

MYSTERY OF THE GREEN RAY

By William Le Cointre

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters

The outbreak of war sends Ronald Ewart, a young London barrister, to the Highlands to say good-bye to his fiancée, Myra McLeod. On the train he meets Hilderman, who calls himself an American and a stranger in those parts, but later Ronald finds that he has built a hut on a cliff above the falls opposite General McLeod's lodge. While fishing in the river Myra is suddenly blinded by a flash of green light. The physician advises consulting a London oculist. Gen. McLeod tells Ewart of a curious experience at the Chemist's Rock. At the station they meet Hilderman, who is very curious as to the cause of Myra's blindness. The General telegraphs that Sholto is blind. The London doctor holds out no hope and Ewart consults a Glasgow oculist, Dr. Garnesk.

CHAPTER VI.—(Cont'd.)

"So that's the complete story of Miss McLeod and her dog Sholto," he mused, when I had finished speaking. For a brief second I thought he was about to laugh at the apparent absurdity of the yarn, but before I had time to answer he spoke again.

"Miss McLeod and her dog are apparently blind, and Mr. Ewart is a bundle of nerves—and this is very excellent brandy, Mr. Ewart. Allow me."

I accepted the proffered glass with a laugh, in spite of myself.

"What do you think of it?" I asked.

He sat on the edge of the table and swung his leg, wrapt in thought for a moment.

"I'm very glad to say I don't know what to think of it," he replied presently.

"Why glad?" I asked anxiously.

"Because, my dear sir, this is so remarkable that if I thought I could see a solution I should probably be making a mistake. This is something I am learning about for the first time; and, frankly, it interests me intensely."

Suddenly he sat down abruptly, with a muttered "Now, then," and began to catechise me in a most extraordinarily searching manner, firing question after question with the rapidity of a maxim gun.

I shall not detain the reader with details of this catechism. His inquiries ranged from the system on which the house was lighted and the number of hours Myra averaged per week on the sea to the make of the engine in her motor-boat. His last question was: "Does anybody drink the river water?"

"Windows that flash in the sun seem to me to be confusing the issue," he said at last. "Windows must always reflect light in a certain direction at a certain time, and though they may be irritating they could not possibly produce even temporary blindness. Still, we won't forget them, Mr. Ewart, though we had better put them aside for a moment. Now, how soon can you bring Miss McLeod to see me?"

"We had hoped," I ventured to suggest, "that you would be able to run up and see her, and have a look at the dog as well."

"I'll be perfectly candid with you, Mr. Ewart," he replied. "I was just going to start on a short holiday. I was going to Switzerland; but the war has knocked that on the head, so I am just running up to Perthshire for a week's fishing. I need a holiday very badly, more especially as I have undertaken some Government work in connection with the war. Fortunately, I am a bachelor, and I will willingly give up a couple of days to Miss McLeod."

"Why not combine business with pleasure?" I suggested. "There's good fishing at Invermullach, gorgeous scenery, a golf-course a mile or two away, and you can do just as you please on the General's estate. He'll be delighted."

"Are you sure?" he asked. "Well, anyway, I can go to the Glenelg Hotel and fish up Glenmore. Now, Mr. Ewart, we will catch the afternoon train, the earliest there is—though I suppose there's only one."

"I can't tell you how grateful I am, Mr. Garnesk," I said. "It may mean a very great deal to us that you are so anxious to see Miss McLeod."

"I am not anxious to see Miss McLeod," he answered cryptically. "I'm anxious to see the dog."

I left him to telegraph to the General that I was arriving that night, bringing the specialist with me; and I need hardly say that I left the telegraph office with a comparatively light heart. The journey to Mallaig was one of the most interesting afternoons I have spent. Garnesk was consulting oculist to all the big chemical machine, naval and other manufacturers in the great industrial centre on the Clyde, and he kept me enthralled with his accounts of the sudden attacks of various eye diseases which were occasionally the fate of the workers. The effects of chemicals, the indigenous generation of gases in the furnace rooms, and so on, had afforded him ample scope for experiment; and, fortunately for us all, he was determined to have found new ground for enlarging his experience. The mixture of professional anecdote and personal prophecy with which he entertained me, now and then rushing across the carriage to get a glimpse of a specimen in some river over which we happened to be passing, gave me an amusing insight into the character of one whom I have since learned to regard as a very brilliant and charming man. When we arrived at the landing-stage at the Lodge, the General greeted him with undisguised joy.

"Begad! Mr. Garnesk," he blurted, "I'm thundering glad to see you, sir. It's good of you to come, sir—extremely good."

"That remains to be seen, General," said Garnesk, solemnly—"whether my

visit will do any good. I hope so, with all my heart."

"Amen to that!" said the old man, pathetically, with a heavy sigh.

"How is Miss McLeod?" asked the specialist.

"Her eyes are no better," the General replied. "She cannot see at all. Otherwise she is in perfect health. She says she feels as well as ever she did. I can't understand it," he finished helplessly.

A suitcase, a bag of golf-clubs, and a square deal box completed Garnesk's outfit.

"Steady with that—here, let me take it," he cried, as Angus was lifting the last item ashore. "Business and pleasure," he continued, raising the box in his arms and indicating his clubs and fishing-rods with a jerk of the head. "I've one or two things here that may help me in my work, and they are very delicate instruments, would rather carry them myself."

As we approached the house the sound of the piano greeted us in the distance; and soon we could distinguish the strains of that most beautiful and understandable of all burial marches, Grieg's "Aase's Tod."

"My daughter can even welcome you with a tune," said the old man proudly. To him all music came under the category of "tunes," with the sole exception of "God Save the King," which was a national institution.

Garnesk stopped and stood on the path, the deal box clasped carefully in his arms, his head on one side, listening.

"We have the right sort of patient to deal with, anyway," he remarked, with a sigh of relief. But to me the melancholy insistence of the exquisite harmonies was fraught with ill-omen, and I could not restrain the shudder of an unaccountable fear as we resumed our walk. Later on, when I found an opportunity to ask her why she had chosen that particular music, I was only partially relieved by her ingenuous answer.

"Oh! just because I love it, Ronnie," she said, "and there are no difficult intervals to play with your eyes shut. I thought it was rather clever of me to think of it. I shall soon be able to play more tricky things. It will cure me of looking at the notes when I can see again."

Myra and the young specialist were introduced; and, though he chatted gayly with her, and touched on innumerable subjects, he never once alluded to her misfortune. Though the General was evidently anxious that Garnesk should make his examination as soon as possible, hospitality forced him to suggest dinner first, and I was surprised at the alacrity with which the visitor concurred, knowing, as he did, his intense interest in the case. But, after a few conventional remarks to the General and Myra, I was about to show him to his room when he seized my arm excitedly.

"Quick!" he whispered. "Where's the dog?"

I led him to a room above the coach-house where poor Sholto was a pitiful prisoner. Garnesk deposited his precious packing-case on the floor, and called the dog to him. Sholto sprang forward in a moment, recognizing the tone of friendship in the voice, and planted his paws on my companion's chest. For twenty minutes the examination lasted. One strange test after another was applied to the poor animal; but he was very good about it, and seemed to understand that we were trying to help him.

"I should hate to have to kill that dog, but it may be necessary before long," said the specialist. "But why didn't you tell Miss McLeod her dog was blind?"

"We were afraid it would upset her too much," I answered, and then suddenly realizing the point of the question, I added, "but how on earth did you know we hadn't?"

"Because," he said thoughtfully, "if you had, she strikes me as the sort of girl who would have told me straight away what she had seen. I should do for him."

"You seem to understand the nature as well as you do," I said admiringly.

"The two are identical, or at least coincident, Mr. Ewart," he replied solemnly. "But what was it you did tell her?"

"We said he was suffering from sort of eczema, which looked as if it might be infectious, and we thought she ought not to be near him for a bit. Otherwise, of course, she would have wanted him with her all the time."

When the examination was over for the time being, I chained Sholto to a hook in an old harness-rack, for he was strong and unused to captivity, and the door had no lock, only a small bolt outside. Garnesk packed away his instruments, carried them carefully to the house, and then we sprinted upstairs to dress hurriedly for dinner.

Myra, poor child, was sensitive about joining us, but the specialist was very anxious that she should do so, and we all dined together. There was no allusion whatever to the strange events which had brought us together, but, with my professional knowledge of the mysteries of cross-examination, I noticed that Garnesk contrived to acquire more knowledge of various circumstances on which seemed to want to be enlightened. Sir Gaire Olvery had been absent for forty minutes' blunt questioning. Myra had hardly left us after the meal was over when the butler handed the General a card, and almost simultaneously a tall, shadowy figure passed the window on the verandah.

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