The Brotherhood of the Seven Kings.

By L. T. Meade and Robert Eustace.

V.—TWENTY DEGREES.—Told by Norman Head.

A HOT and sultry day towards the end of June was drawing to a close. I had just finished dinner and returned to my laboratory to continue some spectroscopic work, when Dufrayer, whom I had not seen for more than a week, walked in. Noticing that I was busy, he took a cigar from a box which lay on the table and sank into an easy chair without speaking.

"What is it to-night, Norman?" he asked at last, as I descended from my stool. "Is it the Elixir of Life or the Philosopher's Stone?"

"Neither," I replied. "I have received some interesting specimens of reduced hæmoglobin, and am experimenting on them. By the way, where have you been all this week?"

"At Eastbourne. The Assizes begin at the Old Bailey, as you know, on Thursday, and I am conducting the defence in the case of the Disney murder. However, I have not come here to talk shop. I had a small adventure at Eastbourne, and have come to tell you about it."

"More developments?" I asked, slightly startled by his tone, which was unusually grave. "Come into the garden; we will have coffee there."

We went through the open French windows and ensconced ourselves in wicker chairs.

"Does it ever occur to you," said Dufrayer, taking his cigar from his mouth as he spoke, "that you and I are in personal danger? It is absurd to lull ourselves into security by saying that such things do not happen in our day, but my only surprise is that Mme. Koluchy has not yet struck a blow at either of us. The thought of her haunts me; she fights with almost omnipotent powers, and we cannot foresee from what quarter the shaft may come."

"You have a reason for saying this?" I interrupted. "Has it anything to do with your visit to the seaside?"

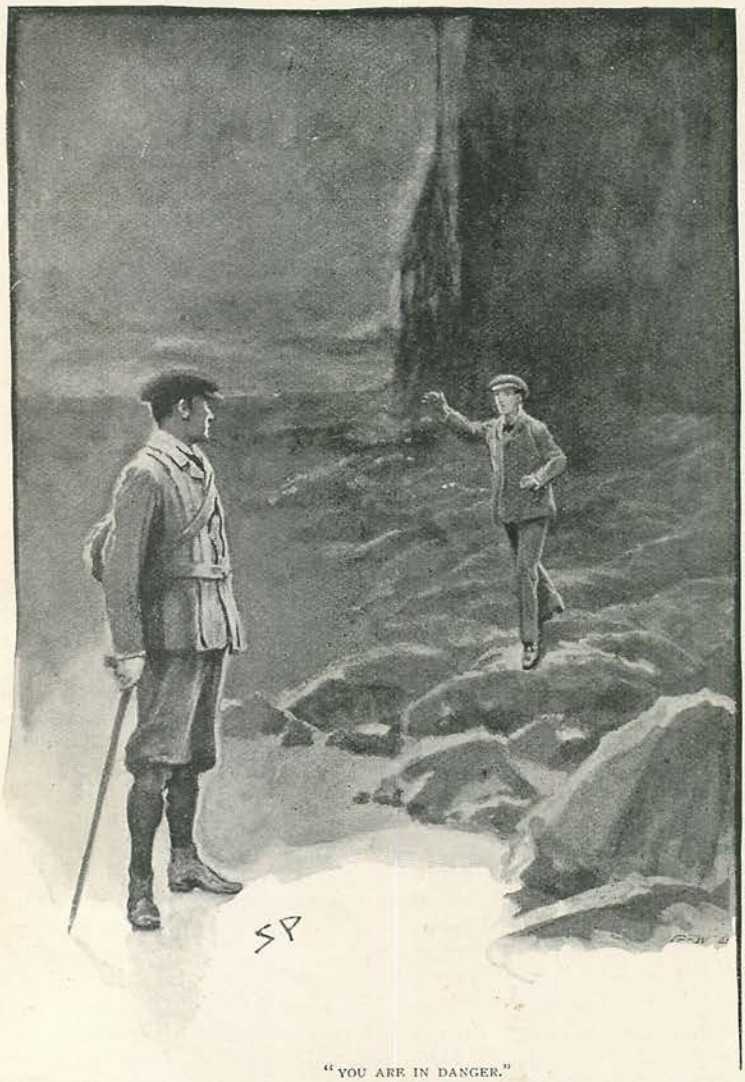
"There is a possibility that it may have something to do with it, but of that I am not certain. In all likelihood, Head, there are no two men in London in such a strange position as ours."

"It is a self-elected one, at any rate," I replied.

"True," he answered. "Well, I will tell you what happened, and the further sequel which occurred this evening. I had been feeling rather done, and as I had a few days to spare, thought I would spend them geologizing along the cliffs at Eastbourne. On Tuesday last I went out for the whole day on a long expedition under the cliffs towards Burling Gap. I was so engrossed in my discovery of some very curious pieces of iron pyrites, for which that part of the coast is noted, that I forgot the time, and darkness set in before I turned for home. The tide was luckily low, so I had nothing to fear. I had just rounded the point on which the light-house stands when, to my amazement, I heard a shrill, clear voice call my name. I stopped and turned round, but at first could see nothing. In a moment, however, I observed a figure approaching me—it sprang lightly from rock to rock. As it came nearer it resolved itself into a boy, dressed in a light grey suit and cloth cap. I was just going to address him when he raised his hand as if in warning, and said, quickly, in a low voice: 'Don't return to London—stay here—you are in danger.' 'What do you mean?' I asked. He made no reply, and before I could repeat my question had left me, and was continuing his rapid course toward the promontory. I shouted after him, 'Stop! who are you?' but in another moment I completely lost sight of him in the dark shadow of the cliffs. I ran forward, but not a trace of him could I see. I shouted; there was no answer. I then made up my mind that pursuit was useless, and returned to the town."

"Have you seen or heard anything since of the mysterious youth?" I asked.

"Nothing whatever. What do you think of his warning? Is it possible that I am really in danger? Is Mme. Koluchy mixed up in this affair?"



"YOU ARE IN DANGER."

I paused before replying, then I said, slowly:—

"As Madame is in existence, and as the youth, whoever he was, happened to know your name, there is just a possibility that the adventure may wear an ugly aspect. Two conclusions may be arrived at with regard to it: one, that this warning was intended to keep you at Eastbourne for some dangerous object; the other, that it was a friendly warning given for some reason in this strange manner."

"You arrive precisely at my own views on the subject," replied Dufrayer. "I am not a nervous man, and can defend my life if necessary. But that small incident has stuck to me in a curious way. Of course, it is quite impossible for me to leave town. The Disney murder trial comes on this week, and as there are many complications it will occupy some days; but, Head, try as I will, the impression of that boy's warning will not wear off; and now, listen, there is a sequel. See; this came by the last post."

As Dufrayer spoke he drew a letter from his pocket and thrust it into my hands.

I took it to the window, where, by the light of a lamp inside the room, I read the following lines:—

"Meet me inside gates, Marble Arch, at ten to-night. Do not fail. You have disregarded my advice, but I may still be able to do something."

"Your correspondent makes a strange *rendezvous*," I remarked, as I handed it back to him. "What do you mean to do?"

"What would you do in my place?" asked Dufrayer, shifting the question. He gazed at me earnestly, and with veiled anxiety in his face.

"Take no notice," I said. "The letter is anonymous, and as likely as not may be a trap to lead you into danger. I do not see anything for it but for you to pursue the even tenor of your way, just as if there were no Mme. Koluchy in the world."

It was half-past nine o'clock, the moon was rising, and Dufrayer's grave face, with his dark brows knit, confronted mine. After a time he rose.

"I believe you are right," he said. "I shall disregard that letter as I disregarded the warning of the youth on the sands. My

unknown correspondent must keep his *rendezvous* in vain. I won't stay any longer this evening. I am terribly busy getting up my case for Thursday. Good-night."

When he was gone I sat out of doors a little longer, pondering much over the two warnings which he had received, and which I had thought best to make little of to him. It was, as he said, impossible for him to leave town, but all the same I by no means liked the aspect of affairs. Whatever the warnings meant, they were at least significant of grave danger ahead, and knowing Mme. Koluchy as I did, I felt certain that no depths of treachery were beyond her powers.

I returned to the house, but felt little inclination to resume my experiments in the laboratory. The night grew more and more sultry, and a thunderstorm threatened.

Between eleven and twelve o'clock I was just preparing to retire for the night, when there came a loud ring at my front door. The servants had all gone to bed. In some surprise, I went to open the door. A woman in a voluminous cloak and old-fashioned bonnet was standing on the threshold. The moment the door was opened, and before I could say a word, she had stepped into the hall.

"Don't keep me out," she said, in a breathless voice; "I am followed, and there is danger. Mr. Dufrayer has failed to keep his appointment, and I was forced to come here. I know you, Mr. Head. I know all about you, and also about Mr. Dufrayer. Let me speak at once. I have something most important to say. Do get over your astonishment, and close the door. I tell you I am closely watched."

"MY NAME IS ELSIE FANCOURT."

The figure of the woman was old, but the voice was young. Without a word, I shut the hall door. As I did so, she removed her bonnet and dropped her cloak. She now stood revealed to me as a slight, handsome, dark-eyed girl. Her skin was of a clear olive, and her eyes black.

"My name is Elsie Fancourt," she said. "My home is at Henley. My mother is the widow of a barrister. Our address is 5, Gloucester Gardens, Albert Road, Henley. Will you remember it?"

I nodded.

"Will you make a note of it?"

"I can remember it without that," I said.

"Very good. You may need that address later on. Now, Mr. Head, you are thinking strange things of me, but I am not, in the ordinary sense of the word, an adventuress. I am a lady—one in sore, sore straits. I have come to you in my desperate need, because I believe you can help me, and because you and also Mr. Dufrayer are in the gravest danger. Will you trust me?"

As she spoke she raised her eyes and looked me full in the face. I read an

expression of truth in the depths of her fine eyes. My suspicion vanished; I held out my hand.

"You are a strange girl, and have come here at a strange hour," I said, "but I do trust you. Only extreme circumstances could make you act as you are doing. What is the matter?"

"Take me into one of your sitting-rooms, and I will explain."

I opened the door of my study and asked her to walk in.

"The matter is one of life and death," she began, speaking in a hurried voice. "Mr. Dufrayer has twice disregarded my warning. I warned him at the risk of my liberty, if not my life, and when he failed to keep the appointment which I made for him this evening, I felt there was nothing whatever for it but to come to you and to cast myself on your mercy. Mr. Head, there is not a moment to lose. Our common enemy"—here she lowered her voice—"is Mme. Koluchy. She has done me a great and awful wrong. She has done that which no woman with a woman's wit and intuition can ever forgive. I will avenge myself on her or die."

"Is it possible that you are the person who gave Mr. Dufrayer that strange warning on the beach at Eastbourne?" I asked.

"I am. I dressed myself as a boy for greater safety, but that night I was followed to my lodgings. Had Mr. Dufrayer heeded my advice I should not be here now. Mr. Head, your friend is in imminent danger of his life. I cannot tell you how the blow will fall, for I do not know, but I am certain of what I am saying. Out of London he might have a chance; in London he has practically none. Listen. You are both marked by the Brotherhood, and Mr. Dufrayer is to be the first victim. No human laws can protect him. Even here, in this great and guarded city, he cannot possibly escape. The person who strikes the blow may be caught, may suffer"—here a look of agony crossed her face—"but what is the good of that," she continued, "when the blow has done its work? No one outside the Brotherhood knows its immense resources. I repeat, Mr. Dufrayer has no chance whatever if he remains in London; he must leave immediately."

"That, I fear, is impossible," I replied, gravely; "my friend is no coward. He is conducting the defence in an important case at the criminal courts. The life of an accused man hangs on his remaining in town—need I say more?"

She turned white to her lips.

"I know all that," she answered. "Have I not followed the thing step by step? Madame also knows how Mr. Dufrayer is placed, and what he has to do this week. She has made her plans accordingly. Oh! Mr. Head, would I risk my life as I am doing for a mere nothing? Can you not believe in the reality of the danger?"

"I can," I answered. "I am certain from your manner that you are speaking the truth, and I know enough of Mme. Koluchy to be sure of the gravity of the situation. Of course, I will tell Mr. Dufrayer what you say, and suggest that he get a substitute to carry on his work in the courts."

"Will you see him to-night?" she asked, eagerly.

"Yes."

"Thank you."

"He is certain to refuse to go," I said. "It is right to give him your warning, but he will disregard it."

"Ah! you think so?"

"I am positive."

"In that case something else must be done, and I must know immediately. If your friend refuses, send a letter to E. F., General Post Office, marked 'Poste Restante.' I will go to St. Martin's-le-Grand early to-morrow morning to obtain it. Put nothing within the letter but the word 'No.' Don't sign your name."

"In case my friend decides not to leave town you shall have such a letter," I replied.

"Under those circumstances I must see you again," continued Miss Fancourt.

I made no reply.

"It is better for me not to communicate with you. Even a telegram would scarcely be safe. I have, I believe, managed to elude vigilance in coming here. I feel that I am watched day and night. I dare not risk the chance of meeting you in the ordinary way. Let me think for a moment."

She stood still, leaning her hand against her cheek.

"Are you musical?" she asked, suddenly.

"Fairly so," I replied.

"Do you know enough of music to"—she paused and half smiled—"to tune a piano, for instance?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I will soon explain myself. The piano-tuner is expected at our house to-morrow. Will you come in his place? I will send him a line the moment I get home, telling him to postpone his visit, but will let our servant think that he is coming. She has

never seen our piano-tuner, and will suppose that you are the man we usually employ for the purpose. Do you mind assuming this *rôle?*"

"I am perfectly willing to try my hand on your piano," I said.

"Thank you. Then, in case you have to write that letter, come to our house to-morrow about two o'clock. The servant will admit you, believing you to be the tuner,

"THE YOUNG MAN TOOK HIS LEAVE."

and will show you into our drawing-room—I will join you there in a few moments. You can leave the rest to me."

I promised to do as Miss Fancourt required, and soon afterwards she took her leave.

A few moments later, I was on my way to Dufrayer's flat. He kept late hours, and I was relieved to see lights still burning in his windows. I was quickly admitted by my host himself.

"Come in, Norman," he cried. "That will do, North," he continued, turning to a young man whom I recognised as one of his managing clerks. "You have taken down all those instructions? Murchison and James Watts must be subpœnaed as witnesses. I shall be at the office early to-morrow."

The young man in question, who had a pale, dark face and grey, sensitive eyes, quickly gathered up several papers and, bowing to Dufrayer and myself, took his leave.

"One of the best managing clerks I have ever had," said Dufrayer, as he left the room. "I have been in great luck to secure him. He is a wonderfully well-educated fellow and knows several languages. He has been with me for the last three months. I cannot tell you what a relief it is to have a clerk who really possesses a head on his shoulders. But you have news, Norman; what is it?"

"I have," I answered; "strange news. After all, Dufrayer, I am inclined to believe in your anonymous correspondent. The youth on the Eastbourne beach has merged into a girl. Finding that you would not keep the appointment she made for you, she came straight to me, and has, in fact, only just left me. Strange as it all seems, I believe in that girl. May I tell you what occurred during our interview?"

Dufrayer pulled a chair forward for me without saying a word. He stood facing me while I told my story. When I had finished he gave his shoulders a slight shrug, and then said:—

"But, after all, Miss Fancourt has revealed nothing."

"Because at present she only suspects," I replied.

"And she coolly asks you to come to me to request me to throw my client over at the eleventh hour and to leave town?"

"She certainly believes that your danger is real," I answered.

"Well, real or not, I cannot possibly act on her warning," replied Dufrayer. As he spoke he walked to the window and looked out. "Things have come to a pretty pass when a man is hunted in this fashion," he continued. "A respectable London solicitor is converted into a modern Damocles, with the sword of Mme. Koluchy suspended above his head. The thing is preposterous; it cannot go on. My work keeps me here, and here I must stay. I will trust the Criminal Investigation Department against Madame's worst machinations. I shall go to Scotland Yard early to-morrow and see Ford. The thing is a perfect nightmare."

"I told Miss Fancourt you would not leave town," I replied.

"And you did right," he said.

"Nevertheless, I believe in her," I continued.

Dufrayer gave me one of those slow, inscrutable smiles which now and then flitted across his strong face.

"You were always a bit of an enthusiast, Head," he replied, "but the fact is, I have no time to worry over this matter now. All my energies of mind and body must be exerted on behalf of that unfortunate man, the conduct of whose trial has been placed in my hands."

I left Dufrayer, and before I returned home wrote the single word "No" on a sheet of blank paper, folded it up, put it into an envelope, and addressed it to E. F., "Poste Restante," St. Martin's-le-Grand.

To think over the enigma which Miss Fancourt had presented to me seemed worse than useless; but, try as I would, I could not banish it from my thoughts; and I even owned to a sense of relief when, on the following day, about two o'clock, I presented myself, as the supposed piano tuner, at 5, Gloucester Gardens, Albert Road, Henley.

The house was a small one, and a neatly-dressed little servant opened the door. She evidently expected the piano-tuner, for she smiled when she saw me, and showed me at once into the drawing-room. She supplied me with the necessary dusters, and opened the piano. I had just struck some chords on the somewhat ancient instrument, when Miss Fancourt came hastily in.

"I am sorry," she said, speaking in a rather loud voice, "but mother has a very bad headache, and has asked me to request you to postpone tuning the instrument to-day; but you must not go before you have had some lunch. I have asked the servant to bring it in."

She had left the door open, and now the girl who had admitted me followed, bearing a tray which contained some light refreshment.

"Put it down on that table, Susan," said Miss Fancourt, "and then please go at once for the medicine for your mistress. I can open the door in case anyone calls."

The girl, quite unsuspicious, departed, and Miss Fancourt and I found ourselves alone.

"Susan will be absent for over half an hour," said the girl, "and I have told mother enough to insure her not coming into the room. She has feigned that headache; it was necessary to do so in order to get an excuse for sending our little servant out for some medicine, and so keeping her out of the way. A man was here questioning her only this morning. Oh, you make a first-class piano-tuner, Mr. Head," she continued, looking at me with a smile, which vanished almost as soon as it came. "But now to business. So your friend refuses to leave town?"

"He does," I replied. "I told you that it was quite impossible for him to do so."

"I know you said so. Now I am going to give you my full confidence, but before I do so will you give me your word that what I am about to say will never, under any circumstances, pass your lips?"

"I cannot do that," I replied, "but if I find that you are a friend to me, I will be one to you."

She looked at me steadily.

"That will not do," she said. "Mr. Dufrayer is an old acquaintance of yours, is he not?"

"My greatest friend," I said.

Her brow cleared, and her dark eyes lightened.

"His life is in danger," she said. "By this time to-morrow he may——" she paused, trembling, her very lips turned white.

"For Heaven's sake, speak out," I cried.

"Yes, I will explain myself. I am certain that when you know all you will give me the promise which is absolutely necessary for my own salvation and the salvation of one dearer to me than myself. Six months ago I became

engaged to a man of the name of John North."

"North!" I said, "North." I felt puzzled by a memory.

The girl proceeded without noticing my interruption.

"I love John North," she said, slowly. "If necessary, I would die for him. I would go to any risk to save him from his present most perilous position."

As she spoke her dark brows were knit, she clasped her hands tightly together, and bent her head.

"'I LOVE JOHN NORTH,' SHE SAID, SLOWLY."

"There is a managing clerk of the name of North in Dufrayer's office," I said, slowly.

"There is," she replied; "he is the man about whom I am speaking. Now please follow me closely. Mr. North, who was educated abroad and spent all his early years in Italy, was articled when still quite a youth to a large firm of solicitors in the City. Early in the spring, Mr. Dufrayer engaged him as one of his managing clerks at a salary of four guineas a week."

"I met North last night," I said. "He looked an intelligent fellow, and my friend spoke very highly of him. I have not the least idea, Miss Fancourt, what this is leading up to, but, as far as I can tell, North seems all right."

"Please let me continue," said the girl; "you will soon see how complicated matters are. Almost immediately after our engagement, John North got into Madame's set. I do not know how he first had an introduction to her, although I sometimes think he must have met her long ago in Italy. She evidently holds the deepest fascination over him, for he was never tired of talking of her, her wonderful house, her fame, her beauty, and the strange power she had over each person with whom she came in contact. One day he told me that through her agency, although her name did not appear in the matter, she had got him an excellent appointment as managing clerk in the office of your friend."

I started. My attention was now keenly aroused.

"This," continued Miss Fancourt, "was three months ago. Mr. Head, during those three months everything has altered, the sun has got behind clouds, the sky is black. I am the most miserable girl on earth."

"You have doubtless a reason for your misery," I said.

"I have. Mr. Head, you tell me you have seen John North?"

"Last night for the first time," I answered.

"And you liked his appearance?"

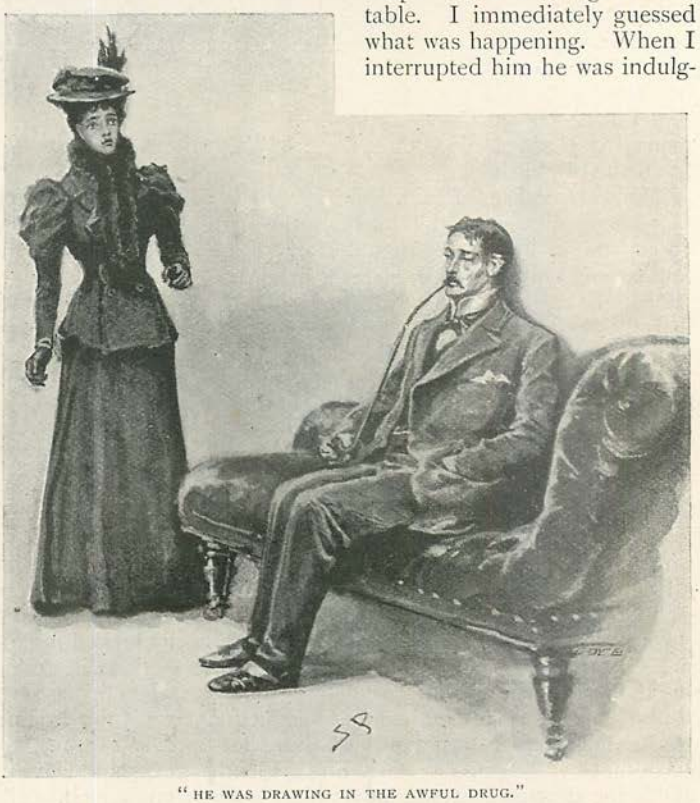
"I was attracted by his face. I cannot exactly say that I liked it, it seemed clever—he looked intelligent."

"He is wonderfully so. Six months ago, when first we were engaged, his face used to wear the brightest, keenest expression; now it is haggard, restless—each day something of good leaves it and something of evil takes its place. Something, yes, something is eating into his youth, his manhood, and his beauty. He is changed to me—I believe he has almost lost the capacity of loving anyone. My love, however, is unaltered, for I know there is a spell over him. When it is removed he will be his own old self again.

Three weeks ago, Mr. Head, I swore I would discover what was wrong. Unknown to anyone, I followed John North to a house in Mayfair. He went there with a large party, of whom Madame was one. I have found out what that house is. It is an opium den, though few except its frequenters are aware of that fact. It was easy for me, then, to put two and two together, and to know what was wrecking the life of the man I loved. You are a scientist, and understand what the opium vice means. It has ruined my lover, both in body and soul."

"This is terribly sad," I answered, "but I cannot quite understand what it has to do with Dufrayer."

"I am coming to that part," she replied. "After I had seen him enter the opium saloon, I began to watch John North more closely than ever, and soon I had strong reason to suspect that he was burdened by a great and very terrible secret. I seemed to read this fact in his eyes, in his manner. He avoided my glance, his gaiety left him, he became more gloomy and depressed hour by hour. My mother lives here, and has done so for years, but my journalistic work keeps me in town during the greater part of the week. I have a small room in Soho, where I sleep whenever necessary, but I always spend from Saturday to Monday at home. I was careful not to give Mr. North the slightest clue that I had guessed his secret, and on the special Sunday evening about which I am going to tell you I asked him to come and visit me at our house. He had neglected me terribly of late, leaving my letters unanswered, seeming indifferent to my presence. He had ceased altogether to speak of our marriage, and the only things which really interested him were his law work and his evenings in Madame's set. When I pressed him, however, he promised faithfully to come to see me on that special Sunday, and I sat for a long time in this room waiting for him. He did not arrive, and I grew restless. I put on my hat, and went along the road to meet him. He did not appear. I felt desperate then, and determined to do a bold thing. I took the next train to town. I arrived in London between six and seven o'clock and took a hansom straight to his rooms. The landlady, whom I had already seen once or twice, told me that he was in. I went upstairs and knocked at his sitting-room door. I heard his voice say 'Come in,' and I entered. He was sitting on the sofa, and did not show the least surprise at seeing me. He asked me in a low, languid voice what I had come about. I replied that, as he had failed to keep his appointment with me, I had come to him. As I spoke I looked round the room. I noticed that he had in his hand a long pipe, and that there was a peculiar, sickly odour in the air. A small spirit lamp of uncommon shape stood burning on the table. I immediately guessed what was happening. When I interrupted him he was indulging in opium smoke. He was drawing in the pernicious, the awful drug, and did not care that I should interfere with him. I was determined, however, to probe this matter to the bitter end. I resolved



"HE WAS DRAWING IN THE AWFUL DRUG."

at any risk to save him. I knew that there was only one way to do this. I must learn the truth—I must find out what that thing was which was casting its awful shadow over him. Like a flash it occurred to me that in his present condition it would be easy to wrest secrets from his lips. I would, therefore, encourage him to smoke. Instead of blaming him, therefore, for smoking the opium I sat down by him and asked some questions with regard to it. I requested him to continue the pleasure which I had interrupted, and showed him that I was much interested in the effects of opium. Low as he had fallen, he evidently did not like to indulge in the horrible habit in my presence, but I would not hear of his denying himself. I even helped him to put some more of the prepared opium into the bowl of the pipe. I smiled gently at him as the heavy aromatic smoke curled up round his nostrils, soothing and calming him. He began to enter into the fun of the thing, as he called it, and asked me to seat myself by his side. I felt sick and trembling, but never for a moment did my resolution fail me. As he got more and more under the influence of the opium, and I noticed the pin-point pupils of his eyes, I began to question him. My questions were asked with extreme care, and deliberately, step by step, I wormed his secrets from him. A ghastly plot was revealed to me, a plot so horrible, so certain in its issues, that I could scarcely restrain myself while I listened. It had to do with you, Mr. Head, with Mr. Dufrayer, and in especial with my lover himself, John North. Just as he murmured the last words of his awful secret he fell back into complete insensibility.

"I immediately hurried from the room. I knew enough of the effects of opium to be certain that John would have no remembrance of what he had said to me when he awoke in the morning. I saw the landlady, told her enough of my strange position to insure her secrecy, and hurried away.

"That night I spent in town, but I had no rest. Since that dreadful moment I have not had an hour's quiet. The man I love is to be the instrument used by Mme. Koluchy for her terrible purpose. A blow is to be struck, and John North is to strike it. What the blow is in itself, how the fatal deed is to be committed, I have not the slightest idea; but your friend is doomed. Can you not understand my awful position? John North is to execute Madame's vengeance. It matters little to her if eventually he hangs for his crime; for, with her usual cunning, she has so arranged matters that she herself will not be implicated. Mr. Head, you now see what I want to do. I want to save John North. Your friend I should also wish to save, but John North comes first, don't you understand?"

"I understand," I replied, "and I pity you from my heart."

"Then, if you pity, you will help me."

"Undoubtedly I will."

"That is good; that is what I hoped."

"But what is to be done? At present it seems to me that you and I are in the terrible position of knowing that there are rocks ahead without having the slightest idea where they are."

"I know this much at least," she replied. "The fatal deed will be committed in London, hence my entreaty to your friend not to leave Eastbourne. I might have guessed that he would not heed an anonymous warning of that sort. Then I tried what a letter would do, begging him to meet me at the Marble Arch. Little I cared what he thought of me if only I could save John North. Mr. Dufrayer did not come, and as a last resource I fled to you."

"I am glad you did so," I answered. "Have you any plan in your head on which I can immediately act?"

"I have, but first of all I want your promise. You must not only save your friend, but you must save Mr. North. I want your word of honour that you will never give your testimony against him."

"I can only say that I will not be the one to hand him over to the police," I replied; "more it is impossible to promise. Will that content you?"

She hesitated and looked thoughtful.

"I suppose it must," she said at last. "Will Mr. Dufrayer make a similar promise?"

"I think I can answer for him," I said.

"Very well. Now, then, Mr. Head, it is just possible that we may be victorious yet. I have discovered that from time to time Mr. North receives communications from Mme. Koluchy. If we could get hold of some of these we might reach the heart of this ghastly plot."

"But how is that to be done?" I asked.

"I have acquainted myself with all Mr. North's movements," continued the girl. "He goes to his lodgings every evening between ten and eleven o'clock, not leaving them again until the morning. Doubtless, night after night he has recourse to the solace of the opium pipe. It is impossible for

me to visit him again, for I am too closely watched, but will you go to him—will you go to him to-night?"

"Do you really mean this?" I asked.

"I do," she replied, "it is the only thing to be done. You can take a message from Mr. Dufrayer. You are Mr. Dufrayer's friend, so a message from him will be natural. When you have got into Mr. North's presence you will know yourself what to do. Your own judgment will guide you. In all probability he will be under the effect of opium, and you can get further secrets from him. At the worst you may be able to find some of Madame's communications."

I stood still, considering.

"I will go," I said; "but success seems more than doubtful."

"I do not agree with you. I am certain that, with your tact, you will succeed. If you can only get hold of some of Madame's letters all may yet be well. By the way, can you read cipher?"

"I understand many ciphers," I replied.

"I have discovered that Mme. Koluchy always writes in cipher. Go to-night. Do not fail. This is Mr. North's address. Do not try to communicate with me again. I shall know if you succeed, and if—but I dare not think of the other alternative."

She held out her hand; her face was white, her lips trembled.

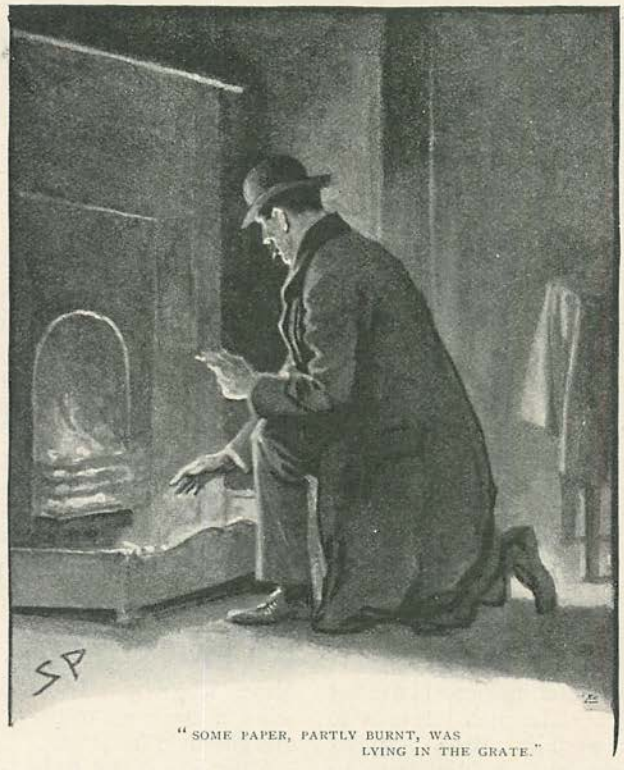
"You are a brave man," she said. "I feel somehow that you will succeed. Go, you must be out of this house before our little servant returns."

That evening between ten and eleven o'clock I found myself at North's lodgings. The landlady herself opened the door. I inquired if North was in, said that I had come with an urgent message from Dufrayer, and asked to see him at once.

"I do not know whether he is in," replied the woman, "but if you will go upstairs to the sitting-room on the third floor just facing the landing, you can see for yourself."

I nodded to her, and ran upstairs. A moment later I was knocking at the door which the landlady had indicated. There was no reply—I turned the handle and went in. One glance round the room caused my heart to beat with apprehension. The bird had evidently flown. Signs of a speedy departure were all too evident.

Some paper partly torn and partly burnt was lying in the grate, and some more papers



"SOME PAPER, PARTLY BURNT, WAS LYING IN THE GRATE."

completely charred to ashes were near it; the door which opened into the bedroom was flung back on its hinges. I went there, to see drawers and wardrobe open and empty. My next business was to go to the grate, secure the half-burnt paper, thrust it into my pocket, and go downstairs again. The landlady was nowhere in sight, so I let myself out.

About midnight I returned home.

"Now, for one last forlorn hope," I said to myself. "The man has evidently got a fright and has gone off. But like many another clever scoundrel, he did not quite complete his work before his departure. This paper is only half-burnt. Can it be possible that it contains the hidden cipher which may yet save my friend?"

I went straight to my laboratory, and opening the crumpled, torn piece of paper spread it out before me. To my dismay, I saw that it was only an ordinary sheet of a morning daily. I was about to fling it away, when suddenly an old memory returned to me. I knew of a method employed once by a great criminal who communicated with his confederates in the following manner. They received from time to time newspapers, certain of the printed letters of which were pricked with a needle. These prickings, when the paper was held up to the light, could be clearly seen, and the pricked letters, when taken down in consecutive order, formed certain words. Could the torn paper in my hands have been used for a similar purpose? I held it up to the light, but no sign of any pricking appeared.

Pacing to and fro in my laboratory I formulated every conceivable hypothesis that might throw light on the terrible problem. What was to be done?

At last, weary with anxiety, I went to bed, and, exhausted as I was, sank into a heavy sleep.

I was roused by my servant calling me at the usual hour the next morning, and almost at once my thoughts flew to our terrible position. I dressed and went again to my laboratory to examine once more the fragment of paper. Without having any definite reason for doing so, I got out my camera, and, placing the paper in a strong light, exposed it to one of my rapid plates; then, going to my dark-room, I proceeded to develop it. As I bent over the dish and rolled the solution to and fro in the plate, I suddenly started, and my heart beat quickly. Was it only imagination, or was something coming out—something beyond and above the mere printed words of the newspaper? In the dim red light I could almost swear that I detected separate dots on the plate, which the paper itself did not show. Could there be a flaw in the negative?

Rapidly fixing it, I took it out and brought it to the light. A cry of joy burst from my lips. Over some of the printed letters something had been put which showed up in the negative, as whiter than the paper, something which would reflect the ultra-violet rays of the spectrum — something fluorescent. Perhaps a solution of quinine was the agent employed. This would, I knew, be quite invisible to the naked eye. Scarcely able to contain the excitement which consumed me, I dried the plate rapidly, and printed off a copy, and without waiting to tone it, took it to the light and examined it with my lens. Great heavens! the awful plot was about to be unveiled. A cipher had really been sent to North in this subtle way. The letters which had been touched with the quinine stood out clearly. As the newspaper was torn and a great part of it burnt, I could not read the full details of the ghastly plot in consecutive order, but the following fragments left little doubt of what the result was meant to be:—

"Aneroid substituted. . . . . thermometer explodes at twenty degrees Réaumur . . . . . leave London to-night."

My brain swam. Quick as lightning my thoughts flew to Dufrayer.

"Thermometer explodes at twenty degrees," I found myself repeating.

Twenty degrees on the Réaumur scale in Russia means seventy-seven degrees Fahrenheit on our English scale. For the last few days the thermometer in London had daily recorded as high a temperature as this. Had it done so yet to-day? Dufrayer had an aneroid barometer hanging in his private room at his office. In it I knew was a thermometer. This was enough.

I bolted from the house, and in another moment a hansom was taking me at a hand gallop to Chancery Lane. In half an hour I was at my friend's door. I jumped out of the hansom, and dashed through the clerk's office into his private room. Dufrayer had evidently just come in, and was seated at his desk.

"Is that you, North? How late you are. I want you to go at once," he began. Then he caught sight of my face, and sprang from his chair.

"Norman!" he exclaimed; "what in the world is the matter?"

"Get out of this," I shouted. "You will never see that ruffian North again; but no matter, you must save yourself now."

As I spoke, I pushed Dufrayer roughly to the further end of the room. My eyes were fixed upon the thermometer in the aneroid, which hung on the wall over his desk. The mercury stood at 76deg. Seizing a jug of cold water, which stood on a table near, I dashed the contents over the instrument. The mercury sank. I was right. I could see it. I was only just in time.

"What in Heaven's name is the matter? Are you mad?" said Dufrayer, gazing at me in astonishment.

"Matter!" I echoed, "the devil's the matter. This thing is an infernal machine.'

"That aneroid an infernal machine? My dear Head, you must have lost your senses. I have had it for years."

"This is not the aneroid you have had for years," I answered. "Get a bucket of cold water—don't stand staring like that. Cannot you understand that we may be blown to pieces any moment?"

He paused just to take in the meaning of my words; then the colour left his face, and he rushed from the room.

"There," I said, as I unhooked the instrument and lowered it gently into the bucket which he had got from the housekeeper's kitchen, "we are safe for the present. But look here."

We bent down and examined the aneroid closely. Fused into the glass bore at the line which marked 77deg. was the tiniest metallic projection.

"But what does it mean? Explain yourself, for Heaven's sake," he said, excitedly.

"SEIZING A JUG OF WATER I DASHED THE CONTENTS OVER THE INSTRUMENT."

"I will in a moment," I answered, drawing out my heavy knife. With the screwdriver I unscrewed the back and levered it open.

"Good heavens! look here," I said.

The space in the hollow woodwork was literally packed with masses of gun-cotton, and below it lay a small accumulator with its fine connecting wires. I cut the wires and emptied the cotton into the water.

"Don't you see now?" I cried. "This is the most devilishly clever infernal machine that could be contrived. When the mercury

rose to 77deg. the circuit would be completed, the gun-cotton fired, and you and your office blown to kingdom come."

"But who has done it?" said Dufrayer. "Who in the name of Heaven could have changed the aneroid?"

"Your clerk, North. I have a story to tell you, but I must do so in confidence."

"Let us go at once to Scotland Yard, Head. This is unbearable!"

"We cannot do so at present," I replied. "I am under a promise to hold back information."

Dufrayer stared at me as though once more he thought me possessed.

"I will explain matters to-night," I said. "Come now, let us turn the key in the door and go out."

Dufrayer suddenly glanced at his watch.

"In the excitement of this infernal affair I had almost forgotten my unfortunate client," he cried; "his case must be coming on at the Old Bailey about now. I must start at once."

"I will walk with you there," I said.

A moment later we found ourselves in Fleet Street. We passed an optician's—in the window was a thermometer. We stood and looked at it without speaking. The mercury was standing at 80deg.

"THE MERCURY WAS STANDING AT 80DEG."

That evening the strange story which Elsie Fancourt had confided to me was told to Dufrayer.

"Once again Madame has scored," was his remark when I had finished, "and that scoundrel North gets off scot-free."

"Madame has not quite scored, for your life has been spared," I said, with feeling.

"The whole thing was planned with the most infernal cunning," said Dufrayer. "Yesterday, North came into my office, pointed out that the aneroid was not working properly, and asked me if he might take it to an optician's in Fleet Street. I very naturally gave him permission. He brought it back in the evening and put it into its place. Yes, the whole plot was timed with the most consummate skill. The thermometer has been daily rising for the last few days, and Madame guessed only too well that it would reach 77deg. before I went to court this morning. Doubtless, North had informed her that the Disney trial was to come on second in the list, and that I should not be required at the Old Bailey before half-past eleven. Well, I have escaped, and I owe it to you, Head, and to Miss Fancourt. I pity that poor girl; she is too good to be thrown away on a scoundrel like North."

"I wonder what her future history will be," I said. "There is no doubt that North is fast in Madame's toils. Miss Fancourt believes, however, that her mission in life is to reclaim him. The ways of some good women are inexplicable."