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***THE RIDDLE
OF THE FROZEN
FLAME***

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The Riddle of the Frozen Flame

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CHAPTER I

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THE LAW

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Mr. Maverick Narkom, Superintendent of Scotland Yard, sat before the litter of papers upon his desk. His brow was puckered, his fat face red with anxiety, and there was about him the air of one who has reached the end of his tether.

He faced the man opposite, and fairly ground his teeth upon his lower lip.

"Dash it, Cleek!" he said for the thirty-third time, "I don't know what to make of it, I don't, indeed! The thing's at a deadlock. Hammond reports to me this morning that another bank in Hendon—a little one-horse affair—has been broken into. That makes the third this week, and as usual every piece of gold is gone. Not a bank note touched, not a bond even fingered. And the thief—or thieves—made as clean a get-away as you ever laid your eyes on! I tell you, man, it's enough to send an average person daft! The whole of Scotland Yard's been on the thing, and we haven't traced 'em yet! What do you make of it, old chap?"

"As pretty a kettle of fish as I ever came across," responded Cleek, with an enigmatic smile. "And I can't help having a sneaking admiration for the person who's engineering the whole thing. How he must laugh at the state of the old Yard, with never a clue to settle down upon, never a thread to pick up and unravel! All of which is unbusinesslike of me, I've no doubt. But, cheer up, man, I've

a piece of news which ought to help matters on a bit. Just came from the War Office, you know."

Mr. Narkom mopped his forehead eagerly. The action was one which Cleek knew showed that every nerve was tense.

"Well, out with it, old chap! Anything to cast some light on the inexplicable thing. What did you learn at the War Office?"

"A good many things—after I had unravelled several hundred yards of red tape to get at 'em," said Cleek, still smiling. "Chief among them was this: Much English gold has been discovered in Belgium, Mr. Narkom, in connection with several big electrical firms engaged upon work out there. The Secret Service wired over that fact, and I got it first hand. Now it strikes me there must be some connection between the two things. These bank robberies point in one direction, and that is, that the gold is not for use in this country. Now let's hear the full account of this latest outrage. I'm all ears, as the donkey said to the ostrich. Fire away."

Mr. Narkom "fired away" forthwith. He was a bland, round little man, rather too fat for one's conceptions of what a policeman ought to be, yet with that lightness of foot that so many stout people seem to possess.

Cleek presented a keen contrast to him. His broad-shouldered, well-groomed person would have adorned any company. His head was well-set upon his neck, and his features at this moment were small and inclined to be aquiline. He had closely set ears that lay well back against his head, and his hands were slim and exceedingly well-kept. Of his age—well that, like himself, was an enigma. To-

day he might have been anything between thirty-five and forty—to-morrow probably he would be looking nineteen. That was part of the peculiar birthright of the man, that and a mobility of feature which enabled him to alter his face completely in the passing of a second, a gift which at least one notorious criminal of history also possessed.

He sat now, playing with the silver-topped cane between his knees, his head slightly to one side, his whole manner one of polite and tolerant interest. But Mr. Narkom knew that this same manner marked an intensity of concentration which was positively unique. Without more ado he plunged into the details of his story.

"It happened in this wise, Cleek," he said, tapping his fountain-pen against his blotter until little spouts of ink fell out like jet beads. "This is at least the ninth case of the kind we've had reported to us within the space of the last fortnight. The first robbery was at a tiny branch bank in Purley, and the bag amounted to a matter of a couple of hundred or so sovereigns; the second was at Peckham—on the outskirts, you understand; the third at Harrow; the fourth somewhere near Forest Hill, and the fifth in Croydon. Other places on the South East side of London have come in for their share, too, as for instance Anerley and Sutton. This last affair took place at Hendon, during the evening of Saturday last—the sixteenth, wasn't it? No one observed anything untoward in the least, that is except one witness who relates how he saw a motor car standing outside the bank's premises at half past nine at night. He gave no thought to this, as he probably imagined, if he thought of

the coincidence at all, that the manager had called there for something he had forgotten in his office."

"And where, then, does the manager live, if not over the bank itself?" put in Cleek at this juncture.

"With his wife and family, in a house some distance away. A couple of old bank people—a porter and his wife who are both thoroughly trustworthy in every way, so Mr. Barker tells me—act as caretakers. But they positively assert that they heard no one in the place that night, and no untoward happening occurred to their knowledge."

"And yet the bank was broken into, and the gold taken," supplemented Cleek quietly. "And what then, Mr. Narkom? How was the deed done?"

"Oh, the usual methods. The skeleton keys of a master crook obviously opened the door to the premises themselves, and soup was used to crack the safe. Everything was left perfectly neat and tidy and only the bags of gold—amounting to seven hundred and fifty pounds—were gone. And not a trace of a clue to give one a notion of who did the confounded thing, or where they came from!"

"Hmm. Any finger-prints?"

Mr. Narkom shook his head.

"None. The thief or thieves used rubber gloves to handle the thing. And that was the only leg given us to stand upon, so to speak. For rubber gloves, when they are new, particularly, possess a very strong smell, and this still clung to the door-knob of the safe, and to several objects near it. That was how we deduced the rubber-glove theory of no finger-prints at all, Cleek."

"And a very worthy deduction too, my friend," responded that gentleman, with something of tolerance in his smile. "And so you have absolutely nothing to go by. Poor Mr. Narkom! The path of Law and Justice is by no means an easy one to tread, is it? Of course you can count upon me to help you in every way. That goes without saying. But I can't help thinking that this news from the War Office with regard to English gold in Belgium has something to do with these bank robberies, my friend. The two things seem to hang together in my mind, and a dollar to a ducat that in the long run they identify themselves thus.... Hello! Who's that?" as a tap sounded at the door. "I'll be off if you're expecting visitors. I want to look into this thing a little closer. Some time or other the thieves are bound to leave a clue behind. Success breeds carelessness, you know, and if they think that Scotland Yard is giving the business up as a bad job, they won't be so deuced particular as to clearing up afterward. We'll unravel the thing between us, never fear."

"I wish I could think so, old chap!" said Mr. Narkom, a trifle gloomily, as he called "Come in!" The door opened to admit Petrie, very straight and business-like. "But you're no end of a help. It does me good just to see you. What is it, Petrie?"

"A gentleman to see you, sir," responded the constable in crisp tones. "A gentleman by name of Merriton, Sir Nigel Merriton he said his name was. Bit of a toff I should say by the look of 'im. And wants to see you partikler. He mentioned Mr. Cleek's name, sir, but I told 'im he wasn't in at the moment. Shall I show him up?"

"Quite right, Petrie," laughed Cleek, in recognition of this act of one of the Yard's subordinates; for everyone was to do everything in his power to shield Cleek's identity. "I'll stay if you don't mind, Mr. Narkom. I happen to know something of this Merriton. A fine upstanding young man, who, once upon a time was very great friends with Miss Lorne. That was in the old Hawksley days. Chap's lately come into his inheritance, I believe. Uncle disappeared some five or six years ago and legal time being up, young Merriton has come over to claim his own. The thing made a newspaper story for a week when it happened, but they never found any trace of the old man. And now the young one is over here, bearing the title, and I suppose living as master of the Towers—spooklike spot that it is! Needn't say who I am, old chap, until I hear a bit. I'll just shift over there by the window and read the news, if you don't mind."

"Right you are." Mr. Narkom struggled into his coat—which he generally disposed of during private office hours. Then he gave the order for the gentleman to be shown in and Petrie disappeared forthwith.

But during the time which intervened before Merriton's arrival, Cleek did a little "altering" in face and general get-up, and when he *did* appear certainly no one would have recognized the aristocratic looking individual of a moment or two before, in an ordinary-appearing, stoop-shouldered, rather racy-looking tout.

"Ready," said Cleek at last, and Mr. Narkom touched the bell upon his table. Immediately the door opened and Petrie appeared followed closely by young Sir Nigel Merriton,

whose clean-cut face was grim and whose mouth was set forbiddingly.

And in this fashion was Cleek introduced to the chief character of a case which was to prove one of the strangest of his whole career. There was nothing about Sir Nigel, a well-dressed man about town, to indicate that he was to be the centre of an extraordinary drama, yet such was to be the case.

He was obviously perturbed, but those who sought Mr. Narkom's counsel were frequently agitated; for no one can be even remotely connected with crime in one form or another without showing excitement to a greater or lesser degree. And so his manner by no means set Sir Nigel apart from many another visitor to the Superintendent's sanctum.

Mr. Narkom's cordial nod brought from the young man a demand to see "Mr. Cleek," of whom he had heard such wonderful tales. Mr. Narkom, with one eye on that very gentleman's back, announced gravely that Cleek was absent on a government case, and asked what he could do. He waved a hand in Cleek's direction and said that here was one of his men who would doubtless be able to help Sir Nigel in any difficulty he might happen to be in at the moment.

Now, as Sir Nigel's story was a long one, and as the young man was too agitated to tell it altogether coherently, we will go back for a certain space of time, and tell the very remarkable story, the details of which were told to Mr. Narkom and his nameless associate in the Superintendent's office, and which was to involve Cleek of Scotland Yard in a

case which was later to receive the title of the Riddle of the Frozen Flame.

Much that he told them of his family history was already known to Cleek, whose uncanny knowledge of men and affairs was a by-word, but as that part of the story itself was not without romance, it must be told too, and to do so takes the reader back to a few months before his present visit to the precincts of the Law, when Sir Nigel Merriton returned to England after twelve years of army life in India. A few days he had spent in London, renewing acquaintances, revisiting places he knew—to find them wonderfully little changed—and then had journeyed to Merriton Towers, the place which was to be his, due to the extraordinary disappearance of his uncle—a disappearance which was yet to be explained.

Ill luck had often seemed to dog the footsteps of his house and even his journey home was not without a mishap; nothing serious, as things turned out, but still something that might have been vastly so. His train was in a wreck, rather a nasty one, but Nigel himself had come out unscathed, and much to be congratulated, he thought, since through that wreck he has become acquainted with what he firmly believed to be the most beautiful girl in the world. Better yet, he had learned that she was a neighbour of his at Merriton Towers. That fact helped him through what he felt was going to be somewhat of an ordeal—his entrance into the gloomy and ghost-ridden old house of his inheritance.

CHAPTER II

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THE FROZEN FLAMES

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Merriton Towers had been called the loneliest spot in England by many of the tourists who chanced to visit the Fen district, and it was no misnomer. Nigel, having seen it some thirteen years before, found that his memory had dimmed the true vision of the place considerably; that where he had builded romance, romance was not. Where he had softened harsh outlines, and peopled dark corridors with his own fancies, those same outlines had taken on a grimness that he could hardly believe possible, and the long, dark corridors of his mind's vision were longer and darker and lonelier than he had ever imagined any spot could be.

It was a handsome place, no doubt, in its gaunt, gray, prisonlike way. And, too, it had a moat and a miniature portcullis that rather tickled his boyish fancy. The furnishings, however, had an appalling grimness that took the very heart out of one. Chairs which seemed to have grown in their places for centuries crowded the corners of hallway and stairs like gigantic nightmares of their original prototypes. Monstrous curtains of red brocade, grown purple with the years, seemed to hang from every window and door crowding out the light and air. The carpets were thick and dark and had lost all sign of pattern in the dull gloom of the centuries.

It was, in fact, a house that would create ghosts. The atmosphere was alive with that strange sensation of disembodied spirits which some very old houses seem to possess. Narrow, slit-like windows in perfect keeping with the architecture and the needs of the period in which it was built—if not with modern ideas of hygiene and health—kept the rooms dark and musty. When Nigel first entered the place through the great front door thrown open by the solemn-faced butler, who he learned had been kept on from his uncle's time, he felt as though he were entering his own tomb. When the door shut he shuddered as the light and sunshine vanished.

The first night he hardly slept a wink. His bed was a huge four-poster, girt about with plush hangings like over-ripe plums, that shut him in as though he were in some monstrous Victorian trinket box. A post creaked at every turn he made in its downy softnesses, and being used to the light, camp-like furniture of an Indian bungalow he got up, took an eiderdown with him, and spent the rest of the hours upon a sofa drawn up beside an open window.

"That people could live in such places!" he told himself, over and over again. "No wonder my poor old uncle disappeared! Any self-respecting Christian would. There'll be some slight alterations made in Merriton Towers before I'm many days older, you can bet your life on that. Old great-grandmother four-poster takes her *cong * to-morrow morning. If I must live here I'll sleep anyhow."

He settled himself back against the hard, horsehair sofa, and pulled up the blind. The room was instantly filled with gray and lavender shadows, while without the Fens

stretched out in unbroken lines as though all the rest of the world were made up of nothing else. Lonely? Merriton had known the loneliness of Indian nights, far away from any signs of civilization: the loneliness of the jungle when the air was so still that the least sound was like the dropping of a bomb; the strange mystical loneliness which comes to the only white man in a town of natives. But all these were as nothing as compared to this. He could imagine a chap committing suicide living in such a house. Sir Joseph Merriton had disappeared five years before—and no wonder!

Merriton lay with his eyes upon the window, smoking a cigarette, and surveyed the outlook before him with despairing eyes. What a future for a chap in his early thirties to face! Not a sign of habitation anywhere, not a vestige of it, save at the far edge of the Fens where a clump of trees and thick shrubs told him that behind lay Withersby Hall. This, intuition told him, was the home of Antoinette Brellier, the girl of the train, of the wreck, and now of his dreams. Then his thoughts turned to her. Gad! to bring a frail, delicate little butterfly to a place like this was like trying to imprison a ray of sunshine in a leaden box!...

His eyes, rivetted upon where the clump of trees stood out against the semi-darkness of the approaching dawn, saw of a sudden a light prick out like a tiny flame, low down upon the very edge of the Fens. One light, two, three, and then a very host of them flashed out, as though some unseen hand had torn the heavens down and strewn their jewels broadcast over the marshes. Instinctively he got to his feet. What on earth—? But even as his lips formed the

unspoken exclamation came yet another light to join the others dancing and twinkling and flickering out there across the gloomy marshlands.

What the dickens was it, anyhow? A sort of unearthly fireworks display, or some new explosive experiment? The dancing flames got into his eyes like bits of lighted thistledown blown here, there, and everywhere.

Merriton got to his feet and threw open another window bottom with a good deal of effort, for the sashes were old and stiff. Then, clad only in his silk pyjamas, and with the cigarette charring itself to a tiny column of gray ash in one hand, he leaned far out over the sill and watched those twinkling, dancing, maddening little star-flames, with the eyes of amazed astonishment.

In a moment sleep had gone from his eyelids and he felt thoroughly awake. Dashed if he wouldn't throw on a few clothes and investigate. The thing was so strange, so incredible! He knew, well enough, from Borkins's (the venerable butler) description earlier in the evening, that that part of the marshes was uninhabited. Too low for stars the things were, for they hung on the edges of the marsh grass like tiny lanterns swung there by fairy hands. In such a house, in such a room, with the shadow of that old four-poster winding its long fingers over him, Merriton began to perspire. It was so devilish uncanny! He was a brave enough man in human matters, but somehow these flames out there in the uninhabited stretch of the marshes were surely caused by no human agency. Go and investigate he would, this very minute! He drew in his head and brought the

window down with a bang that went sounding through the gaunt, deserted old house.

Hastily he began to dress, and even as he struggled into a pair of tweed trousers came the sound of a soft knock upon his door, and he whipped round as though he had been shot, his nerves all a-jingle from the very atmosphere of the place.

"And who the devil are you?" he snapped out in an angry voice, all the more angry since he was conscious of a slight trembling of the knees. The door swung open a trifle and the pale face of Borkins appeared around it. His eyes were wide with fright, his mouth hung open.

"Sir Nigel, sir. I 'eard a dreadful noise—like a pistol shot it was, comin' from this room! Anythink the matter, sir?"

"Nothing, you ass!" broke out Merriton, fretfully, as the butler began to show other parts of his anatomy round the corner of the door. "Come in, or go out, which ever you please. But for the Lord's sake, do one or the other! There's a beastly draught. The noise you heard was that window which possibly hasn't been opened for a century or two, groaning in pain at being forced into action again! Can't sleep in this beastly room—haven't closed my eyes yet—and when I did get out of that Victorian atrocity over there and take to the sofa by the window, why, the first thing I saw were those flames flickering out across the horizon like signal-fires, or *something!* I've been watching them for the past twenty minutes and they've got on my nerves. I'm goin' out to investigate."

Borkins gave a little exclamation of alarm and put one trembling hand over his face. Merriton suddenly registered

the fact as being a symptom of the state of nerves which Merriton Towers was likely to reduce one. Then Borkins shambled across the room and laid a timid hand upon Merriton's arm.

"For Gawd's sake sir—*don't!*" he murmured in a shaken voice. "Those lights, sir—if you knew the story! If you values your life at any price at all don't go out, sir, and investigate them. *Don't!* You're a dead man in the morning if you do."

"What's that?" Merriton swung round and looked into the weak, rather watery, blue eyes of his butler. "What the devil do you mean, Borkins, talkin' a lot of rot? What *are* those flames, anyway? And why in heaven's name shouldn't I go out and investigate 'em if I want to? Who's to stop me?"

"I, your lordship—if I ever 'as any influence with 'uman nature!" returned Borkins, vehemently. "The story's common knowledge, Sir Nigel, sir. Them there flames is supernatural. Frozen flames the villagers calls 'em, because they don't seem to give out no 'eat. That part of the Fens is unin'abited and there isn't a soul in the whole village as would venture anywhere near it after dark."

"Why?"

"Because they never comes back, that's why, sir!" said Borkins. "'Tisn't any old wives' tale neither. There's been cases by the score. Only a matter of six months ago one of the boys from the mill, who was somewhat the worse for liquor, said he was a-goin' ter see who it was wot made them flames light up by theirselves, and—he never came back. And that same night another flame was added to the number!"

"Whew! Bit of a tall story that, Borkins!" Nevertheless a cold chill crept over Merriton's bones and he gave a forced, mirthless laugh.

"As true as the gospel, Sir Nigel!" said Borkins, solemnly. "That's what always 'appens. Every time any one ventures that way—well, they're a-soundin' their own death-knell, so to speak, and you kin see the new light appear. But there's never no trace of the person that ventured out across the Fens at evening time. He, or she—a girl tried it once, Lord save 'er!—vanishes off the face of the earth as clean as though they'd never been born. Gawd alone knows what it is that lives there, or what them flames may be, but I tells you it's sheer death to attempt to see for yourself, so long as night lasts. And in the morning—well, it's gone, and there isn't a thing to be seen for the lookin'!"

"Merciful powers! What a peculiar thing!" Despite his mockery of the supernatural, Merriton could not help but feel a sort of awe steal over him, at the tale as told by Borkins in the eeriest hour of the whole twenty-four—that which hangs between darkness and dawn. Should he go or shouldn't he? He was a fool to believe the thing, and yet—He certainly didn't want to die yet awhile, with Antoinette Brellier a mere handful of yards away from him, and all the days his own to cultivate her acquaintance in.

"You've fairly made my flesh creep with your beastly story!" he said, in a rather high-pitched voice. "Might have reserved it until morning—after my *début* in this haunt of spirits, Borkins. Consider my nerves. India's made a hash of 'em. Get back to bed, man, and don't worry over my investigations. I swear I won't venture out, to-night at any

rate. Perhaps to-morrow I may have summoned up enough courage, but I've no fancy for funerals yet awhile. So you can keep your pleasant little reminiscences for another time, and I'll give you my word of honour that I'll do nothing rash!"

Borkins gave a sigh of relief. He passed his hand over his forehead, and his eyes—rather shifty, rather narrow, pale blue eyes which Merriton had instinctively disliked (he couldn't tell why)—lightened suddenly.

"Thank Gawd for that, sir!" he said, solemnly. "You've relieved my mind on that score. I've always thought—your poor uncle, Sir Joseph Merriton—and those flames there might 'ave been the reason for his disappearance, though of course—"

"What's that?" Merriton turned round and looked at him, his brow furrowed, the whole personality of the man suddenly awake. "My uncle, Borkins? How long have these—er—lights been seen hereabouts? I don't remember them as a child."

"Oh, mostly always, I believe, sir; though they ain't been much noticed before the last four years," replied Borkins. "I think—yes—come August next. Four years—was the first time my attention was called to 'em."

Merriton's laugh held a note of relief.

"Then you needn't have worried. My uncle has been missing for a little more than *five* years, and that, therefore, when he did disappear the flames obviously had nothing to do with it!"

Borkins's wrinkled, parchment-like cheeks went a dull, unhealthy red. He opened his mouth to speak and then drew

back again. Merriton gave him a keen glance.

"Of course, how foolish of me. As you say, sir, impossible!" he stammered out, bowing backward toward the door. "I'll be getting back to my bed again, and leave you to finish your rest undisturbed. I'm sorry to 'ave troubled you, I'm sure, sir, only I was afraid something 'ad 'appened."

"That's all right. Good-night," returned Merriton curtly, and turned the key in the lock as the door closed. He stood for a moment thinking, his eyes upon the winking, flickering points of light that seemed dimmer in the fast growing light. "Now why did he make that bloomer about dates, I wonder? Uncle's been gone five years—and Borkins knew it. He was here at the time, and yet why did he suggest that old wives' tale as a possible solution of the disappearance? Borkins, my lad, there's more behind those watery blue eyes of yours than men may read. Hmm! ... Now I wonder why the deuce he lied to me?"

CHAPTER III

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SUNSHINE AND SHADOW

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When Merriton shaved himself next morning he laughed at the reflection that the mirror cast back at him. For he looked for all the world as though he had been up all night and his knee was painful and rather stiff, as though he had strained some ligament in it.

"Beastly place is beginning to make its mark on me already!" he said, as he lathered his chin. "My eyes look as though they had been stuck in with burnt cork, and—the devil take my shaky hand! And that railroad business yesterday helps it along. A nice state of affairs for a chap of my age, I must say! Scared as a kid at an old wives' story. Borkins is a fool, and I'm an idiot.... Damn! there's a bit off my chin for a start. I hope to goodness no one takes it into their heads to pay me a visit to-day."

His hopes, however, in this direction were not to be realized, for as the afternoon wore itself slowly away in a ramble round the old place, and through the stables—which in their day had been famous—the big, harsh-throated doorbell rang, and Merriton, in the very act of telling Borkins that he was officially "not in," happened to catch a glimpse of something light and fluffy through the stained-glass of the door, and suddenly kept his counsel.

A few seconds later Borkins ushered in two visitors. Merriton, prepared by the convenient glass for the

appearance of one was nevertheless not unpleased to see the other. For the names that Borkins rolled off his tongue with much relish were those of "Miss Brellier and Mr. Brellier, sir."

His lady of the thrice blessed wreck! His lady of the dainty accent and glorious eyes.

His face glowed suddenly and he crossed the big room in a couple of strides and in the next second was holding Antoinette's hand rather longer than was necessary, and was looking down into the rouguish greeny-gray eyes that had captivated him only yesterday, when for one terrible, glorious moment he had held her in his arms, while the railroad coach dissolved around them.

"Are you fit to be about?" he said, his voice ringing with the very evident pleasure that he felt at this meeting with her, and his eyes wandering to where a strip of pink court plaster upon her forehead showed faintly through the screen of hair that covered it. Then he dropped her hand and turned toward the man who stood a pace or two behind her tiny figure, looking at him with the bluest, youngest eyes he had ever looked into.

"Mr. Brellier, is it not? Very good of you, sir, to come across in this neighbourly fashion. Won't you sit down?"

"Yes," said Antoinette, gaily, "my uncle. I brought him right over by telling him of our adventure."

The man was tall and heavily built, with a wealth of black hair thickly streaked with gray, and a trim, well-kept "imperial" which gave him the foreign air that his name carried out so well. His morning suit was extremely well cut, and his whole bearing that of the well-to-do man about