Morningsons, on their houseboat, at Henley," said Marjorie gaily. "To-morrow is the only day for Mr. Drex. I was wondering what I should do, to tell the truth. I needn't worry any more now. I expect it will be dull, but that won't matter for once."

"I—I suppose not, dear," said her poor father.

He was quite incapable of further remonstrance, and allowed himself to be carried off to tea somewhere.

As it happened, the following afternoon was gloriously fine. The sun shone brilliantly, and the roads were dusty and hot. Nevertheless, the motor-ride down into Surrey was enjoyable, and the earl was not sorry to get out of London.

Banham Towers was situated just beyond the village of Great Banham—although where its greatness came in was rather a puzzle for the village was very small. It was picturesque, however, and Marjorie was interested. She was still more interested in Banham Towers, for Mr. Drex's country house was a lovely place.

The building was set back from the road, with a profusion of trees surrounding it. Copper beeches, with their ruddy leaves, stood upon either side of the wide drive, and, nearer the house, there were some magnificent chestnuts.

Mr. Drex was on the wide steps, and he welcomed his visitors heartily. Very soon Lady Marjorie changed her opinion about Mr. Drex's treasures "not being much, anyhow." They were interesting and novel—and extremely rare. Many of the curios had strange histories, and Marjorie was enthralled with her host's ample fund of stories.

The girl was thoroughly delighted with her visit. Her father, unfortunately, could not appreciate the visit at its true worth. His failing eyesight made it impossible for him to participate in her pleasure. But he was greatly interested in Mr. Drex's conversation.

Tea was taken on the lawn, beneath the natural arbour of a weeping-willow tree. It was a quiet meal, but very enjoyable. On the whole, Marjorie was pleased with her visit, and was even more pleased with a couple of valuable curios which Mr. Drex had given her for her own collection.

After tea the men lit cigars, enjoying the cool evening breeze.

"Oh, by the way, did I show you my wonderful apricot tree?" smiled Mr. Drex.

"Apricot trees aren't wonderful, are they?" asked Marjorie.

"This one is. It is a wall-tree, and its formation is really extraordinary," said the host. "It is situated at the rear of the house, and you must see it, Lady Marjorie. Straight down the main path, through the orchard, to the end of the fruit-garden. You can't miss it, then. I'll come with you, if you like."

"Oh, no. You stay here, and talk to dad," said Marjorie lightly.

And she tripped off through the trees. When she came back, five minutes later, she found the two men standing by the earl's big motor-car. Lady Marjorie ran lightly across the springy turf.

"Isn't it wonderful?" she cried. "The tree, I mean. You'll have to come and see it before we go, dad."

But her father protested that he couldn't see the tree, even if he went; and so, a few minutes later, the visitors departed. Atkin, the chauffeur, had been told to take the journey to London quietly. It was still quite early in the evening.

Lady Marjorie was rather silent as she sat beside her father. She was usually so full of spirits that he could not help noticing the slight change.

"What is the matter, little girl?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm all right, dad," she smiled. "I was thinking of all those wonderful curios. I wish you could have seen them all. And I've got a little bit of a headache. It's the heat, I suppose. A nuisance, isn't it?"

"The air will make you better, dear. Lift your dust-veil," said her father.

She did so, and allowed the cool evening air to blow upon her pretty face. After that she was better, although she was not her usual self. Once, near London, a slight defect developed in the engine. Atkin pulled up to remedy it, and there was a delay of ten minutes.

But when the big automobile was gliding along Piccadilly in the bright evening light, Lady Marjorie recovered her spirits. She suddenly gripped her father's arm, and laughed gaily.

"Tell Atkin to stop at Drake & Edwin's, dad," she exclaimed.

"More finery, eh?" smiled the earl.

"Only a few things, dad—and a new hat," said Marjorie.

And so the car was pulled up outside the famous drapery establishment of Messrs. Drake & Edwin, Ltd., of Piccadilly Circus. Lady Marjorie tripped into one of the many entrances, and disappeared among the throngs of well-dressed people.

The Earl of Elsington waited patiently for ten minutes. It was close upon closing-time for the great establishment, and the shutters were already being lowered. Fifteen minutes passed, and they lengthened into twenty.

"Marjorie is a long time," muttered the earl. "I wonder what is keeping her? It is not like her to keep me waiting all this time."

Messrs. Drake & Edwin, Ltd., were closed altogether five minutes later, and the earl thought it advisable to make inquiries. He gained admittance after a little trouble; but Lady Marjorie was not in the establishment. If she had been there, she had departed by one of the usual exits, in the usual way.

The earl, rather annoyed at what he thought to be the girl's thoughtlessness, at once went home.

Lady Marjorie was not there.

She had not been seen, and she did not return.

In short, the girl had vanished completely and absolutely. The Earl of Elsington had last seen her entering the premises of Messrs. Drake & Edwin, Ltd.—Atkin, the chauffeur, had seen her, too.

And from that second Lady Marjorie disappeared.

There was no trace!

CHAPTER II.

NELSON LEE'S PROMISE—INQUIRIES—THE
DETECTIVE'S AMAZING THEORY.

MR. NELSON LEE, the famous criminologist, was looking grave. "You have told me everything, Lord Elsington?" he asked quietly.

"I wish to Heaven I had!" said the Earl of Elsington. "I have merely related the events which took place just previous to my little girl's disappearance. As I said, we had been down in the country for the afternoon, and Marjorie popped into Drake & Edwin's to purchase a new hat, I believe. She did not come out—and I have not seen her since."

"That was three days ago?"

"Yes, Mr. Lee. To-day is Saturday; Marjorie disappeared on Wednesday."

"The police have discovered nothing?"

"Not even a faint trace," said the earl distractedly. "Upon my soul, Mr Lee, I am worried out of my life. Marjorie was everything in the world to me. What can have happened to her in Drake & Edwin's? I know where she is now——"

"You know?" asked Nelson Lee, in surprise.

"I should have said I know that she was kidnapped by a gang of infamous scoundrels—scoundrels who mean to extort money from me," said the earl fiercely. "The Circle of Terror means to make me pay——"

"The Circle of Terror!" shouted Nipper, keenly interested.

"Hush, Nipper," admonished Lee. "You should not interrupt!"

But Nelson Lee himself was looking very grim now. He and his young assistant had listened to their visitor's story without much interest. It had struck them that Lady Marjorie's disappearance was just one of those mysteries which occur in the great metropolis every day. There had been nothing strange or unusual in the Earl of Elsington's narrative.

The last words he had uttered, however, put a different complexion on the matter.

The Circle of Terror!

Neither Nelson Lee nor Nipper needed any information regarding the villainous nature of that combination of rogues. Indeed, only a couple of hours since a

basket of glorious peaches had been brought up into the consulting-room by Mrs. Jones, the housekeeper. They had been left by a district messenger-boy, she had said.

There was a ticket enclosed—"From a Friend." Nelson Lee and Nipper had looked at the inviting fruit, but they had not tasted it. The trick was too obvious. It was, indeed, clumsy. Those peaches, when examined, proved to be impregnated with deadly poison. One bite would have been sufficient to cause instant death! Nelson Lee had destroyed the fruit, and had dismissed the matter from his mind. He guessed that the Circle of Terror was responsible.

For the Circle of Terror, and particularly Professor Cyrus Zingrave, its supreme chief, had every reason to be furious with Nelson Lee. And the Circle of Terror's fury usually took the form of some deadly menace.

The great detective had been waging a grim war against the Circle; and Nelson Lee had beaten the infamous secret society "hands down," as Nipper put it. In several encounters Lee had proved his superiority.

Nelson Lee was aware that the High Lord of the Circle was Professor Cyrus Zingrave, the once-notorious chief of the League of the Green Triangle. The police did not know this interesting fact, and Lee did not enlighten his official colleagues. That knowledge gave him a certain advantage. He and Nipper were aware of other things, too. And, although the Circle did not know that Nelson Lee had discovered so much, they, nevertheless, displayed considerable anxiety concerning the great detective's health. In the High Lord's opinion, Nelson Lee was rather too healthy; a drop or two of poison—deadly poison—was just the tonic for him. Unfortunately, Nelson Lee was slow to fall into a trap.

"Yes, my little girl has been abducted by the infamous Circle of Terror!" declared Lord Elsington gravely. "How the abduction was accomplished Heaven alone knows—I do not! The police are mystified. They have discovered nothing."

"I am scarcely surprised at that—now," said Nelson Lee. "The Circle of Terror does not do things by halves. And I will willingly take up this matter for you, Lord Elsington. I am fighting

the Circle of Terror, and if I can restore your daughter to you I shall be gratified—"

"You must find her, Mr. Lee!" said the earl huskily. "I do not believe that these devils will give her up when they have gained their way with me. They will keep her a prisoner—perhaps I shall never see her again! Dear Heaven! You cannot realise how much little Marjorie was to me. I am half-blind, and I relied upon her for almost everything. She was the life and soul—"

"You must not worry unduly," interjected Lee softly. "Please, tell me, how do you know your daughter has been kidnapped by the Circle of Terror? Have you received a message of any sort—a demand for money—"

"A demand, Mr. Lee, but not for money," said the earl. "It came this morning, just when I was beginning to despair. In a measure I am relieved—for it is, at least, definite news. But what an appalling situation!"

The visitor took out a letter, and handed it to Nelson Lee.

The detective saw at once that the communication was in the usual style adopted by the Circle. It was printed, and at the top there was a neat purple circle. The message ran as follows:—

"Headquarters, date as Postmark.

"My Lord,—Your daughter, Lady Marjorie Millicent Hilling, is quite safe and well. She will come to no harm, provided you comply with the demand set forth below.

"One of your ships—the Joseph K. Lincoln—is now on its way to Buenos Aires, with a cargo of mixed merchandise. You are hereby advised to cable fresh instructions to your agents in Buenos Aires. The Joseph K. Lincoln is to proceed, with full cargo, to the port of Iguasco, on the Brazilian coast. The ship's cargo must then be delivered up to Mr. Rodney Stalton, of Iguasco; he will have full instructions. Having unshipped her cargo, the Joseph K. Lincoln will then return to Buenos Aires, and will be again at your service. Under no circumstances must you cause inquiries to be made concerning the fate of your property, or the activities of Mr. Rodney Stalton. You have heard of the Circle of Terror—and you know the Circle's power.

"That matter is left in your hands. If you follow these instructions to the

letter your daughter will be restored to you unharmed in the slightest degree. If, however, you refuse, you will never see your daughter again.

"We will give you until Monday. On Tuesday you must publish your answer in the Personal Column of 'The Times.' All you need put is 'Yes.—Elsie.' We shall understand. We shall then forward you further and fuller instructions. Should this warning be ignored, we shall not give you a second chance. Your daughter will—suffer.

"THE CIRCLE OF TERROR."

The Earl of Elsington, although partially blind, saw Nelson Lee lay the Circle's letter upon the table.

"Have you come to any decision?" asked the detective quietly.

"Yes. I shall comply, of course."

"I am glad you take that sensible view," went on Lee. "It is possible that I may be able to avert the disaster—I have until Monday, at any rate. Even longer than that, for it seems that you are to receive further instructions. But it will be as well to be prepared."

"You think these infernal brutes will carry out their threat?"

"Most decidedly. And it is a hidden threat," said Nelson Lee. "We do not know what horrible fate there is in store for poor Lady Marjorie. 'Your daughter will—suffer.' That sentence is terribly significant, and you cannot afford to ignore it. If you refuse to comply, Lady Marjorie's fate may be even worse than—death."

"I shall obey," Mr. Lee," said his lordship huskily.

"If you do, I have little doubt that your daughter will be restored to you, unharmed," went on Lee. "Nevertheless, I shall do my utmost to defeat the Circle's aim. What is this cargo worth?"

"Just over sixty thousand."

"H'm! Quite a respectable prize," mused Lee. "It is a novel method of extorting money, but an effective one. The Circle has resorted to its usual method of terrorism. I am puzzled, however, as to how the Circle could have kidnapped your daughter in such a public place as Drake & Edwin's."

"It is an amazing story, Mr. Lee."

The detective lay back in his chair, and lit a cigarette. Nipper watched him rather anxiously. The lad, although keeping silent, was boiling inwardly. It was a bit too thick, he decided, for this

Circle of Terror to kidnap a sweet young girl. Nipper had never met Lady Marjorie, but he had seen her photograph.

Both Nipper and his master knew that the Earl of Elsington was a big ship-owner, and the loss of the Joseph K. Lincoln's cargo, although serious, was not likely to affect him very deeply. The cargo, in all probability, did not belong to Lord Elsington at all; but the ship was his, and he was responsible.

"You can give me no further facts?" asked Nelson Lee presently.

"None whatever. My daughter entered Drake & Edwin's, and I did not see her again," said the earl. "That is all—it is so simple, indeed, that there is no scope for inquiry."

"I will get to work on the case at once," said Lee. "Whatever happens, Lord Elsington, I will report to you on Monday evening. I am afraid the time is too limited for any definite result to be achieved—we must hope for the best, however."

Very shortly afterwards the earl took his departure. He was feeling a little more hopeful, and a certain amount of colour had stolen back into his haggard cheeks. Nipper was very sorry for the distracted peer.

"Poor old chap," said the lad feelingly. "He's awfully cut-up, guv'nor."

"How was Lady Marjorie kidnapped—that is the question?" said Nelson Lee, pacing up and down the consulting-room. It is a puzzle, Nipper—and we shall not solve it by remaining here. We must get to work."

"How, sir?"

"First of all, by visiting Drake & Edwin's."

In less than five minutes Lee and Nipper were off. They went in a taxi, and were soon bowling along High Holborn, and then along New Oxford Street. Just against Tottenham Court Road an alarming incident occurred.

But for the amazingly clever work of the taxi-driver the incident might have been a tragedy. A heavy motor-lorry was coming along just behind the taxi, and it was making a considerable noise.

The taxi sped forward, but was pulled up by the traffic. The vehicle stopped dead, and waited. But, from the rear, the lumber of the motor-lorry was as loud as ever. Nipper glancing back, saw that the heavy vehicle—heavier than any motor-bus—was rushing straight towards the back of the taxi.

"Great Scott!" roared Nipper.

He could see, in a second, that the lorry could not pull up in time. The taxi would be smashed to atoms—and Lee and Nipper were, of course, in the rear. They would receive the full force of the appalling collision.

"Look out, guv'nor!" bellowed Nipper.

"But there was no time for them to act; the lorry was upon them. But, even as the crash occurred, the taxi-driver raced his engine and slammed in the clutch. The taxi gave a terrible lurch, and jerked forward.

Practically all the force of the dreadful impact was avoided. The crash which followed was loud enough, and the back of the taxi was crushed in like cardboard. But Nelson Lee and Nipper were unhurt. But for the driver's prompt action his fare would have been seriously injured, if not killed outright.

The heavy lorry shoved the battered taxi before it, just as a snow-plough shovels snow. There was another crash as the front of the taxi butted into the rear of a motor-bus, smashing the stairs, and playing havoc with the taxi's engine. The poor little vehicle was crumpled up fore and aft—a complete wreck. But nobody was hurt.

There was tremendous excitement, and a great crowd collected. But the police soon had the matter in hand, and there was a wholesale taking of names and addresses. The driver of the lorry was a scared-looking fellow. He declared that he lost his head, and couldn't shut off the power.

But Nelson Lee was looking very grim. He fully believed that the accident had been deliberately planned. The Circle of Terror had merely made another attempt to kill its enemies. Lee had no proof of this at the moment; but he was sure in his own mind.

And the incident only made him all the more firmly determined to press his campaign on to the bitter end—one way or the other. In a fresh taxi Lee and Nipper continued their interrupted journey.

"Narrow shave that, guv'nor," said Nipper. "I'm glad you took that taxi-driver's name and address. I reckon he saved us from a mangling. He's a good chap. We shall have to send him a bar of sugar-candy, or something!"

Nelson Lee smiled grimly.

"I shall not forget the service he

rendered, young 'un," he said. "Perhaps it was greater than we suppose. That lorry was just behind us all the way from Holborn. It may have been a coincidence, but—" Nelson Lee paused.

"But what, sir?" asked Nipper, staring.

"The Circle of Terror wants to get rid of us—that's all."

"Great Jupiter! You don't suspect—"

"I do, Nipper. But I can't be sure," said Lee grimly. "By adopting a ruse like that we should have been killed—or badly injured, at least—without foul play being suspected. The facts are suggestive, at all events— But here we are, at Drake & Edwin's."

Piccadilly Circus had been reached, and the pair entered the great dry-goods store, as an American would have put it. They were at once shown into the manager's private office, and met Detective-Inspector Lennard there. Lennard was a very old friend of Nelson Lee's, and a capable, hard-headed detective-officer.

"Hallo! You on this business, too?" said the inspector, taking Lee's hand. "I'm afraid you'll draw blank, Lee."

Lennard knew the main facts, for, of course, the Earl of Elsington had informed the police of the whole business. The knowledge that the Circle of Terror was concerned in the abduction caused Lennard to be rather gloomy.

Nelson Lee had a few words with the manager, but could obtain no information of any sort whatever.

"I can only refer you to Mr. Lennard," said the manager. "He has been questioning my assistants for an hour just, and he knows all there is to be known."

"And that's—nothing!" said the inspector.

Nelson Lee laughed.

"But, surely, Lennard, you have been able to procure some information?" he asked. "Lady Marjorie Hilling certainly entered this establishment on Wednesday evening last, a few minutes before closing time. Is there no shop-walker or assistant who can remember—"

"That's the queer part of it, Mr. Lee," said the inspector. "I was here yesterday and the day before. We didn't know until this morning that the Circle was concerned in the business—but that doesn't make any difference to this in-

quiry. The fact that Lady Marjorie didn't enter the place until nearly closing-time should have made my task a heap easier—but it hasn't. Not a soul remembers having seen her in the building on Wednesday evening."

"Yet she certainly entered."

"No doubt about that," replied Lennard. "The only solution that I can think of is that she left again immediately, almost before she could get into the doorway. But why? She didn't kidnap herself, did she? We can be absolutely sure that Lady Marjorie didn't want to disappear. She was forced in some way. But how?"

"That's the root of the whole question."

"Perhaps she was tricked," said Lennard musingly. "Plenty of ways, you know. Some chap might have approached her with a yarn that her father had been taken ill, and had gone off to hospital. A fake taxi, and there you are. Once she was inside they'd have her. But that theory won't hold water."

"Why not?" asked Nipper.

"Why not, you young imp?" growled the inspector. "Because I've positively learned that there was no taxi business. The commissionaire swears that a taxi didn't come near the building during the last half-hour on Wednesday evening. He remembers Lord Elsington's car standing there, but there wasn't a taxi called or—or anything. It's a fair puzzle. People can't be kidnapped in public, can they? And you can bet your boots that the girl wasn't a party to the thing herself. Force was applied—but that's all we know. She just vanished."

"There's just a chance that Lady Marjorie entered and then came out again immediately, as you say, Lennard," said Nelson Lee. "Her father's half-blind, you know, and he would not have seen her, even if he had been watching. The girl may have decided to look into one of the windows, and, while doing so, something happened to draw her attention."

Detective-Inspector Lennard snorted.

"She 'may' have done this, and she 'may' have done that!" he growled. "Confound it, Lee! I'm wild. There's no beginning to this affair. I've exhausted all the methods of inquiry, and I haven't progressed a yard."

"Then I sha'n't waste any time here," said Nelson Lee smilingly. "Don't be

disheartened, Lennard. Something will probably turn up."

The detective took his departure, and at once commenced walking across the Circus. As there wasn't a taxi handy, Lee jumped on to a motor-bus. Nipper followed, and the pair mounted to the top.

"Where to now, gov'nor?" asked the lad curiously.

"Well, I have a mind to question Atkin, Lord Elsington's chauffeur," said Lee. "I don't think the police have troubled over such a detail. But it is possible that Atkin may provide us with some really valuable information. I don't know for certain, but I have an idea that our quest will not be blank."

"What the dickens can he tell us?" demanded Nipper.

"My dear lad, how do I know? If I did know I shouldn't trouble to question him," replied Nelson Lee. "It is obviously useless remaining at Drake & Edwin's. Lennard has pumped everybody dry, and has discovered nothing. It would be foolish for us to go over the same ground. Therefore, I am going to the only quarter where it is possible to obtain information."

"A fat lot a fatheaded chauffeur can tell us!" grumbled Nipper.

The lad considered that his master was wasting time. But Lee lay back in his seat and smoked in silence. The earl lived in Sloane Place, and his garage was situated in a narrow mews near by. At one time the mews had consisted of stables and coach-houses. But they were now almost all garages for automobiles.

As Nelson Lee had anticipated, Atkin was at work on the big car. Since Lady Marjorie's abduction, the automobile had been idle, and Atkin was looking worried and miserable.

He greeted Nelson Lee and Nipper cordially enough when he learned why they had come; and he leaned against the body of the car, wiping his oily hands with a piece of waste.

"It's a fair knock-out, that's what it is, Mr. Lee!" he said glumly. "If any curs have harmed Lady Marjorie's—"

"I don't think your young mistress is harmed so far," interrupted Lee. "I want you to tell me exactly what occurred, Atkin."

The chauffeur nodded.

"That's easy enough, sir," he said. "I've worked for a few people in my time, but I will say that Lady Marjorie's the best mistress I've ever served. Really,

I'm employed by his lordship, her father. But she always gave me my orders, and I had to do just as she told me. A young ripper she was, but as good as gold. I'm real cut up, sir. Me and the other servants just adored Lady Marjorie. She's only a kid, after all, but I'd have done any bloomin' thing for her, an' that's a fact! Always sunny and smiling, she was. Used to make me grin all over even when I was feeling down in the dumps, after a row with the missus!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I want you to tell me what happened on Wednesday afternoon, Atkin," he said.

"Yes, sir. You mean after we got back to London?"

"No. Tell me everything."

"Well, we went down to a one-hoss village called Great Balham, or Banham, or something like that," said Atkin, lighting a cigarette. "Went to some big cove's house down there."

"Who was the gentleman?"

"Why, Mr. Drex, I think—that's it," said the chauffeur. "Mr. Wellington Drex."

"Wellesley Drex, you mean?" smiled Lee. "I have heard of the man."

"You've got it right, sir. Well, we went down there, and Lady Marjorie and her father stayed for three or four hours. Had tea in the garden, an' all the rest. I rather enjoyed myself, I'll admit. There were a couple of decent housemaids— But that ain't the story, is it, sir? We started away in good time, and everything went well until we got through Ripley, on the way to Cobham."

"And what happened then?"

"One of the plugs got sooted up, an' the old engine jerked a bit. So I pulled up, and attended to it," said Atkin. "Nothin' much in itself, sir, but I was rather surprised."

"Surprised at what?"

"Why, Lady Marjorie. She didn't come an' look on, or give advice, or anythin'."

"And does she usually interfere in that way?" smiled Lee.

Atkin shook his head firmly.

"It ain't interference, sir," he declared. "Lady Marjorie ain't more than a kid, I s'pose, but what she don't know about motor-cars ain't worth larnin'. I always used to look to her for advice an' instruction. Why, now an' again she'd even do a job herself, an' get her sweet little hands all messed up with oil an' stuff!"

"But she didn't help you on this occasion?"

"No, sir. As a rule, she'd be out of the car in a twink, an' would take charge of things in that high-handed way of hers—which is really amusin'. Some chaps might not have liked it," said Atkin. "But, lor' bless your life, you couldn't be wild with Lady Marjorie, sir! When I stopped the car I was expecting her to be down beside the engine every second."

"And didn't she come?" asked Nipper.

"No. That's what surprised me," said Atkin. "Lady Marjorie just sat behind without sayin' anythin', or movin' at all. She'd been pretty quiet all the way up—much quieter than usual—an' I reckoned she'd got a headache. But I'll admit I was surprised when she sat in the car without even askin' what was wrong!"

"That was unusual, was it not?" mused Nelson Lee.

"Rather, sir. An' I was a bit worried, because I didn't want Lady Marjorie to get ill or anything!" exclaimed Atkin. "Now she's vanished! I knew there was something wrong! Right from the moment she left that house in Banham!"

"Don't interrupt your story, Atkin."

"All right, sir. I got the plug in order, and then we started again. Lady Marjorie hadn't said a thing the whole time. Of course, I wasn't particularly surprised, Mr. Lee," added the chauffeur. "There wasn't anything startling in it; but it was queer. Do you understand me, sir?"

"Perfectly," said Lee. "Lady Marjorie, I gather, was in gay spirits during the journey down to Banham, but very quiet and subdued on the return trip. Didn't she speak at all?"

"Oh, yes; just as we were goin' down Piccadilly," said Atkin. "I heard her saying something to her father, an' the next moment his lordship told me to pull up at Drake & Edwin's. That was rummy, too!"

"Which was?"

"Her father givin' me the order. She always told me what to do where ever we went," said Atkin, shaking his head. "There was something wrong with the girl that afternoon, Mr. Lee. A cold comin' on, maybe, or some other illness. Her voice didn't seem the same as usual."

Nelson Lee started slightly.

"How was her voice different?" he asked.

"Kind of husky, sir. But it wasn't so much the voice as the tone, if you know what I mean."

"I think I understand, Atkin," said Nelson Lee. "Tell me. How was Lady Marjorie dressed?"

"Why, in a kind of pink, flimsy sort of dress, sir. Made o' that stuff that they call vile, ain't it?"

"Vile?" repeated Nelson Lee, with a smile. "Hardly that, Atkin!"

"Well, it sounds something like that," said the chauffeur. "I've heard the missus talkin' about it."

Nipper chuckled.

"Why, you mean voile!" he grinned.

"That's it," said Atkin, nodding. "Voile's the word—sounds like 'vile' spoken by a country chap, don't it? Well, anyhow, Lady Marjorie was wearin' one o' them dresses—an' a real beauty it was, too! But, there! My young mistress looked fine in anything!"

Atkin suddenly removed his cigarette, and blew out a cloud of smoke.

"Oh, an' there was the veil, sir!" he added. "That was queer, too. Lady Marjorie was wearin' a white dust-veil over her face and hat."

"How was that queer?"

"Because I never saw her wearin' one before. In fact, Mr. Lee, she always said that she hated veils and all such things. Lady Marjorie was a real sport, you know. No squeamishness about her, although she was only a young 'un. Used to drive this car a sight faster than I'd care to drive it!"

"But about the veil," said Nelson Lee keenly. "According to your statement, Atkin, Lady Marjorie wore a dust-veil for the first time in your remembrance on Wednesday afternoon. That was, indeed, suggestive. Was the veil a thick one?"

"Not very, sir."

"Could you see through it plainly?"

"Just see her face, like," said Atkin. "But not clearly, sir."

"I suppose you saw Lady Marjorie enter Drake & Edwin's?"

"Of course, sir! She seemed lively enough then, I must say. Tripped across the pavement and went into the big main entrance. That's the last I saw of her, sir," added Atkin gloomily. "I was watching the door for three or four minutes, but she didn't appear."

"And that is all you know?"

"Every bit, sir. An' that's a fat lot, ain't it?" said the chauffeur disgustedly. "I wish I could have told you something

important, Mr. Lee. I hope to Heaven Lady Marjorie's found!"

Lee and Nipper took their departure a few minutes later, leaving Atkin the richer by ten shillings. Atkin was satisfied, and Nelson Lee was satisfied, but Nipper seemed to be rather fed-up.

"Sheer waste of time, gov'nor," he declared. "That's what it was. You are a funny chap, blessed if you aren't! What was the good of asking him all those questions—about dresses and veils and things?"

"Every good in the world, my good Nipper," replied Lee calmly. "But I think I can see a taxi in the distance. If it is empty we will charter it at once, and make for home. Perhaps we shall have better luck on this trip—we certainly do not want to try conclusions with any more motor-lorries!"

The taxi was called, and, in due course, Lee and Nipper arrived back at Gray's Inn Road without any further exhibition of the Circle of Terror's "frightfulness." For Lee was convinced that the Circle was paying him extra special attention.

Nipper poured himself out a fizzy glass of lemonade.

"I'm thirsty after all that fooling about, sir," he growled. "It always makes me thirsty when we waste time."

"My good Nipper, I do not consider that we have wasted even one second," interjected Nelson Lee smoothly. "On the contrary, Atkin's information was of the utmost importance, and I have formulated a theory—an astounding theory."

Nipper stared.

"Let's hear it, gov'nor!" he said eagerly.

"Well, to begin with, I believe that Lady Marjorie Hilling was abducted in the country—before the return journey to London commenced."

Nipper stared harder than ever.

"You must be wandering, gov'nor!" he burst out. "You know as well as I do that Lady Marjorie wasn't kidnapped until she was in Drake & Edwin's! How the thunder could she have been—"

"If you will allow me to finish, Nipper, without making these rude interruptions, you may possibly grasp the full significance of my argument," said Lee smoothly. "I repeat—Lady Marjorie was kidnapped at the house of Mr. Wellesley Drex—that she never made the return trip to London at all!"

"Then—then who did?" roared Nipper.

"Evidently you take me for a magician, Nipper," said the great detective calmly. "I have not the slightest idea who took Lady Marjorie's place. But I am quite convinced that the lady was not the Earl of Elsington's daughter."

Nipper stared blankly.

"You're—you're dotty, gov'nor!" he gasped.

"Thank you!"

"I didn't mean to be rude, sir!" panted Nipper amazedly. "But I'm flabbergasted! Are you really serious? Do you mean to say that you think that Lady Marjorie didn't come back to London at all?"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"That is just what I do mean to say," he replied.

"It's—it's a daring theory, sir, and I don't quite see how you get at it," said Nipper, calming down somewhat.

"What makes you so positive?"

"I'm not positive—I only suspect."

"Well, why do you suspect, then?"

"Because of several things—seemingly minor, trivial points, but really of the most singular importance," replied the great criminologist. "Just consider the facts as we know them, Nipper. We will take Atkin's evidence. He referred to a slight stoppage on the road, owing to engine trouble, on the way home."

"I don't see—"

"You will in a minute. Atkin said that he was surprised because Lady Marjorie didn't help with the repair. The girl, it seems, is something of an expert in motor matters, and it was remarkable that she did not jump out of the car and take charge of things."

"She had a headache," said Nipper.

"That was no reason for remaining indifferent to the stoppage," said Nelson Lee. "No, Nipper; Lady Marjorie acted in a totally different manner to what one would expect. She remained in the car, and did not even ask what the trouble was. As Atkin said, her behaviour was not startling, but undoubtedly queer. That gave me the first hint. Then Atkin mentioned that the girl's voice was slightly different. A cold coming on, Atkin said. Perhaps so; but there is another explanation."

Nipper shook his head.

"I'm not satisfied, sir," he said flatly.

"Neither was I satisfied then," replied Lee. "I just had a vague suspicion. But Atkin then made the most significant statement of all. He told us that Lady Marjorie was wearing a dust-veil. Her

face was only just visible, Nipper. It was impossible to distinguish the girl's features distinctly."

"By jingo!" said Nipper.

"Further, Atkin declared that Lady Marjorie detested veils—that she had never previously worn one," went on Lee. "Girls are changeable, I know; they have fads and fancies of their own. But that does not affect this particular incident. Lady Marjorie hadn't worn a veil on the journey down. Why should she wear one on the journey up? There is only one answer, Nipper."

"It was a kind of disguise, you mean?"

"Exactly. A disguise, young 'un," said the detective keenly. "Everything points to it. Being another person—a substitute—she naturally remained in the car when Atkin stopped to effect repairs. Then there is her disappearance. A girl cannot be kidnapped in a place like Drake and Edwin's without the fact being known. The false Lady Marjorie, of course, merely walked into the shop, mingled with the crowd, and made her way to one of the ladies' rest-rooms. There, I assume, she donned a light mackintosh, or coat, which she had concealed. When she left the building she was totally altered in appearance."

Nipper took a deep breath.

"It's all jolly cute, sir," he said. "Blessed if I don't believe you're right! But what about her father? Surely he wouldn't have been deceived——"

"He was deceived, Nipper—and easily," said Lee. "He is half-blind, remember, and the fact that Lady Marjorie did not converse with him on the journey to London would not make him suspicious. He just imagined that she was tired or out-of-sorts. And the noise of the car would effectually disguise any slight alteration in her voice."

"That's true enough, gov'nor," agreed Nipper. "The whole trick was worked so that the police would go pottering about Drake and Edwin's instead of investigating at the real scene of the abduction. Smart, anyhow."

"Amazingly smart," said Nelson Lee, taking a few paces up and down the consulting-room. "And I am quite sure that the police will never arrive at the truth."

"We're different," grinned Nipper. "We go to work the right way, don't we, sir? But I'm opening my mouth too

wide. It was you who saw through the dodge. I was as thick-headed as the police. But if what you say is right, Lady Marjorie must have been kidnapped at Banham Towers—Drex's place!"

"Precisely!"

"Then—then Drex was concerned in the affair?" asked Nipper, staring. "Oh, that's too thick, sir!"

Nelson Lee lit a cigar, and puffed at it for a few seconds in silence.

"Do you remember that adventure I had, a few weeks ago, when I impersonated Edmund Cross?" he asked suddenly. "When I succeeded in gaining admittance to the secret retreat of the High Lord of the Circle of Terror?"

"Do I remember!" ejaculated Nipper. "Great Scott! I should think I do, sir! You nearly lost your life that trip, in that ghastly steel-trap affair. You disguised yourself as Edmund Cross, a member of the Circle who's been collared by the police. But your disguise was detected by Zingrave, and he floored you."

"I managed to escape, however," smiled Lee. "I dashed through the garden, and then went headlong down a cliff, into a river. I had no idea where the place was situated, and had hoped to locate it. Unfortunately, I struck my head on a rock while struggling in the river, and then wandered about the fields and roads, dazed. I was brought to London, and didn't fully recover until the next day."

Nipper nodded.

"Rotten piece of luck, that was," he said. "All you could be certain of was that the High Lord's secret retreat is situated somewhere in Surrey, below Guildford. You'd been taken to the place in a closed car, and blindfolded. Then, when you did escape, you went and knocked yourself silly. We don't know where the High Lord's place is, to this day! I wish we did!"

"Just consider these facts, Nipper," said Lee quietly. "We know—positively know—that Professor Zingrave's headquarters is situated in a quiet country district somewhere below Guildford. Lady Marjorie was abducted by the Circle of Terror. She was abducted at Banham Towers, the country house of Mr. Wellesley Drex. Banham Towers, Nipper, is situated in Surrey—below Guildford!"

Nipper stared at his master open-eyed.

"You—you don't mean——!" The lad paused, and gasped. "You don't think Drex's place is Zingrave's secret lair, do you?" he shouted.

"Are not the facts significant?" asked Lee calmly.

"Ye gods! What a thought!" said Nipper breathlessly. "Why, if this is true, Drex must be an accomplice of Zingrave's!"

"Why an accomplice, Nipper?"

"Do you mean that Drex is the High Lord himself?" roared Nipper.

"It is possible—even probable. But you needn't bellow in that fashion, my lad!"

Nipper sank down into a chair, and mopped himself. The detective's amazing theory was a little too much for him, all at once.

"You're a wonder, gov'nor!" he said at last. "I must say that your argument is tremendously powerful. Who is Drex, anyhow. There's no reason why he shouldn't be Zingrave in disguise, is there? If all this is true, Zingrave has overreached himself. By making Lady Marjorie 'disappear' in London, he thinks he's safe. Yet he has really paved the way to exposure. Why, we shall be able to release Lady Marjorie, and collar the High Lord of the Circle at the same time!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I am afraid you are too optimistic, Nipper," he replied. "I hardly hope to achieve all that. And I am by no means sure that my theory is sound. I only suspect."

"And what are you going to do?"

"The first thing is to make sure that Banham Towers is Zingrave's lair," replied Lee. "During my visit there I didn't see anything, but I memorised certain landmarks—such as a narrow gravel path and a flight of stone steps. If we discover that the entrance to Banham Towers tallies with my general idea of it, we shall be able to act drastically. It all depends upon how events shape themselves."

"But if we go poking about the place we shall be spotted——"

"I have no intention of 'poking about,' Nipper," interjected Lee crisply. "We shall go disguised, of course. To-day is Saturday; we have very little time at our disposal, for Lord Elsington's answer has to appear in Tuesday's

'Times.' It will appear, of course, but his lordship is to receive further instructions. I reckon that we have until the middle of next week, Nipper. No harm will come to Lady Marjorie within the next three or four days."

"And when do we start work?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"I'm not sure that I shall take you down——"

"Oh, rats! I'm dying to be in this business!" exclaimed Nipper anxiously. "Don't be mean, gov'nor! I dare say I shall be useful!"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"Right you are, you young rascal," he said. "Perhaps you'll come in handy. There will be hard work, and there will be danger. But the possibilities are enormous, Nipper—and I have a feeling within me that we shall 'make good'!"

CHAPTER III.

A LITTLE REVOLVER PRACTICE CAUSES QUITE A CONSIDERABLE AMOUNT OF TROUBLE.

MR. WELLESLEY DREX was sauntering in his garden. His short, well-knit figure was clothed in a light summer flannel suit, and a Panama hat reposed on his head. He was smoking a cigar, and his sole occupation was that of strolling about, admiring the flowers.

It was the evening of Monday—five days after the abduction of Lady Marjorie, since the girl had disappeared on the previous Wednesday. Mr. Drex had heard of the sad affair, and had written to the Earl of Elsington, expressing his concern.

Banham Towers was a splendid old place, with delightful grounds. In parts the garden was wild—a sheer wilderness. But the lawns in front of the house were as neat as carpets, and the flower-beds were superb.

Mr. Drex took a great pride in his garden. By the next summer he meant to "reclaim" the rest of the ground, for the whole place had been in a sad state of neglect when he first took it.

Banham Towers had been empty for several years previous to Mr. Drex's occupation. There was some story connected with the place which rendered it undesirable in the eyes of prospective tenants. The old house was popularly

supposed to be haunted, but neither Drex nor his household had ever seen anything strange, and the village folk were beginning to lose their fear of the place. Nevertheless, the honest country folk were rather nervous of the Banham Towers grounds after dark. The property had the reputation, and the reputation stuck.

After nightfall no villager would enter the grounds unless accompanied by somebody else. This was, in a way, desirable, for Mr. Drex loved privacy, and he was, at least, satisfied that no villagers would ever trespass.

On one occasion, a month or two before, a well-known local character—a poacher—had been found near the barbed-wire which surrounded the Banham Towers property. The fellow had been quite dead, but there was nothing to show how he had died, except a few burns. The affair caused a sensation at the time, but it remained a mystery. And, as a consequence, the grounds were generally avoided by all.

Yet Mr. Wellesley Drex was by no means unpopular in the neighbourhood.

On the contrary, the owner of Banham Towers was liked and respected by everybody. He was genial and kindly, and overflowing with good-nature. On many an occasion he had contributed handsome sums to local charities. If any villager was ill, one of Drex's servants would be despatched to the cottage of the sufferer with a plentiful supply of delicacies, and, generally, a few currency notes.

There was not a soul in the district who would hear a bad word against Mr. Drex. He was a gentleman of the first water; a benefactor to the poor, and a genial companion of the well-to-do. The doctor and the vicar and other local celebrities were on the best of terms with Mr. Wellesley Drex.

The retired Indian merchant was wealthy, and he was generous with his wealth. He owned two superb motor-cars, and was frequently away from home, visiting friends in London, or touring the country for the pleasure of it.

He took life easily, and was generally to be seen pottering about his garden on any fine evening. Quite recently the district had been in the throes of an electioneering campaign, and Mr. Drex had supported the popular candidate. He had worked strenuously in the constitu-

ency, making several speeches a day for a week on end. And Mr. Drex had kept everybody alive with his geniality and generosity. Even his political opponents had welcomed him.

And now, on this particular Monday evening, he was enjoying the sunlight and the cool breeze. The garden was very private, tall trees concealing the house from the roadway.

Mr. Drex looked up as he heard a footstep on the gravel path.

"Well, Bartlett, what is it?" he inquired smilingly.

Bartlett was the butler, a grave-faced man of fifty, with a somewhat forbidding aspect. The villagers did not like Bartlett much.

"Can you come indoors, sir?" said the butler.

"I shall be in very shortly——"

"I should like you to come now, sir," said Bartlett respectfully.

Drex gave the man a sharp look, and then tossed his cigar-end behind a bush. Without a word he walked to the house, and entered, Bartlett following. They went along a wide, tiled passage to the library.

Once within this apartment—a sumptuously furnished room—Drex faced his butler. There was a grim, almost impatient, expression upon Drex's face now.

"Well, what do you want to say?" he demanded.

"It's about the prisoner——"

"Tut-tut!" snapped Mr. Drex sharply.

"The guest, Bartlett—the guest!"

Bartlett winced under the harsh admonition.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "The guest is restless——"

"Of course she is restless," interposed Drex. "We cannot expect anything else. That was no reason for you to bring me indoors——"

"But she has been sobbing bitterly for two hours past," said Bartlett. "I thought I had better tell you, sir. It won't do her any good, and we don't want her to get ill, do we? That would be awkward, sir."

Mr. Wellesley Drex pursed his lips.

"Very well, Bartlett, I will go to her," he said shortly.

The butler left the library, and closed the door softly behind him. Drex remained standing by the centre-desk for a few moments; then he snapped his fingers impatiently, and crossed the room.

Had Nelson Lee been present in that department during the short conversation between Mr. Wellesley Drex and his butler, he would have been positive of one thing. Drex was, as he suspected, none other than Professor Cyrus Zingrave, High Lord of the Circle of Terror!

It was amazing, but it was a fact.

This peaceful, genial, open-hearted retired Indian merchant was, in reality, the cleverest criminal in Great Britain—probably the cleverest criminal in the world. His brain it was that had conceived the League of the Green Triangle; his brain it was that had planned every coup of the Circle of Terror.

Professor Zingrave was an amazingly clever man. In the realms of science no honour was beyond his reach; he could have become famous throughout the world as a master scientist.

But Zingrave had developed some queer kink of criminality after he had attained considerable fame in the scientific world. And then he had set out to become a leader of crime. The Green Triangle League had been amazingly successful until Nelson Lee had set to work to crush it.

Zingrave had fled when the disaster came, and it was generally supposed that he had died. But after a year had elapsed he returned to England with fresh plans, fresh ideas, fresh inventions.

And the Circle of Terror had been the result. Zingrave was ruthless now—his object was to wage a bitter, terrible war against humanity, careless of scruples, and seeking only personal gain. So far the Circle of Terror had been enormously successful, but Nelson Lee was gradually getting his arch-enemy's measure.

Two of the Circle's most prominent men had been exposed—Edmund Cross and another man named Hampson. Minor members of the Circle had also been caught in the police net spread by Nelson Lee's instructions.

Hampson had been a member of "The Council of Three." This trio were intimate advisers and friends of Professor Zingrave. Hampson's place had been filled by another man. The High Lord had no sympathy for an accomplice once he had been foolish enough to get himself into the law's clutches.

The servants at Banham Towers—which was Zingrave's secret headquarters—were all "in the know," both male and

female. Bartlett, indeed, was wanted badly for murder in the west of England. Zingrave's establishment was a secure retreat for them, and they led an easy life. If one of them happened to turn traitor, the Circle would mete out the punishment—death. And Zingrave would come to no harm, for he was fully prepared for any emergency. His name in the district—the name of Wellesley Drex—was sound, and exposure would not come through the treachery of a servant. Moreover, the High Lord had no fear of treachery.

Within this peaceful country dwelling the High Lord of the Circle hatched his great plots. The victimisation of the Grand Imperial Assurance Company, the stealing of the Duke of Amberley's miniatures, the appropriation of Commander Brigham's famous hovering aeroplane—every coup found its origin in Zingrave's able brain.

But Nelson Lee, as of old, had interfered. More, he had frustrated several of the professor's most profitable schemes. Therefore, Nelson Lee had to go. Unfortunately, Nelson Lee was no easy bird to catch. Even when the Circle got hold of him, he managed to slip away. Zingrave would willingly have given ten thousand pounds for the knowledge that Nelson Lee was positively dead.

For the great criminologist was dogged; he would never admit defeat. And, by pressing his campaign steadily forward, he was putting such a spoke into the Circle's wheel that the whole machinery was in danger of becoming clogged.

In this particular affair, however, Professor Zingrave was certain of success. He confidently reckoned upon securing the Joseph K. Lincoln's cargo, valued at £60,000. Zingrave's agents in Brazil would convert that cargo into cash with all speed.

For the first time, the High Lord had used his own residence for the purpose of a temporary prison. He had thoroughly weighed the chances before taking the step. Everything had been prepared well in advance.

Lady Marjorie was a prisoner within Banham Towers, but she did not know it. If she had known it, then the whole scheme would have been extremely dangerous. For, after her release, she would have been able to talk.

Zingrave, for all his cleverness—and he was a genius of crime—had never calcu-

lated upon Nelson Lee deducing the actual truth from the very meagre facts which were known to the police. Zingrave had not believed it possible that the truth could have been guessed at.

By clever trickery he had made it appear that Lady Marjorie had been kidnapped at Messrs. Drake and Edwin's. Even Nelson Lee would never have chanced upon the truth if he had not known that the High Lord's lair was situated somewhere in the neighbourhood of Banham Towers. And, so far, Lee had only guessed at things; he was even now putting his theory to the test.

Zingrave would have been somewhat alarmed could he have known of Nelson Lee's close investigations.

It was the plan to release Lady Marjorie when her father had complied with the Circle's demands. But Zingrave had carried everything out so cunningly that the girl would be able to reveal nothing; that is, nothing of value.

She had no suspicion that she was a prisoner within the walls of Banham Towers. She had no suspicion that her captor was Mr. Wellesley Drex himself. And she never would know—if Zingrave's plans succeeded.

The abduction itself had been simple.

"Drex" had sent Marjorie off to the bottom of the garden by herself to look at an apricot-tree. She had been sent almost at the moment of departure, while the host kept Lord Elington in conversation.

Marjorie had gone light-heartedly enough, and had found the tree. It was really curious, and she had been examining it when two men—both masked—had leapt down from the wall, where they had been hiding. Within fifteen seconds Lady Marjorie had been rendered insensible by the use of a harmless drug.

She had then been taken to a small shed near by, and left in the care of two women accomplices—one of them the "substitute." These women had rapidly stripped off Marjorie's outer dress, the voile frock. The substitute had donned this, and also Marjorie's hat, adding a thick dust-veil. Then the disguised woman had tripped back to the waiting motor-car. Previously she had been listening to Marjorie's conversation, and, being a clever actress, had picked up the girl's way of speaking.

This substitute, of course, had travelled to London, and had disappeared exactly

as Nelson Lee had surmised. Meanwhile Marjorie had recovered her senses, to find herself in a small room with a barred window far out of her reach. She had been told that she had been kidnapped by the Circle of Terror, but that she would come to no harm. Her wardress had added that she was in the heart of Essex, having been conveyed there by motor-car.

Marjorie had no suspicion that she had not been conveyed more than fifty yards. And when she was released in due course, Zingrave would drug her as before, and take her to a small cottage near Braintree, in Essex. There would then be nothing whatever to connect Mr. Wellesley Drex with the affair.

The poor girl had borne her troubles bravely, but she was only a young girl, after all. In spite of her natural vivacity, she had broken down more than once. And now, so it seemed from Bartlett's report, she was making herself ill with sobbing.

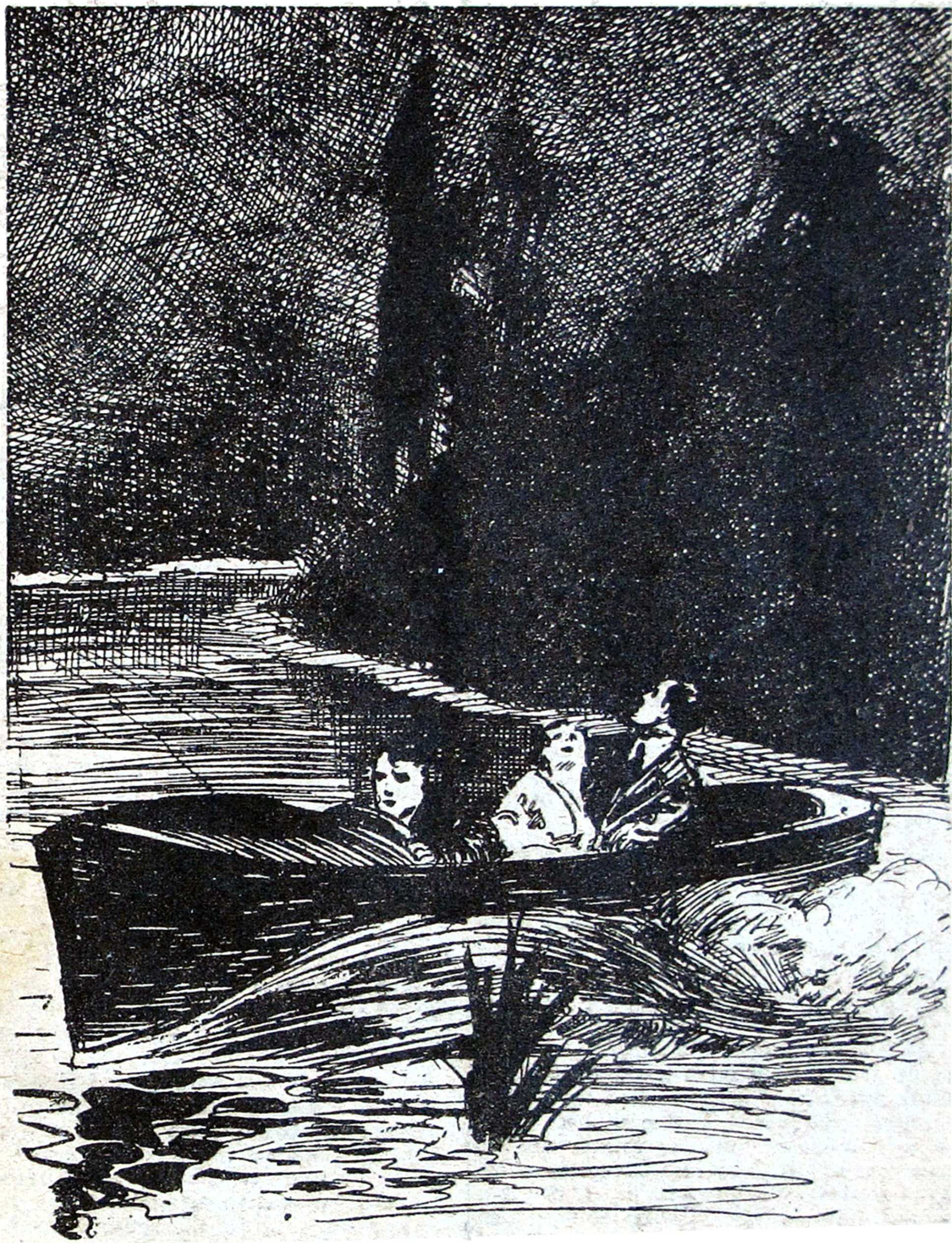
Zingrave cared not one jot for his prisoner's state of mind or her sufferings, but he did not want her to become ill. Lady Marjorie had seen the High Lord once, and she had been terrified by his appearance, for he had visited her in his hideous disguise—the disguise he was now donning. But Marjorie, in spite of all, was defiant and brave.

The professor's library was hung with rich tapestries. He produced a beautiful flowing gown of some shimmering purple material. Donning this, he next enclosed his face in an appallingly ugly mask. This mask was an extraordinary article. It was made of some soft material, resembling human skin.

It fitted completely over Zingrave's face and neck and head, and looked exactly like his real skin—only it was a ghastly yellow in colour. Nelson Lee had seen that disguise and he had been startled.

With the purple gown, the yellow mask, and a purple skull-cap, the High Lord presented a hideous appearance. But, as a disguise, the transformation was a triumph. It was utterly impossible to detect the man's real identity.

After a glance at his revolting reflection in a mirror, Zingrave left the library, and walked softly down the dim passage. Although there was still plenty of daylight—the sun had not yet set—the passage was gloomy. At the far end



Even as Nipper spoke, a bullet droned past his ear and struck the water with a sharp "ping."—(See page 27.)

there was a heavy door. The High Lord passed through this, and ascended a few stairs. Then he found himself facing a narrow oaken door, with two patent locks and three heavy bolts.

He slipped back the bolts, and then unlocked the patent latches. Pushing open the door, Zingrave entered a stone-paved passage, where a little oil-lamp was burning on a bracket. He closed the door and smiled.

The passage was an exact representation of a portion of an old tumble-down cottage, and the triple-bolted door, from the inside, seemed to be a ramshackle affair, and was fitted with a rusty latch. Anybody seeing it from the inside would suppose that it was the outer door of an old cottage.

There was another door at the end of the passage—drabably painted, and fitted with two old-fashioned, rusty bolts. Zingrave forced these back with a grinding noise, and passed into a small room, leaving the door half-open.

This room was small, and perfectly square. The walls were of plaster, and merely pinkwashed. Overhead there were irregular rafters, looking exactly like a roof. There were even dull red tiles to be seen among the cobwebs. On one side, right against the rafters, nine feet from the floor, a small window admitted a weak light, for the window was frosted, and the upper portion was made like a ventilator, with perforated zinc covering it. Dimly to be seen behind were eight stout iron bars.

The apartment was furnished meagrely. A ragged piece of cocoanut matting covered the floor, and against one wall there was an old-fashioned dressing-table and a chest of drawers. Opposite a small iron bedstead stood. This was fairly comfortable, for the mattress was soft and the sheets and blankets clean.

As Zingrave entered there was a movement from an aged wicker chair, and Lady Marjorie Hilling looked up with a tear-stained face. The girl had been silently sobbing, and her former violent grief—as reported by Bartlett—seemed to have abated. She was attired in a plain cotton dress, which, in spite of its plainness, looked well upon her dainty, perfect figure.

"Oh!" she exclaimed in a low, choking voice.

"Come, come, my dear young lady,

you must not be frightened of me!" said the High Lord softly.

"You—you wretch!" cried Lady Marjorie. "I'm not afraid of you! How much longer are you going to keep me here? Oh, you will have to pay for this——"

"I came here to comfort you," interjected Zingrave gently. "You must not cry, child. You will be released in a very little while. Your father is well—we have not touched him—and he knows that you are safe. Have a little patience, and you will soon be freed from this picturesque little cottage prison."

The girl's eyes were alight with anger.

"You only come here to taunt me, you hideous monster!" she said defiantly. "You're afraid to let me see who you really are. But I'm not frightened of you. Oh, I wish I were a man! I'd knock you down, then!"

The words were thrilling with contempt and loathing, but Zingrave was unmoved.

"I see that my servant exaggerated," he said easily. "He is on guard outside, as you know, and he heard you sobbing. I thought, perhaps, that you were foolish enough to make yourself ill. That would be unfortunate, for there is no medical help within reach of this lonely spot on the Essex marshes."

Lady Marjorie did not answer. She looked straight at Zingrave with fearless, defiant eyes for a moment, then deliberately picked up a book and commenced to read. The girl was as pretty as ever, except for her reddened eyes and the pitiful little droop of her mouth. Her joyful spirit had been subdued, but only temporarily.

The High Lord uttered a short laugh, and left the room. He bolted it after him, and then bolted the outer door. Within five minutes he had become Mr. Wellesley Drex again, and was strolling in the garden as before.

The sun was just setting, and Zingrave dismissed Lady Marjorie from his mind. She was of no importance to him whatever. So long as she was safe and well he did not worry. For, to do Zingrave justice, he meant to carry out his part of the bargain if Lord Elington agreed to the Circle's terms. Lady Marjorie would be restored to her father absolutely unharmed.

Mr. Drex paused as he was about to smell a beautiful rose.

"Ah, yes, the pistol," he murmured. "This is a good opportunity for testing it."

He entered the house again, little dreaming that the incident which was to follow would mean the wrecking of his plans and the crushing of his hopes. Tiny, insignificant happenings frequently lead to stupendous issues. It was so in this case; although Zingrave, least of anybody, foresaw the coming disaster.

For some time past he had been working on a new invention—a deadly revolver, which was quite noiseless in its action. The professor was possessed of an inventive brain, and many of his mechanical devices were in daily use by the members of the Circle of Terror.

This noiseless revolver was a masterpiece in its way, and Zingrave meant to produce dozens of them almost immediately. He had tested the weapon several times, but was not quite satisfied with the trigger mechanism. The revolver was rather inclined to "kick," and thus spoil the aim, and he meant to rectify this defect.

Retiring to the rear of the house, where the garden was a wilderness, he chose a big old elm tree as a target, and spent five minutes in practice. Yes, the trigger was undoubtedly defective.

Looking round, Zingrave saw two martens perched on the gutter of the house. They were peaceful creatures, and were totally unconscious of impending danger. The professor levelled his revolver and fired.

Again the trigger jammed somewhat, and the bullet flew wide. At all events, the martens remained on the gutter, although their heads were up; they had evidently heard the bullet, although there had been no report.

Zingrave uttered an impatient exclamation, and fired again. This time one of the birds toppled down to the ground, quite dead. The other flew off in alarm.

"H'm! I think the defect can be easily——"

"Sir!" exclaimed an urgent voice suddenly. "Mr. Drex——"

"Well, what is the matter?" snapped Zingrave impatiently, as Bartlett came running from the house. "Hang it all, Bartlett, you are an infernal nuisance!"

"There's a pipe burst, sir!" said Bartlett, in alarm.

"A what? A pipe burst? Nonsense——"

"It must have been one of your bullets, sir," said the butler.

Zingrave frowned. He could not quite understand. There was no water laid on at Banham Towers, of course. The supply came from a deep well somewhere in the rear quarters. A pump in the scullery pumped the water up to a large cistern in the attic. This cistern, of course, was filled every morning. And pipes led down through the house to the various taps—in the bathroom, scullery, etc. A large number of country houses are supplied by the same system.

The professor went indoors, and then upstairs. In the room below the attic, a bedroom, water was pouring out of a big pipe which ran down one of the walls. The floor was already swamped and flooded. Mats were floating about, and the water was overflowing on to the landing and trickling down the stairs.

"Good gracious!" said the professor. "Can't we turn the water off?"

"No, sir," gasped Bartlett. "The tank's full, you see. If we were in London, or a big town, we could turn the main supply tap off. But the tank'll have to empty itself. I tried to hammer the pipe up, but it only made the leak worse."

Zingrave snapped his fingers angrily.

He realised that he had caused this unfortunate accident. The leak was right against the ceiling, opposite the window. Above the window there was a small ventilator. By a curious chance, one of Zingrave's "wide" bullets had passed through the ventilator, and had burst the pipe. Bartlett, in an endeavour to hammer up the leak, had actually made things worse.

The whole affair was just an accident—such as might occur at any place, at any time. It had been unforeseen, and nothing could be done. The only thing was to let the tank empty itself. But Zingrave uttered an impatient exclamation.

"Have you turned all the taps on?" he demanded.

"No, sir——"

Then shout down orders for every tap to be turned on, you idiot!" said Mr. Drex angrily. "That will reduce this escape of water to a mere trickle. Upon my soul, Bartlett, you have no brains!"

The butler was about to leave the flooded room when a woman appeared. She was about forty years of age, and

her face was hard and cruel. At the present moment she seemed to be very excited.

"The water's pouring into the guest's room, sir!" she panted. "The place is swamped—the bed, chairs, and everything! The girl is soaked to the skin! She'll have to be taken out of the room—"

Zingrave cut her short, and went downstairs. He soon found that the woman had not exaggerated. Hastily donning his gown and mask, he went into the "prison." Lady Marjorie was, indeed, soaked to the skin, and the room was as badly flooded as the one directly about, in which was the burst pipe. The girl was shivering and alarmed. Water was pouring down the ceiling in cascades.

The High Lord gave some quick orders. Lady Marjorie was blindfolded, and taken to one of the cellars. It was impossible for her to remain in the flooded room. By the time the taps had all been turned on the tank was empty.

"What's to be done, sir?" asked Bartlett. "We can't have any more water until the pipe is repaired. The kitchen fire's had to be put out, and it can't be lighted again until there's water in the tank. And what about the guest, sir? She can't stay in the cellar for long."

"The pipe will have to be repaired, Bartlett, of course."

"There's no plumber in the village, sir," said the butler. "We can't get one to-night, anyhow."

The two men stood silent for a minute, both thinking impatiently. This little incident, so trivial in itself, was causing an enormous amount of trouble. It was so absurd. Zingrave was angry with himself and angry with everybody. The thing could not have happened at a more inopportune time. There seemed no hope of getting the pipe repaired until the following afternoon. And what of Lady Marjorie during that time?

"Oh, there's that old chap on the green, sir!" exclaimed Bartlett suddenly.

"Eh? What are you talking about?"

"I've just remembered, sir," said the butler quickly. "There's an old traveling tinker—a chap who mends pots and pans—camping on the village green. He's pitched there for a day or two, I believe. He might be able to repair the pipe at once—this evening."

Professor Zingrave nodded.

"Go and fetch the fellow, Bartlett," he ordered. "In a way I prefer such a man to a local plumber. You should have thought of him before. Go at once, and bring him back with you. Don't take a refusal. Offer to pay him double money, if necessary. The pipe must be repaired."

"Very good, sir."

And Bartlett hurried away on his errand.

Zingrave, somewhat relieved, went into the library. How was he to know that, by sending for the old tinker, he was finally sealing the fate of his conspiracy against the Earl of Elsington?

CHAPTER IV.

LADY MARJORIE IS VERY INGENIOUS, AND NELSON LEE GETS ON THE TRACK.

THE village green was a picturesque spot.

It was very peaceful this calm summer evening. The main village street led to the green, and on two sides of the green itself there were fields, with only a cottage or two here and there. On the other two sides, there were rows of old-fashioned cottages, with children playing before them, or on the edge of the green.

A somewhat ramshackle caravan stood against a clump of shady elms, and before it a small fire was burning in a little, portable grate. Near the fire was a bent old man, with wizened features and white hair.

Nobody would have accused that old fellow of being Mr. Nelson Lee, the celebrated crime investigator. Still less would they have accused his young helper, a ragged urchin with a tousled mop of hair and a face as red as a beet-root, of being Nipper.

Yet that was the actual truth.

Nelson Lee and Nipper were living the simple life for a few days. Nevertheless, they had been doing a considerable amount of work during the day. But not their accustomed work. They had been mending pots and pans for the humble country folk. It was rather a change, and Nipper, at least, had been rather amused.

But, as he confided to his master, he wouldn't care to keep on at the same job for more than a few days. It was

rather too monotonous for Nipper's liking.

And it was for this old tinker that Professor Zingrave had sent!

The High Lord of the Circle of Terror, all unknowingly, had dispatched Bartlett to seek the aid of Nelson Lee himself! It was a somewhat curious situation, but perfectly natural, and seemed likely to develop dramatically.

Nelson Lee had started out with the intention of doing things thoroughly. He suspected Mr. Wellesley Drex, but knew nothing for certain. It was therefore necessary to act with great caution.

On the previous Saturday evening, Lee had easily obtained the old caravan. He and Nipper had disguised themselves, and, throughout Sunday, they had journeyed down through Guildford to this spot.

They had arrived on Sunday evening, and all Monday Nelson Lee had been busy doing various jobs for the village people. Disguised as travelling tinkers, Lee and Nipper had no fear of being recognised by their enemies.

Moreover, Lee had spent a whole day at tinkering without making the least attempt to pursue his investigations. On the morrow he intended calling at Banham Towers, the suspected place, in the hope of securing some odd jobs. Lee thought it more than likely that he would be able to pick up a few clues on the morrow.

But Fate had arranged things differently.

While Nelson Lee and Nipper were preparing their evening meal, Bartlett arrived upon the scene and went straight to the point. The detective did not like the look of the man, and was not surprised when Bartlett said that he had been sent by Mr. Drex.

"I want you to come to the Towers at once, my man," said the butler sharply. "You can mend a burst water-pipe, I suppose?"

"Oh, ay! I can do them jobs, sir," replied Lee wheezily.

"Then get your tools, and come at once," said Bartlett. "What's your name, my good fellow?"

"Ben Smiley, sir. An' this 'ere boy is my gran'son, Jimmy," replied Lee. "He be a good boy, too——"

"I dare say, Smiley," interjected Bartlett. "But we have no time to waste. The daylight will soon be gone.

You're wanted at the Towers to mend a burst water-pipe."

Ben Smiley scratched his hoary head.

"Won't that do in the morning, sir?" he asked. "Me and Jimmy was just agoin' to set down to a bite o' food. That be past my workin' time, rightly speakin'. My eyes ain't what they used to be, an' the light ain't werry good."

The detective was inwardly jubilant. He had never hoped for such a lucky chance as this. He was actually asked to enter the Towers! But Lee was careful to assume an air of unwillingness.

"The matter is urgent," said Bartlett impatiently.

"I don't see as how I can come along now, sir——"

"Mr. Drex instructed me to bring you back with me, Smiley," interrupted the butler. "Don't be foolish! You will receive your own price for your services—and some over if you do the job well."

"Seein' as that's the case, I'll oblige ye," said the pseudo-tinker wheezily. "Git the tools an' things out, Jimmy lad. We'll need the sodder, an' irons, an' the ole fire. I dessay the gent'll be able to let us hev' a mite o' coal."

"Of course. As much as you want," said Bartlett.

Nipper, with a chunk of bread-and-butter sticking out of his mouth, proceeded to collect all the necessary tools. Bartlett saw no reason why he should remain, now that he had arranged for the tinker to effect the repair.

"You know where the Towers is?" he asked.

"Why, yes, sir! Up past the vickerage, on the right-and side," wheezed Lee.

Bartlett hurried away, and Nelson Lee and Nipper followed more slowly, the latter carrying the little fire in its grate. Nipper was very keen, and could scarcely conceal the eagerness which filled him.

"I say, sir, this is unexpected, eh?" he murmured, as they walked. "We might be able to spot a few things——"

"Don't talk now, young 'un," warned Nelson Lee. "Hedges, like walls, have ears."

"With a few thousand other ears in the fields," grinned Nipper, glancing at the ripening corn beyond the hedges.

They arrived at Banham Towers in a few minutes, and passed in at the heavy gates. Lee was very keen now. The pathway to the house itself was somewhat narrow, and this tallied with the

detective's impression of Zingrave's headquarters. Nelson Lee had been there on one famous occasion, but it had been at night, and Lee had been blindfolded.

"Yes, this seems to be the place," he told himself. "I remember that my right foot struck against a grating after a few yards had been covered. By James, there is a grating here!"

In the midst of the gravel a drain had been set, and Lee's foot grated on the metal work as he passed. Farther on, he recollected, he had passed down ten narrow steps, then through a kind of tunnel. Would he see those steps and that tunnel now? If so, there would be little doubt left in his mind.

"Dear me! This is interesting," he murmured a moment later.

They were near the house now, and the gravel path took two directions. One led straight on, and the other branched off towards some stone steps, leading down to a narrow archway beneath a conservatory, obviously to a side-door.

The place was exactly the same as he had imagined!

There could be no doubt on the point. He was within the grounds of the High Lord's secret retreat! Nelson Lee was agog with inward excitement, but he displayed no emotion of any sort.

Bartlett appeared a moment later, and took the "tinkers" in by the back door. Nipper left the fire down in the courtyard, close against the wall of a jutting part of the house, evidently older than the rest.

There was certainly nothing sinister about the aspect of the house. Nelson Lee and Nipper met Mr. Wellesley Drex inside, and he treated them genially, promising them a liberal reward if they effected the repair that evening. There were two very respectable-looking maid-servants, in neat caps and aprons, and a man in livery, evidently a chauffeur, was swabbing down a motor-car outside the garage.

But Lee did not judge by appearances. Zingrave was a clever man, and he would certainly keep up a genuine household. Certainly the professor's disguise was excellent, and Lee could not positively recognise in Mr. Drex the redoubtable Zingrave. But he was practically sure.

Lee acted his part to perfection, and the same could be said about Nipper. The professor had absolutely no suspicion of the truth.

Once the upper room was reached, Nel-

son Lee examined the defective pipe, and he saw immediately that the original hole had been caused by a rifle or revolver bullet. This was significant in itself. Indeed, Lee was rather uneasy. What did that bullet-hole mean? Had there been foul play?

According to Nelson Lee's theory, Lady Marjorie was a prisoner within this house. The place had no aspect of a prison, but it was old, and there were many rooms, and, probably, extensive cellars. An investigation was, of course, impossible, but both Lee and Nipper decided to keep their eyes open.

They would have given much to have gained admittance to the particular cellar in which Marjorie was imprisoned. The girl herself was rather upset by all the excitement. She had been soaked to the very skin by the unexpected flood, and the woman who called herself the matron had brought her some dry clothes.

Marjorie had stripped off her wet things, had towelled herself, and had dressed in the fresh clothing. Then the yellow-masked High Lord had entered the cellar, and had attended to a few details.

The cellar was only a temporary prison. She would be removed from it as soon as the repair had been effected and her own apartment put in order. There was no window in the cellar, but an iron grating was fitted into the outer wall, close against the ceiling, and well out of reach. This grating was on a level with the ground outside.

To prevent accidents, Zingrave gagged the prisoner. He did not want her to cry out. The gag was another invention of the professor's. It was strapped to the head, and could not be removed by the wearer, although it caused no discomfort—at least, no pain. Lady Marjorie's ankles were secured by patent straps to the chair on which she was sitting.

Thus she could not move, and she had been told that a guard was placed outside the door. Any suspicious movement within the cellar would at once result in a visit from the matron.

The girl sat in her chair, making no attempt to free herself. She knew that such an attempt would fail. And she was confused with all this extraordinary commotion. Poor Marjorie, in fact, was inclined to be tearful. Her troubles seemed to be getting worse. Hitherto she had, at least, been free within her own room.

After a while she heard faint voices coming through the grating. One was that of a wheezy old man, who seemed to be talking to a boy. They were talking about soldering-irons, she believed, or something like that. Oh, of course! The leaky water-pipe was being repaired.

For the first time, Lady Marjorie was struck by the surprising nature of that leak. Her former prison, she thought, was a ramshackle cottage. How had that water come from the roof?

She did not trouble herself to think, but she felt positive that the repairers were not in league with the villain who was holding her a prisoner. Could she communicate with them?

"Oh, if only I could!" she thought, becoming excited. "If I could let them know that I am here, a prisoner, they might be able to help. Oh, how stupid I am! How can I let them know? I cannot make a sound, and it's even impossible to throw something out of the grating. I can't reach it from here."

She became despondent again, but only for a moment. Here was a chance of rescue for her! Oh, how could she summon help? The girl's naturally cheerful nature came to her rescue. Her wits were sharpened by her peril.

She looked down, and saw a small piece of brick near her feet. It was a mere crumb, no larger than a pebble. If she could manage to write a message, wrap it round the stone, and throw it through the grating—

Oh, but that was impossible! She would never be able to aim straight. And besides, even if she did aim straight, she couldn't give the fragment of brick enough velocity to carry it right into the open air. She would need a catapult, at least. Anyhow, could she improvise a catapult?

"Oh!" she thought suddenly, with a catch of her breath behind the gag.

In a second she was enormously excited. An ingenious idea had struck her. First of all she looked down at her left side. Within reach there was an old paint-pot, with some half-dried, sticky green paint at the bottom of it. She had seen it before, when there had been a light in the cellar. Now it was quite dark except for the dim shaft of light from the grating.

The girl displayed wonderful ingenuity. She pulled out a portion of her blouse at the waistband, and quickly tore off a square about four inches across each way.

Then she pulled a hairpin out of her golden hair, bent down, and stuck it in the half-solidified paint. In less than a minute she had succeeded in smearing the word "Help" upon the scrap of poplin blouse material. It was impossible for her to add any further words.

Quivering with excitement and hope now, Lady Marjorie bent down and picked up the scrap of brick. Her ankles being strapped, she could not move an inch from her present position.

She wrapped the piece of material round the rough stone, and then placed it on her lap. Her next action proved her astonishing inventive powers. She fumbled with her clothing in the darkness, and there was a slight snapping, tearing sound. She now held in her hand a short length of silk-covered elastic.

A minute ago that piece of elastic had been serving the purpose for which it had been manufactured. It had been a portion of feminine attire. But now it was a catapult!

With steady hands, Marjorie placed the wrapped stone in position on the elastic. Would she be able to send it through the grating? Or would it strike one of the iron bars, and rebound into the cellar?

She took careful aim, stretched the elastic, and let go suddenly.

The fragment of brick, with its message, sped across the cellar. Marjorie didn't see it; she didn't hear it. With quivering body and fast-beating heart, she waited. She was sure that the stone had passed through into the open.

Just at that moment Nipper was attending to the soldering tools at the fire outside. It was deep twilight now, and the yard was deserted save for the chauffeur at the other end, who was still busy on the car.

Nipper himself and the fire stood about fifteen feet from the house wall.

The lad saw something drop close by—a pebble, apparently. He looked up, wondering who had thrown it. But it had come from the house wall, which was blank! That was rather curious.

Nipper looked down at the pebble, and saw that a piece of cloth seemed to be wrapped round it. He picked it up, opened it out, and gasped. But the next second he was busily attending to the fire, and Lady Marjorie's message was in his pocket. But as Nipper went on with his work, he glanced casually at

the wall of the house. He saw the cellar grating, low against the ground, and he understood.

Although the lad was inwardly seething with excitement, he gave no outward sign. He went across the yard whistling, carrying some tools into the house. In the upper room, Bartlett was watching the old tinker at work. Certainly there were no suspicions entertained regarding the old pot-mender.

To Nelson Lee the repairing of a water-pipe was child's play; but he did not hurry over the job. In keeping with his character, he did not display unusual cleverness. He just fumbled with the repair, but made a good job of it in the end. Actually he could have been finished within a quarter of the time.

Lee was rather disappointed. He had discovered nothing, and Bartlett's constant presence made it impossible for him to make furtive investigations. He knew that Nipper was similarly watched by the chauffeur in the courtyard.

Water was pumped into the tank again, and it was soon seen that the repair was a sound one. Mr. Drex came up to Lee as the latter was pottering about his little fire, preparing for departure.

"You've done well, my man," said Drex genially.

"That ain't rightly my time for a-doin' of jobs, sir," wheezed Nelson Lee. "I don't reckon to work arter sundown. Me an' my little ole gran'son work main hard a-durin' a-dsytyme, an' if we kep' this sort o' thing up reg'lar-like we shouldn't be fit for nothin' next day. I allus says a man wants rest if he's a-goin' to do good work. An' if that there rest is took from 'im, why, that oughter be paid for handsome!"

The owner of Banham Towers laughed heartily.

"Of course—of course!" he cried. "And I mean to pay handsomely. What is your charge?"

"Well, sir, rightly speakin', I don't reckon as three-an'-six would hurt ye."

"Three-and-six! That's far too little," declared Mr. Drex. "Here is a ten-shilling note, my dear Smiley. If there are any other jobs for you to perform you will be sent for in the morning."

Lee took the note eagerly.

"Thank 'ee kindly, sir," he exclaimed.

"You're a gent!"

And with that Nelson Lee and Nipper

took their departure. They were seen off the premises by Bartlett in the dying dusk, and after they had passed out into the road they heard the gates clang to.

It was not until they had reached their caravan that Lee permitted himself to speak. Once in the privacy of that dingy apartment he produced the ten-shilling note and looked at it smilingly.

"A trophy, Nipper," he exclaimed. "I'm very much afraid we have nothing else to show for our visit to Banham Towers. We were watched constantly, and I was quite unable to——"

"Hold on, guv'nor," interjected Nipper, unable to contain himself longer. "If you didn't find anything out, I did!"

"Indeed!"

"Just squint at this, sir."

Nelson Lee took the scrap of blouse material, opened it out with difficulty, for the paint had begun to stick, and deciphered the one significant word "help." The detective did not move a muscle.

Then he turned his eyes upon Nipper inquiringly.

"What's this?" he asked.

"That was chucked to me in the courtyard, guv'nor," said Nipper impressively. "It bounced down quite close, wrapped round a stone." The lad could not contain his excitement any longer. "Great Scott!" he burst out. "Don't you see, sir? It's from Lady Marjorie!"

"Tell me just what happened," exclaimed Lee keenly.

Nipper did so.

"It came from a cellar grating in the old part of the house," he finished up. "As sure as fate, guv'nor, Lady Marjorie is in that cellar, and she must have heard our voices!"

Nelson Lee nodded slowly.

"We are going to rescue Lady Marjorie," he said quietly.

"When, guv'nor?"

"To-night!"

CHAPTER V.

NELSON LEE PREPARES—THE RESCUE—
PROFESSOR ZINGRAVE IS DRASTIC—FINIS.

NIPPER'S information and Lady Marjorie's appeal were very welcome to Nelson Lee. The great detective had imagined that his visit to the Towers had been utterly fruitless.

But now the aspect of the case was totally changed.

Although Nipper had been watched by the chauffeur, the lad was positive that the little incident of the thrown stone had not been witnessed.

"The fellow was bending down with his back towards me at that particular moment," said Nipper. "I was whistling, and I picked up the stone, glanced at the piece of cloth, and then went straight on with my work. Even if anybody had spotted me they couldn't have known what I was doing."

"And yet we are now supplied with the very information we were most anxious to obtain," said Nelson Lee. "It strikes me, Nipper, that there is more in this affair than meets the eye."

"How do you mean, sir?"

"While I was attending to the fire with you I noticed that the apartment beneath the one in which the burst pipe was situated is fitted with a small window," replied Lee. "That window has stout iron bars across it. In my opinion, Nipper, the room with the barred window is Lady Marjorie's prison."

Nipper stared.

"Why, you know jolly well that she's in a cellar," he exclaimed.

"At the present time, yes," agreed Lee. "But I've been figuring things out, my lad. Do you think it probable that Zingrave would keep his prisoner incarcerated in a cellar which has a grating looking out upon the open courtyard?"

"Well, it seems a bit funny, doesn't it?"

"The fact is, young 'un, Zingrave accidentally burst that water-pipe with a revolver bullet," went on the detective. "As there is no evidence of sinister work, I assume that the High Lord was practising with his revolver. I have also come to the conclusion that the water flooded the floor, and therefore swamped the room beneath, which is Lady Marjorie's prison. She was therefore removed to the cellar while you and I effected the repair. I can follow out the whole course of events quite clearly. Owing to that slight accident of the water-pipe we have got straight on the track."

"I—I suppose it isn't a trap, gov'nor."

"A trap? Oh, no," said Lee. "I am quite convinced that Zingrave had no suspicions regarding us. In some way or other Lady Marjorie wrote that appeal, and we are going to answer it without the slightest delay."

"Of course, the sooner we get to work

the better," said Nipper shrewdly. "Lady Marjorie is in the cellar now, and it ought to be easy to get her out. She won't be left in there for long, that's certain."

Nelson Lee and Nipper devoured a hasty meal while they donned fresh garments and discarded their disguises. There was no longer any necessity to be old Ben Smiley and Jimmy.

The night promised to be an exciting one, and while Lee changed his clothes and ate his food he was thinking and planning and scheming. He had already decided what to do by the time he had changed.

It was not yet late; the last gleam of sunset was still in the sky. The village green was very dim and shadowy, and Lee and Nipper set off without being observed by a soul.

A brisk three mile walk, accomplished in forty minutes, brought them to the little town of Hayle. Lee's first visit was to the police-station, and here he rang up Scotland Yard, and was soon in communication with his old friend, Detective-Inspector Lennard. Certain arrangements made, and Lee rang off. Then, after a few words with the local inspector, he and Nipper left.

This time they went down to the private house of a motor-boat builder. Hayle was situated on the banks of a river, and this river, as Lee well knew, flowed right past the western boundary of the Banham Towers grounds.

Lee had plunged into that river, some weeks before, and had been carried down upon some miniature rapids. These were on the other side of Banham Towers—that is, the rapids would have to be negotiated in a boat trip from Hayle. Moreover, as the summer was now more advanced, the river was much quieter.

The great detective soon arranged for the hire of a small but efficient motor-boat. It was a neat little craft with a very quiet engine. And at eleven-thirty exactly to the minute Nelson Lee and Nipper started out.

They went alone, and were soon gliding down the river in the direction of Banham. By road the distance had been three miles; by river it was close upon six. The country through which the river meandered was picturesque and sparsely populated. There were very few houses near the river.

Now and again cottages were passed, but at this time of night everything was quiet and everybody was asleep. Lee had made his plans thoroughly, but was quite aware of the fact that he and Nipper were running into grave perils.

At last the motor-boat arrived at the extremity of the Towers property. Here the detective shut off the power, and allowed the boat to drift.

"Are we there, gov'nor?" asked Nipper in a low voice.

"Nearly. But don't talk, my lad. It is possible that Zingrave has men posted at different quarters," whispered Lee. "I don't think that is at all likely, but it is as well to be cautious. We know what we have to do, and we needn't talk about it."

"Right you are, sir."

The left bank of the river at this point became steeper as the boat progressed. After a further five hundred yards the bank was more like a precipice. It rose sheer out of the water, and trees could be seen growing upon the summit.

Lee brought the boat in at a spot where the cliff sloped back a trifle. Here it was possible to moor the boat and climb up the cliff face. It was rather difficult, but the pair succeeded in the end. Even if they had slipped and fallen they would have received nothing worse than a wetting.

Again, Nelson Lee profited by the knowledge he had gained during his former visit. On that well-remembered occasion he had narrowly escaped death of a startling nature. A heavy barbed-wire fence ran within three feet of the cliff edge. This fence was innocent enough—so far as looks went.

But, in reality, the wire was heavily charged with electricity. One touch meant death. Nelson Lee had come prepared. Bidding Nipper remain behind, he donned a pair of thick rubber gloves, and then, with a pair of stout cutters, he severed the wires and provided a wide gap.

Then he and Nipper stole through and made their way across the rank wilderness towards the house. The cultivated pleasure garden was situated on the other side.

It was well past midnight now, but Lee fully expected to find the household awake. He did not exactly know how he should proceed once he had gained admittance. But he reckoned that by a

surprise attack he would have the advantage. Possibly he would do nothing but scout around on this occasion. And then, later on, the whole house would be raided.

In any case, Lee was determined to do nothing rash.

At last the thick trees were left behind, and the dark bulk of Banham Towers loomed up in front, with only a stretch of coarse grass intervening. One or two lower windows were dimly illuminated.

The air was soft and warm, and Lee was not surprised, therefore, when he saw that a side door stood wide open. A gloomy passage could be seen, but it was quite deserted. Lee thought it possible that Zingrave was strolling upon the well-cut lawn on the other side of the house, enjoying a last cigar before turning in. And this, as a matter of fact, was actually the case.

The detective crept towards the open doorway, Nipper close behind. They stood just before the entrance looking into the passage. Lee concluded that it would be unwise to enter.

But just then the sound of voices came to the ears of the intruders. The voices were proceeding from the interior of the house. Lee tightened his grip upon his revolver butt, and waited.

He merely expected to see one or two of the servants, on their way to bed, probably. And he was therefore surprised when the owners of the voices came into view round a bend of the passage.

"You're all right, my lady," one gruff voice was saying. "Just bein' taken from one cottage to another, that's all. You won't come to no 'arm."

Nipper thought he recognised Bartlett's tones, but they were disguised. And, before the lad could form any real opinion, he received a shock. Two dim figures came into the passage.

They were men, but their faces were unrecognisable in the gloom. Nelson Lee believed that they were Bartlett and the chauffeur. And, between them, they were carrying a slight, graceful form.

Lady Marjorie!

The girl was being taken from the cellar back to her original prison! Lee and Nipper had arrived at a singularly opportune moment. Lady Marjorie was gagged and blindfolded,

Nipper simply shook with excitement.

"The brutes!" he breathed.

Nelson Lee made up his mind on the

spur of the moment; he acted instantly, for another such opportunity as this would never occur again. The detective pressed Nipper's arm.

"Use your revolver butt, lad!" he muttered.

Nipper understood, and together the pair dashed into the dim passage.

That which followed next was confusing and startling. The attack was so unexpected that Bartlett and his companion had no chance of defending themselves. They were taken completely unawares.

Nipper's revolver crashed down upon Bartlett's head, and the fellow dropped like a log. In the same second Nelson Lee dealt with the other man. The attack was a complete success. Hardly a sound had been made.

Lady Marjorie was caught by Lee as she was falling. The detective lifted the girl's slight form in his arms, and hurried into the open air. Nipper followed, caring little how seriously the two men were hurt.

Across the stretch of rough grass Lee fled, carrying Marjorie with ease. He was enormously strong, and she was slight. Nipper thought it was almost too good to be true. If they could only get clear away——!

Zingrave, of course, would flee, but that could not be helped. An open raid on the house, with Lady Marjorie within its walls, was not to be thought of. This was why Nelson Lee had acted as he had done.

He knew that the professor, mad with fury, would not hesitate to kill the girl out of sheer ruthlessness. But, with Marjorie safely away, a raid would be carried out immediately. It had been absolutely necessary to rescue the girl before making any general attack.

And, by a singular stroke of fortune, Nelson Lee had been able to get Marjorie away with a minimum amount of trouble and danger. Bartlett and the other man had literally walked into the hands of the detective.

Two-thirds of the distance to the river was covered in safety. Then Nipper, in the rear, heard several husky, excited shouts. The alarm had been given; the rescue had become known!

"Buck up, gov'nor!" panted Nipper urgently. "The rotters are after us!"

Nelson Lee staggered on; there was no time to release the straps which bound the rescued girl's ankles. And, at last,

the barbed-wire fence loomed up ahead. Lee had made no mistake, and had arrived at the exact spot where the wires were cut.

"Now, Nipper!" he gasped. "We must go carefully. Help me to lower Lady Marjorie down the cliff. We don't want to get a soaking by slipping!"

It was more by luck than anything else that the boat was reached in safety. The trio scrambled down the sloping cliff-face helter-skelter. Marjorie's frock was torn and tattered in several places by the time the level of the river was reached. And Lee and Nipper were scratched and bleeding in several places.

"Done 'em!" gasped Nipper exultantly. "Done the rotters, by Jupiter!"

"Not yet, Nipper—not yet!" said Lee between his teeth.

He had heard the tramping of feet overhead, and he was anxious. The motor-boat was in an appallingly exposed position. From the cliff-top it was possible to fire straight down upon the fugitives, and Lee knew that the High Lord, at least, would not hesitate to shoot.

Frantically, Nelson Lee pushed off and jerked at the starting handle of the motor. After the second attempt the engine commenced buzzing merrily, and the screw churned up the water at the stern.

"Oh, my hat!" panted Nipper. "What a game! But we've won!"

Even as he spoke something droned past his ear and struck the water with a sharp "ping!" But no report had been heard. Glancing hastily up, Nipper saw three dim figures standing on the top of the high river bank.

Bullets whizzed down upon the boat; two struck the woodwork and chipped it. Another hit Nelson Lee's cap.

"A noiseless automatic revolver!" muttered Lee.

It was Zingrave, indeed, who was firing the shots. The professor was simply choking with rage. And his temper was not improved by the knowledge that it was impossible to aim accurately with the defective revolver. He had not had time to adjust the trigger, and accurate firing was out of the question.

And then, before he had emptied all the chambers of the revolver, the motor-boat was hidden by the thick trees. Lee and Nipper, in the boat, were quite un-

hurt. They knew, too, that the victory was theirs.

The little engine was buzzing with all its power, and the boat sped through the water. Lee had turned the boat, and it was speeding back in the direction of Hayle. The detective had, of course, turned the boat's nose before mooring it, so that he had started off in the right direction straight away.

"It was hot work while it lasted, Nipper, but I fancy we have gained the day," said Nelson Lee breathlessly. "It now remains to be seen if Lennard has followed my instructions. If so, we stand a chance of making a clean sweep."

While he was speaking Lee was unfastening Lady Marjorie's bonds. In less than a minute the girl was free of the straps and the gag and the bandage round her eyes. She stared round her joyously.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Oh! I've been rescued!"

"That is so, Lady Marjorie," smiled Nelson Lee. "We had a bit of excitement over the job, but we're safely away now. Unless my plans have gone wrong, you will meet your father within five minutes!"

The girl clasped her hands, and her companions could see that her breast was rising and falling rapidly. She was greatly excited, and filled with joy and admiration—admiration for her rescuers.

"Oh, how splendid of you!" she cried. "I must know who you are! Please, please tell me! I'm all in a whirl. I don't know what has happened!"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"This young gentleman here is Nipper," he said. "My own name is Nelson Lee. Your father came to me on Saturday, and asked me to find you. Happily, I have done so, but I must admit that Providence has assisted me amazingly."

"Oh, I've heard of you, Mr. Lee," said Marjorie with sparkling eyes. "And of Nipper, too, of course. You're the two people who track criminals down, aren't you? Oh, what an exciting life you must lead!"

Nipper grinned.

"It's solemn routine work most of the time," he said. "The excitement generally comes in at the finish of a case—like this. I'm tremendously glad that you are safe. I say, did we hurt you coming down that cliff?"

"I was scratched, I believe, but it's nothing," said Marjorie. "No, not my hands. My ankle and my knee are pain- ing me a little—I suppose the skin's got torn a trifle. But what does that matter? I'm free!"

Three minutes later there was a shout from one of the banks. There were thick trees there, and "all was in darkness. Nelson Lee had been keeping his eyes open, but he had seen nothing.

"Ahoy, there!" came the soft shout.

"Hallo! That's old Lennard!" said Nipper. "Ahoy! That you, inspector?"

"By George!" exclaimed the unseen voice. "Have you done the trick, then? Lord Elsington is here——"

"Dad!" cried Lady Marjorie excitedly.

"My child—my child!" came the earl's quivering voice.

The motor-boat's nose hissed through the reeds, and dug itself into the soft bank, which was quite low here. A moment later little Lady Marjorie was clasped in her father's arms, and now she was sobbing with joy.

Nelson Lee and Detective-Inspector Lennard were talking rapidly.

"This is the spot you mentioned, Lee," said the inspector. "A mile up beyond the bridge. I've got three touring cars here, and a dozen men. The river winds, you know, and we're only a stone's throw from the Towers!"

Nelson Lee clapped Lennard on the back.

"Good man!" he exclaimed. "I don't know what I should do without the Yard! Fiction detectives work 'on their own,' but that's not possible in real life, Lennard. You've done just what I wanted, and there's not a second to waste!"

"By George!" said the inspector. "You're a keen chap, Lee! We've been messing about in London, round Drake and Edwin's, and we haven't done a thing! How in wonder's name did you——"

"No time for explanations now, old man," interjected Lee. "We're going to raid Drex's place. He's one of the Circle of Terror chiefs, you know. I don't suppose we shall nab him—he's too slippery—but we'll try."

The police did not know that Professor Cyrus Zingrave was the High Lord of the Circle, and Lee did not mean to reveal that fact. When the great coup came the detective would surprise Scotland Yard,

and there was nothing to be gained by revealing the secret now.

The Earl of Elsington came to Lee's side.

"Thank Heaven you were successful, Mr. Lee," he said quietly. "I had not dared to hope for such joy as this, but I am still lost in amazement. Is it possible that Wellesley Drex was mixed up—"

"I am sorry, Lord Elsington," said Nelson Lee. "But you must excuse me now. In the morning I shall be delighted to explain things, but every second is precious now."

"You must come round to our house, Mr. Lee!" cried Lady Marjorie.

He promised to do so, Nipper adding that he would certainly be there. And then Lady Marjorie and her father were packed off to London in one of the cars. Nelson Lee, Nipper, Inspector Lennard, and a dozen Yard men hastened to Banham Towers.

As Lee had feared, the place was deserted.

The High Lord had fled, together with his servants. No trace of them was found, it may be added, and the police were unable to effect a single arrest. But Zingrave had been forced to abandon his identity and his home. This blow had been the severest which Lee had yet struck.

Bartlett was found in the passage—Nipper's blow had been heavy, and the man was still unconscious. The chauffeur had gone.

In the library all was confusion. The High Lord had departed in great haste, and there was plenty of evidence of this. The tapestry was thrust aside against one portion of the wall, and the door of a small safe was revealed, half-open.

Nelson Lee and the inspector approached it, and Lennard was about to open the door wide when Lee knocked him backwards.

"What the deuce!!" gasped Lennard. "Look at this, man!" rapped out Lee grimly.

An almost invisible thread was stretched from the door to the interior of the safe. Lee had only spotted it by chance. And, after he had cut it, he discovered that the other end was attached to a great bomb!

If the safe door had been pulled open a terrible explosion would have resulted! Even as it was, Lee found that the bomb was timed; it would explode in a few moments in any case. The cutting of the string had set the mechanism at work. Zingrave had been horribly cunning.

"Outside—everybody!" roared Nelson Lee urgently.

He and Nipper and the police pelted out with all speed. They did not cease running until they had reached the roadway itself. And then, as they paused, there was an appalling, staggering, deafening explosion.

It seemed to rent the very heavens. They were all flung down by the shock, and debris was scattered in every direction. When, ten minutes later, the place was approached, Banham Towers was nothing but a heap of ruins.

This was a pity, but it could not have been avoided. If there had been any evidence in the building it was now demolished. Zingrave had not intended the police learning a single secret. He had had everything prepared in advance.

Nelson Lee was jubilant, nevertheless. True, Zingrave was still at liberty, but Lee had scored a great triumph over the Circle of Terror. Lady Marjorie was restored to her father, and the plot had miserably failed.

Moreover, the High Lord had been hounded from his secret retreat.

Truly, Nelson Lee's campaign was progressing well!

THE END.

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BOB RANDLE—who, the lad considers, is a "slacker"—on the grounds that Bob seems to find favour in the eyes of

MARY THWAITES, the pretty daughter of Fisherman Thwaites, of whom Tom is very fond.

(Now read this week's thrilling instalment.)

THE U-BOAT.

THE damage done to the *Flyer* proved of a merely superficial character, so that she was soon to be rendered fit for sea again, the repairs being at once proceeded with.

Tom and the officers and crew had, therefore, another little holiday, which, the strenuous nature of their service being considered, was very acceptable between their battles with the enemy.

Meanwhile, the activity of German U-boats continued with increased violence, and many a splendid foodship was sent to the bottom without warning, the heroism of the officers and men of the mercantile marine in carrying on being beyond praise.

The sowing of mines about the British coast continued on a scale hitherto unprecedented. Not a day passed without the loss of many fishing boats. Yet the fishermen of the coast towns, whether engaged in catching food for the nation, or sweeping mines from the sea, went out regularly as usual, never hesitating, and taking the bad luck with the good.

The buying of the *Dora Grey* had put new life into Fisherman Thomas Crawley.

The loss of his first ship had almost broken him up. He was likely to crumple under the blow. But the moment he got back to Weathersea with his new ship he threw off his cares, and applied himself to his work with a vim and courage that surpassed anything he had ever done before. He seemed made of iron. He was untiring, and he had a loyal and tireless crew.

First-hand Riley and the boy, Sam, were indefatigable. And Mary, whenever she sailed with Tom's father, worked as hard and as well as the rest. And luck favoured them.

The *Dora Grey* never put out to sea without securing a fine catch.

She never came back without her hold being stocked to bursting-point with fish. Prices usually ruled high. During one week in particular, when the *Dora Grey* was the only fishing-boat to put into the port of Weathersea, Thomas Crawley made as much money as in normal times he would expect to make in six weeks' hard work.

Tom's father was not a greedy man, and he rewarded Riley, Sam, and Mary, and such others as helped him at times, as they deserved.

"We all take a common risk, my lads," he cried, when they expressed their gratitude. "I couldn't catch even a flounder if you refused to sail with me. And as you'd share my misfortune if anything happened to us at sea, so you ought to be rewarded when I make a little pile; leastways, that's the way I look at it.

Most of the fishermen who risked their lives on that dangerous coast were highly paid and duly rewarded as circumstances permitted. Yet no master was, perhaps, as generous as Thomas Crawley.

He could have manned his ship a dozen times over.

It was a day or two after the adventure on the cliff that Mary Thwaites

heard that Thomas Crawley was going to sea.

Jerry Morgan was to have gone with him as second hand, but had been taken bad, and was in bed at home with a severe colic.

Mary heard this from Bill Riley as the burly fellow came swinging by the cottage gate on his way to the harbour.

"If the skipper had made it known yesterday, my lass," said the first hand of the Dora Grey, "he'd have had plenty willing to help him. They've all been roped in for mine-sweeping, though, and we shall have to do the best we can."

"But you can't go to sea, fishing, without a second hand, Bill Riley," said Mary, pouting her lips.

"We'll try. We ain't duffers, you know, miss. We shall manage, I dare say."

"But I'm regular second hand of the ship. Why can't I go?"

"Skipper doesn't want a petticoat aboard, miss, until things quieten down a bit. Maybe we'll get mined or torpedoed; and if anything happened to you through him, Thomas Crawley'd never forgive himself."

"Why shouldn't I take the risk? No fish is coming into market, do you know that, Riley. Nearly every boat is mine-sweeping, and food prices are soaring."

The first hand nodded his head gravely.

"Which means that it's a national duty to go fishing. And I'm going, never mind the risk."

Bill Riley gazed admiringly at the girl, touched his cap, and strode away.

"We'd like to have you, make no mistake about that," said he. "But just now, my girl, you're best at home."

Mary Thwaites was no different to the rest of her sex.

No sooner did she find herself set aside because she was a woman than she determined that she would sail with the Dora Grey that day, at any cost.

And so she quickly got into her heavy, high-topped leather boots, donned her working garb, and footed it to the harbour, where she prevailed upon a boatman to row her out to the smack.

The Dora Grey was almost ready to sail when she stepped on board.

Thomas Crawley stared at her in blank astonishment as she came striding up to him, her beautiful face radiant with delight at her success.

"Hi, Mary, lass, what's come over ye?" said he; "anything wrong at home?"

"No, uncle; but you're short-handed, and I'm coming with you."

"You're not, lass. It's too risky. There's mines all along the coast, and two Weathersea boats have been sent to the bottom lately."

"What of that? If the Dora Grey is to go down, I shall go down with her. So we'll say no more about it," cried Mary.

She looked up and down the deck.

"Pity Tom can't help his father," she cried.

"He's not allowed to, my lass. He's willing enough. But I'm not going to take you."

"You are."

"I'm not."

"You are."

And then they fell to arguing, the upshot being that as they could not get Mary to leave the smack, short of throwing her overboard, they decided to let her have her way, and to take her with them.

An hour later the smack left the harbour, and, with half sail set, dipped to the swell, and sped out into the offing to catch food for the nation.

They had a good stiff breeze to help them, and, sure of their ground, they got to work before dusk.

For once in a way the results were poor, and whenever they hauled the heavy trawl up they found it choked with weed, with a smattering of small fish amongst the green and brown from the ocean's bed.

Wind and sea remained favourable for the fishing, and the Dora Grey, piloted by the sure hand of her master mariner, trawled the unknown fishing-grounds. Still the perverse luck continued throughout the night, and in the morning, instead of sailing for port with a huge catch as he had intended and made sure of doing, Thomas Crawley found that he had still a lot of work to do.

He yawned, stretched his tired limbs, and swept the sea with his eyes. In the far distance he could see the smoke of a passing steamer. Nearer in shore there were two sailing boats. Over there to the south-west were a fleet of mine-sweepers, busy at their monotonous but magnificent work.

"Boys, we'll have breakfast," he cried, and descending into the caboose.

he found Mary Thwaites there frying the bacon and making the tea.

She looked as fresh and as sweet as ever, and his eyes lit up with a light of appreciation as he glanced at her.

"Mary, my lass," pronounced the fisherman, "with the exception of my wife when she was your age, you are the bonniest wench ever I've clapped eyes on. And it seems a bit of a pity, you know, that you think so much of my Tom——"

Mary coloured hotly.

"Why do you say that, uncle?" she asked—he was always uncle to her.

"Because he's not worthy of you."

Mary turned her head away, and became busier than ever.

"Tom's not grown up yet," she said; and thereafter there was silence until Bill Riley came down and ate with them.

The breakfast made all of them feel livelier, and as soon as all had satisfied their hunger, sail was set for a fresh fishing-ground, and Thomas Crawley prophesied that they'd have better luck there.

"We'll be in harbour with all the fish we want before sundown," said he.

The Dora Grey heeled over to the pull of the sails and the freshening wind. The waves lapped her sides, and she spurned the water from her bows as she sped onward, as smart a smack as ever Thomas Crawley boarded.

Mary took her stand by the skipper, and as her eyes scanned the seas, talked about what they would do after the war.

"Don't talk of that happy time, my girl," said Crawley very seriously, "for it might bring us bad luck——" Then his jaw dropped, his eyes bulged, and with a trembling hand he pointed ahead.

"Look—look there—My God——!" he exclaimed. And as the crew strained their eyes across the water, they saw the hull of a U boat suddenly emerge from the sea.

"Look—look! A German submarine! We're lost!"

With a gasp of horror, the skipper leapt to the steering-wheel.

"Stand by the boat, all of you," he yelled, cool as ever as the first shock of emotion passed away. "And, remember, whatever happens, we've got to save the lass."

"They've launched a torpedo, uncle," said Mary, white, but very calm.

The skipper whirled the wheel round. "Luff, there!" he roared.

The Dora Grey swung nearer into the wind, but the deadly course of the torpedo advanced rapidly, and Mary felt that it would strike them, whatever steps they took to avoid it.

"Curse you, curse you! you inhuman cowards!" shrieked Bill Riley, shaking his fist in impotent rage at the distant U-boat.

Then they lapsed into silence, and stood watching, waiting for the inevitable end.

THE SINKING OF THE DORA GREY!

"WE are lost!"

As the despairing cry echoed upon the air the eyes of all aboard the Dora Grey, save the skipper, who issued his commands in ringing tones, followed the wake left behind by the advancing torpedo, a whitish streak that showed plainly on the sea.

Nearer and nearer it came, and it seemed to Mary, as she calmly awaited the end, that a burst of fiendish laughter came from the U-boat that lay rocking on the heaving sea.

A fierce anger burned within the fisher-girl's breast. Was there no help near? Were they to be sunk in all their helplessness, and had it been decreed that the inhuman murderers who could do no better than sink a harmless fishing-boat were to escape all punishment for their crime?

For a moment Mary lifted her eyes from the advancing trail, and swept the sea around her.

Only too plainly she realised that there was no help at hand.

Those distant trails of smoke from the stacks of passing steamers told of vessels coming and going, laden with stores, munitions, or merchandise no doubt; but no war craft was near to help.

They were indeed lost.

"Lower away the lifeboat!" bawled the skipper, at the pitch of his lungs. "Lively's the word, there!"

Instantly the order was obeyed; the ropes were freed, and the little boat swung outward till she hung over the sea.

Like magic the work was done.

Thomas Crawley evidently realised

hat there was no chance of escape now. The torpedo was almost home.

"Stand by!" he roared. "Get your life-belts. Save the lass, whatever happens——!"

He got no farther, for there was a sudden, deafening report, and the fishing smack shivered from stem to stern.

A gigantic fountain of spray, carrying in it pieces of the shattered hull, rose high, and falling, drenched them.

Mary was hurled into the scupper by the violence of the explosion, and her head struck hard against the timber there. For a second or two she remained unconscious, stunned.

She could see nothing for the blinding flash of the explosion had scaled her vision for the moment.

Sam, the boy, went down headlong. Bill Riley reeled and dropped to the deck. So did the third hand.

Skipper Crawley, with hands of iron, grasped the spokes of the steering-wheel, and set his teeth.

Around him flew the broken debris of the hull. Under his feet the torn planks seemed to rise. Portions of the wheel were blown away. Down came the mainmast, with a crash, snapped off near its base. The sails enveloped part of the deck, and soaked in the lapping sea.

And over there from the U-boat laughter rang.

Never for a moment did brave, stout-hearted Thomas Crawley lose his nerve, or forget the responsibilities that his position of skipper imposed on him.

He felt the Dora Grey quiver, and then heel over till the slanting deck almost hurled him down into the sea.

He could hear the water gurgling fast into the hold. The weight of it steadied her. Yet he knew, as he saw with what awful rapidity she settled down, that they had little time left.

His wide eyes stared around the broken deck. He saw Mary rising from the scuppers. He saw the boy Sam rise with bleeding face, and heard him groan as he clapped both hands to his head. He saw Bill Riley, grim and stolid as ever, get up and look around him.

"You cursed pirates!" Riley roared, shaking his fist at the submarine, which now began to move slowly towards them. "May hell fires burn yer—— May——"

"Riley!" roared the skipper. "Clap a lifebelt round the lady. Mary, lass, Heaven knows whether any of us will escape alive. The boat's gone, and we'll sink within three minutes." He sprang from his useless post, and, clasping her in his arms, imprinted a farewell kiss, first on one cheek, then on the other. Two great tears started in his eyes, and glistened there like pearls.

"Heaven bless you, my child!" he said brokenly. "You have always been like a daughter to me. I asked you to stay behind this trip. I had a sort of feeling that something would happen. May the Lord watch over you, and preserve you; and if so be as you are spared, may my son, Tom, make you a good husband. Good-bye——!"

"Oh, uncle—uncle!" sobbed the girl, unnerved more at the thought of losing him than at the fate which awaited her.

She returned his kisses, and then he sprang away, his momentary weakness gone, his chin raised defiantly, his eyes flashing fire.

Bill Riley had found a lifebelt, and this he set round Mary's body, buckling the straps in place.

The boy, Sam, had already recovered, and furnished himself with a similar belt. The skipper did not attempt to get one, though there were others ready to his hand.

"The boat's gone," yelled Bill Riley. "Sam, boy, help me to throw over the life raft."

The life raft was a float made of strong wooden battens, nailed and screwed across and across. It had been made and kept against such an emergency as this.

The third hand rushed up. The boy Sam, Riley, and he lifted the raft and hurled it overboard.

By this time the deck of the Dora Grey was almost awash.

Close at hand the pirate stood by, and on the deck of the submarine could be seen her officers and her murderous crew.

The faces of the latter were grinning. Their foul mouths hurled coarse epithets at the doomed crew of the fishing smack, and they even revelled in the peril of the poor girl.

The skipper gave them a withering glance, then turned his back on them.

"Save yourselves, my lads," said he. "Bill Riley, you go over first. Gain

(Continued overleaf.)

the raft, and wait there for Mary. Lass, stand by."

Riley looked over the side, and saw the raft floating there, a harbour of refuge, indeed.

He hoisted himself up on the bulwarks, and, standing there a second to judge the distance, jumped.

Into the sea he plunged, but his head was above the surface in a moment, and, in spite of his clothes and boots, a few heavy strokes took him within reach of the raft, on to which he hauled himself with a little difficulty.

"Now, Mary, girl," said the skipper.

He lifted her to the wooden rail, and held her there.

She turned her beautiful agonised face towards him—a face as white as death now.

"Good-bye, Uncle Tom," she cried.

"God bless you—"

"And bless you, too, my girl. Jump!"

She obeyed, springing wide, and within a few seconds Riley's outstretched hand had touched hers, and she had been drawn clear of the water.

"Now, Sam," said the skipper.

The boy needed no second bidding. Into the sea he plunged, and swiftly gained the life float.

Now the third hand went, and the skipper was alone.

"Just in time," said he, noticing that from the side of the Dora Grey which had been blown out by the torpedo the water was already washing over the deck planks.

One look he gave the raft. Good! They were all aboard it.

Next he cast his eyes towards the distant shores of England. He could just make out a faint, shadowy line which he knew to be the coast.

"Good-bye to England and home! Heaven preserve her and it!"

Next he raised his eyes towards the heavens.

"Into Thy hands, O Lord—" he murmured, and then the ship went down under him, and tossed him into the heaving, swirling waters, to drag him down by force of suction, to fill his ears with deafening, clamouring sounds of rushing waters, to sting his eyes with the searching brine.

This way and that he was tossed, until the deadly pressure of the water threatened to crush him.

Surely, surely, he thought, this was the end!

(To be continued.)

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