

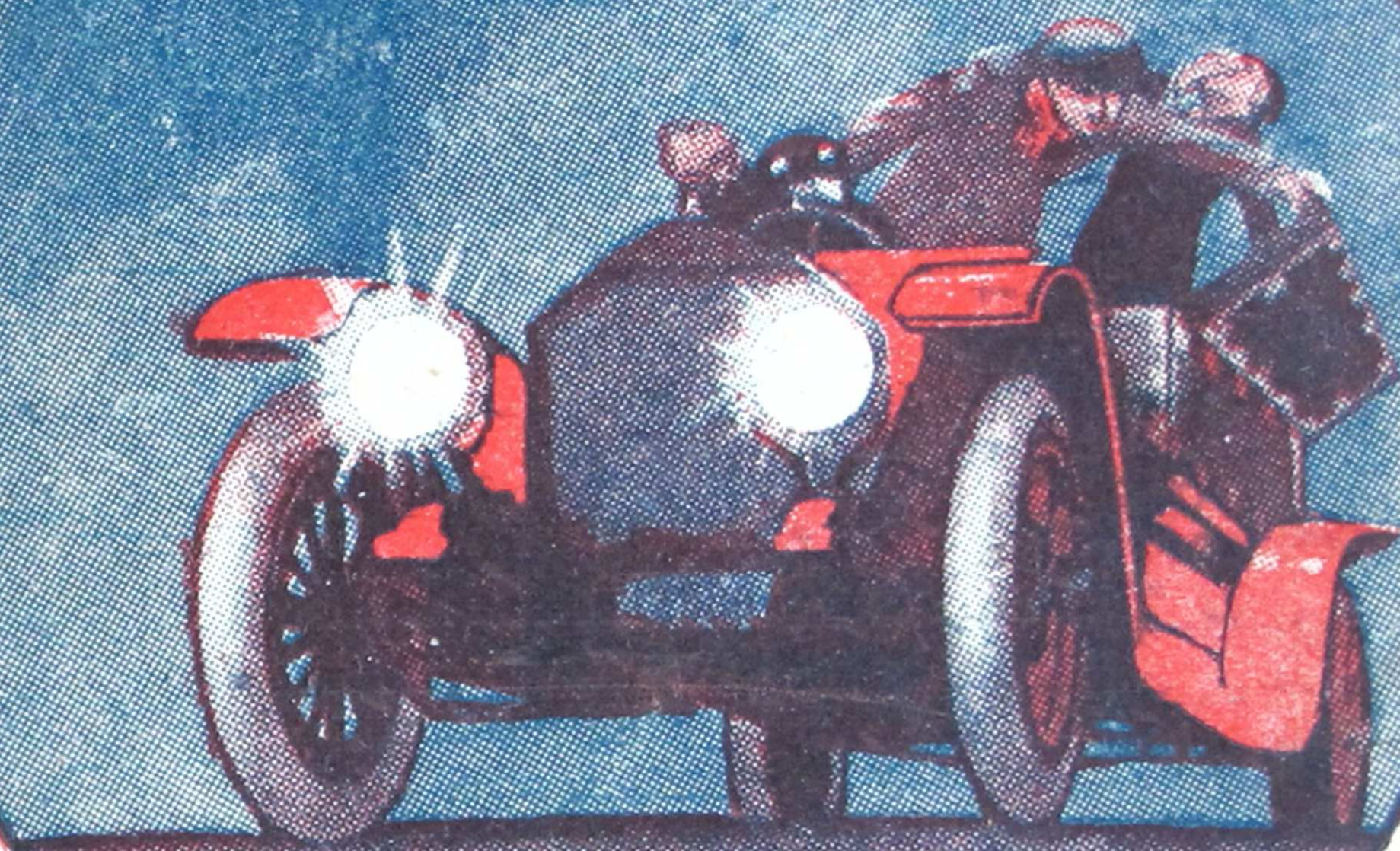
No. 93.—LONG DETECTIVE NOVEL.—1^D.

Week ending
March 17, 1917.

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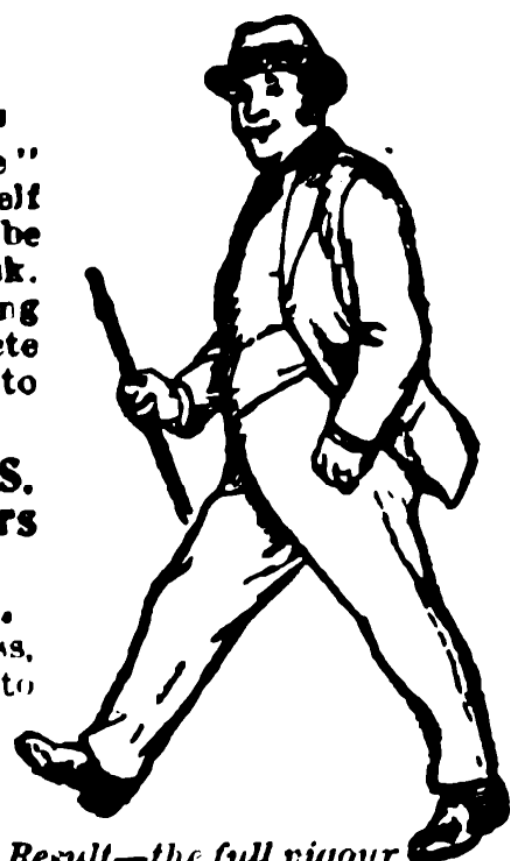
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Another Astounding Episode in NELSON LEE'S Great Campaign against "THE CIRCLE OF TERROR."

Specially written for this Issue by the Author of "The Green Triangle" Series.

CHAPTER I.

The Remarkable Incident of the Dead Fly.

"READY, guv'nor?"

"Well, I call that rather cool, Nipper," said Nelson Lee, the celebrated detective. "I have been waiting for you for fully ten minutes, and then you burst in and calmly ask me if I am ready!"

Nipper grinned.

"I'll bet you're not ready even yet," he said. "You'll find that your cigars aren't in your case, or your tie's crooked, or something. I'm absolutely prepared to leave the house on the instant."

"Right! Come along then," said Lee promptly.

The detective made for the door of the consulting-room, and Nipper followed close on his heels. Then, suddenly, the lad paused.

"Hold on, guv'nor!" he exclaimed. "I haven't got my gloves!"

"I thought you were ready to leave the house on the instant?" asked Nelson Lee, with a chuckle. "I am afraid, Nipper, that your brain is becoming somewhat muddled. Your memory is giving way. Perhaps I do not give you enough work to do."

"Perhaps you give me a jolly sight too much!" growled Nipper. "That's about the size of it, guv'nor. Now where the thunder are my gloves? I left 'em on the table when I came in. Have you touched 'em?"

"The table is no place for gloves, young 'un," said Lee severely. "I have often told you not to litter the table with your rubbish. I believe I threw a pair of raggy things into the coal-scuttle some little time ago."

Nipper dived towards the scuttle with a wrathful expression. Then he looked up and gave vent to a growl.

"My gloves!" he ejaculated. "A brand new pair, too! At least, they were brand new about a couple of months ago. Like your games, guv'nor, to chuck them into the fireplace. They might have been shoved on the fire!"

"About the best place for them, to judge by appearances," smiled Lee. "Why don't you buy yourself a new pair, you young rascal? You've got plenty of money. It's laziness, Nipper—sheer laziness. How much longer are you going to keep me waiting?"

Nipper pulled on his gloves—which were by no means so dilapidated as

Nelson Lee intimated—and announced that he was quite ready to depart. So the pair left the apartment, descended the stairs, and emerged into Gray's Inn Road.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening, and intensely dark. There was no moon, and the stars were obscured by clouds. Rain had fallen shortly before, and the roads and pavements were muddy.

Nelson Lee and Nipper had decided to take a little relaxation, and were just off to a West End theatre to witness a new play. They had been hard at work lately, and Lee decided that they both needed a little well-earned pleasure. The famous detective's remarks concerning Nipper's idleness were, of course, nothing but pleasantries; for Nipper was as hard-working as his master.

They walked briskly down Gray's Inn Road, intending to charter a taxi in Holborn. And almost as soon as they had departed a man crossed the dark road and knocked sharply at Lee's door. Either he had just missed seeing the detective by pure accident, or had been deliberately waiting upon the other side of the road in order to witness Lee's departure. At all events, as soon as Lee and Nipper had vanished into the gloom, the man crossed the road and knocked.

After a few moments the door was opened by Mrs. Jones, the worthy landlady. She saw that the man upon the doorstep was attired in some kind of uniform or other, that he carried a small handbag, and that he was a typical example of an ordinary London Gas Company employee or something of that character.

"This is the address of Mr. Nelson Lee, ain't it, ma?" inquired the uniformed man briskly.

"Mr. Lee's hout at present," replied the landlady shortly.

"That don't make no odds," answered the man. "It ain't necessary for me to see Mr. Lee himself. There's something amiss with the telephone, so I've been instructed, and I've come round to put it right. Maybe you'll show me the way up in Mr. Lee's rooms, ma?"

Mrs. Jones hesitated.

"This don't seem the right time to come repairing telephones," she said doubtfully. "However, if you've got written instructions I'll show you up."

"It's a special order, don't yer see," explained the other, feeling in his pocket and producing a paper. "This 'ere Mr. Lee's an important bloke, I understand, and it won't do for his telephone to get out of order—not even for a hower. There you are missis—will that suit you?"

Mrs. Jones took the paper which was handed to her, stepped back and examined it beneath the hall light. It was quite an ordinary Post Office Telephone printed form, filled in in the usual way to the effect that the telephone installed in the rooms of Mr. Nelson Lee required a slight but important adjustment.

This was quite satisfactory, and the landlady at once admitted the telephone man and escorted him upstairs.

Mrs. Jones did not exactly like being disturbed in this way, but under the circumstances she could not refuse. It would have been better, perhaps, if Lee himself had been present, but Mrs. Jones knew that the detective and Nipper would not be back for some hours.

Within the consulting-room Mrs. Jones switched on the electric lights, and then indicated the telephone with a wave of her hand.

"Sha'n't keep you long, ma," said the man cheerily. "I don't think the job's much, anyhow. But these 'ere things can't be put right except by an experienced man. I am anxious to get away myself, to tell the truth."

My missis'll be wondering what's become of me. I was supposed to get home in good time to-night."

While he was speaking the man was nimbly producing certain delicate tools from his bag, and he looked at Mrs. Jones once or twice rather amusedly.

"Nothing for you to wait," he said as he sat down and drew the telephone instrument towards him. "I'll call down when I'm ready to leave, if you like. Sha'n't be above ten minutes, at the most."

Mrs. Jones shook her head.

"I'll stay here," she said shortly. "I don't never allow anyone in Mr. Lee's rooms, not by hisself. Just you go on with your work, man, and be sharp about it."

The telephone man laughed.

"Just as you like," he said. "I don't mind you looking on, ma. But wimmin, as a rule, always ask foolish questions—and that causes delay."

"I don't want no hinsults," said Mrs. Jones curtly.

The man chuckled again, and went on with his work. For perhaps five minutes he was busy, and then, with a little sigh of satisfaction, he pushed the instrument away from him, and then commenced packing his tools. When they were all in his bag he rose to his feet with a smile.

"That's done," he announced. "Haven't kept you long, have I? When do you think Mr. Lee will be back?"

"Not until about half-past eleven," replied the landlady. "He and Mr. Nipper have gone out to a theatre, I believe——"

Mrs. Jones paused, listening.

For, at that moment, she heard a familiar footstep upon the stairs, accompanied by a still more familiar whistle. She knew, at once, that it was Nipper who was returning, and the lad was mounting the stairs two at a time. As a matter of fact Nelson Lee had discovered, just before hailing a taxi in Holborn, that a most important item had been forgotten. The theatre tickets had been left behind upon the mantelpiece. Nipper, of course, had chipped his master unmercifully, but the lad had offered to run back and fetch the tickets.

Nipper was, therefore, in a hurry, and before Mrs. Jones and the telephone man could say anything further the lad entered the consulting-room.

"Hallo! Who's in here?" he exclaimed, as he strode in. "Oh, it's you, Mrs. Jones. Anything wrong?"

Nipper was somewhat surprised to find the landlady and the uniformed man in Lee's room, and he stared at the telephone-man curiously, and with a certain amount of vague suspicion.

"From the telephone company, Mr. Nipper," explained Mrs. Jones. "This man's just put the telephone right——"

"That's queer," interjected Nipper. "There was nothing wrong with the telephone that I know of. What authority have you got for coming here?" added the lad, turning to the fellow. "And the company doesn't usually send men round at this time of night——"

"I have only carried out instructions, young shaver," said the man easily.

"Not instructions that were given by Mr. Lee," replied Nipper promptly. "And not so free with your 'young shaver,' either! This looks a bit fishy, to my mind."

Nipper was shrewd, and he didn't hesitate to speak his mind. He was decidedly suspicious, to tell the truth, for it seemed highly improbable to him that a telephone-repairer should be sent round at such a late hour in the evening—more especially as there was nothing whatever wrong with the instrument.

The man, himself, too, evidently saw that Nipper's suspicions were aroused, and he did not quite like the look in the youngster's eyes. There was a determined light in them, and it was certain that Nipper intended going into the matter thoroughly.

So, in one second, the man threw all pretence to the winds, and he made an abrupt dash for the door. The move was so sudden that Nipper was not prepared, and a heavy push from the fleeing man sent the lad reeling backwards.

"Lor' a-mercy!" gasped Mrs. Jones breathlessly.

"I thought there was something crooked about it!" roared Nipper, hurling himself forward. "That rotter's an impostor—he's been up to some trick or other in this room!"

As Nipper spoke he rushed through the doorway and pelted down the stairs with terrific speed.

The man had gained a short start, but the advantage was certainly with Nipper, for the lad knew every stair by heart, and was as sure-footed as a mountain deer.

He simply flung himself down the stairs, five at a time, and landed in the hall right upon the fugitive's heels.

With a panting gasp, the fellow wrenched open the door, and attempted to slam it before Nipper could pass out. But the lad was prepared for the move, and he was through before the other could perform his object. The next second Nipper had gripped the stranger's arm fiercely and tightly.

"Let go, you young fool!" snarled the other savagely. "By thunder! I'll smash you——"

"Smash away!" panted Nipper.

The lad was positively certain that the telephone man had come with evil intentions. Indeed, the fellow's sudden flight practically proved that. And Nipper had no intention of letting him get away if he could possibly prevent it.

But, although Nipper was strong and active and plucky, he was not quite capable of tackling a full-grown man who was desperately anxious to get away.

Nevertheless, there was quite a considerable tussle out upon the pavement. It was extremely dark just there, and it so happened that no pedestrians were on this pavement at the precise time. Across the road people could be seen, and two electric trams were in sight. But nobody seemed to notice that quick fight between Nipper and his unknown adversary.

By an agile movement Nipper tripped the man, and they both rolled to the pavement with a gasp, and floundered about desperately, each endeavouring to gain mastery.

The tussle was over in a few seconds. They rolled into the gutter forcibly, Nipper uppermost—which was fortunate, for the gutter was filled with sticky, clinging mud. For a moment Nipper thought that his man was beaten; but the lad was quite mistaken.

For, with a tremendous heave the stranger flung Nipper off him. The young detective floundered upon the pavement, but was on his feet in a second.

He caught a glimpse of the telephone man in an almost inverted position in the gutter—caused by his tremendous effort to free himself from Nipper's weight. And before the lad could spring upon the fellow afresh he was on his feet and speeding away down Gray's Inn Road and into the darkness. In spite of the strenuous struggle the stranger still wore his peaked cap, and still gripped his bag.

For one moment Nipper thought of giving chase; but then he realised

that such a chase would be doomed to failure. Moreover, several people were coming along now, and one or two had paused on the opposite side of the road to gaze across in wonderment.

The little fight had attracted a certain amount of attention, but nobody knew exactly what had taken place. And Nipper, after pausing to recover his cap from the gutter, hurried away down Gray's Inn Road, to the opposite direction—towards Holborn.

The lad found his master waiting rather impatiently.

"You've been a long while, young 'un," exclaimed Nelson Lee. "I'm afraid we shall miss the beginning— Good gracious! What on earth have you been doing, Nipper? You are smothered with mud, and your face is scarcely recognisable."

"I reckon we'd better give up that theatre for to-night, guv'nor," said Nipper rapidly.

And he told his master exactly what had occurred. Lee listened carefully, and when he had heard all he nodded.

"Yes, we must certainly give up the evening's pleasure, my boy," he agreed. "That man was up to no good in our rooms. I strongly suspect, in fact, that he was an emissary of the Circle of Terror. They have been promising to settle with me for some time past, you may remember."

"The Circle of Terror!" ejaculated Nipper breathlessly. "I bet you've hit the nail on the head, guv'nor. What a jolly good thing we forgot those theatre tickets."

"It probably means that our lives have been saved," replied Lee grimly, as they walked back to their rooms. "The man, if left to himself, would have fitted up some diabolical arrangement which would have put an end to us as soon as we entered the apartments—that is how I figure things out. The Circle of Terror, as you have good reason to know, is ruthless in its methods."

The pair soon reached home, and they found Mrs. Jones in a state of considerable agitation, waiting for them. She was greatly relieved when she saw that Nipper was with his master.

"Oh, Mr. Nipper, I thought as how you'd met with some haccident!" exclaimed the landlady. "I thought that villain had done you a harm!"

"Not likely!" exclaimed Nipper promptly. "It would take more than a worm of that sort to get the better of me. He escaped, I know, but if it had been a fair stand-up fight I'd have whacked him easily!"

They all went upstairs into the consulting room, and Nelson Lee took a quick glance round.

"How long was the man here, Mrs. Jones?" he inquired.

"About seven or eight minutes, sir."

"Was he left alone in this room——"

"Not for one second, Mr. Lee!" declared Mrs. Jones emphatically. "I don't allow nobody in here by theirselves. I know that you have private papers lying about, and if anybody wants to wait for you I take 'em into the ante-room."

Lee nodded approvingly.

"Quite right, Mrs. Jones," he agreed. "But, of course, this man stating that he wished to repair the telephone, you allowed him to enter?"

"Yes, Mr. Lee. And I watched him the whole time."

"What was he doing?"

"Nothing, that I could see—just playin' about, I believe. I don't know nothing about telephones and their like," said the landlady. "He just pretended to finger it about, and seemed to be busy for a bit. He suggested that I should leave him alone, but I didn't take the 'int!"

Lee smiled.

"Oh, it's obvious that the man's plan failed," he said. "His object was to go into this room and have it to himself for some little time. By remaining with him, Mrs. Jones, you apparently upset his arrangements. I am glad that Nipper appeared when he did."

Mrs. Jones departed a minute or two after, highly pleased with herself. And Lee and Nipper remained in the consulting room talking. They could see at a glance that nothing had been touched. The man had had no time in which to perform his work—whatever that happened to be.

Nelson Lee glanced at his watch.

"Why, Nipper, we might possibly be in time, yet," he exclaimed briskly. "I have remembered that the play is preceded by a short front piece. We shall miss that, of course, but——"

"Hold on, sir," interjected Nipper. "I've got something to show you—I haven't looked into it myself either."

He had produced from his pocket a small, leather-covered book—a pocket-book. The leather was smothered with mud.

"After the rotter had hooked it I went to the gutter to take up my cap," explained Nipper, "and I found this little book lying in the mud. The chap nearly turned upside down in his efforts to get the best of me, and this must have fallen out of one of his pockets. It might be interesting."

Nelson Lee removed his hat, took the pocket-book, and seated himself upon the corner of the table. He opened the cover, and at once gave vent to a short ejaculation. Nipper was by his side in a moment.

"See, young 'un!" exclaimed Lee grimly.

Just inside the fly leaf of the book was a small circle, roughly drawn in purple ink.

It was the sign of the Circle of Terror!

Nelson Lee's suspicions were confirmed. The man who had attempted the trick had been an emissary of the mysterious, dreaded secret society—the most amazingly audacious and daring band of criminals who had ever troubled the British Isles.

Nelson Lee had already had more than one strenuous encounter with the Circle of Terror. But the famous detective had been unsuccessful in discovering any tangible facts. It was known generally that the Circle was a powerful and determined organisation, but who its chief was, and where the headquarters lay, remained a deep mystery.

Lee had actually been in the presence of the chief. The latter had called himself the High Lord—the Dictator. And, in all truth, the chief of the Circle of Terror was a dictator in the truest sense of the word.

Unless his demands were complied with on the instant, sheer disaster followed for the victim. Already the Southern Counties Railway had been robbed of £20,000, and the company had suffered three serious disasters before the money had been paid.

The Grand Imperial Assurance Company had been the next victim, and £30,000 had been demanded from this concern. After refusal and a series of subsequent calamities, the chairman of the insurance company had decided to pay.

But Nelson Lee had been successful in one respect. He had exposed a powerful member of the Circle's Inner Committee, and the scoundrel was disgraced and ruined.

But the identity of the High Lord remained absolutely obscure. The meeting-place of the Circle was unknown, and police and public alike were mystified. The Circle had threatened to bring a reign of terror upon the

land—and, so far, they had been true to their word. Accordingly, Nelson Lee was considerably interested when he learned, for a positive fact, that the pseudo-telephone man had been an emissary of the Circle. More than once the great detective's life had been attempted.

"This pocket-book may be interesting, Nipper," exclaimed Lee smoothly. "I think, after all, we will give up the theatre for to-night. It all depends——"

The telephone bell rang sharply.

Mechanically, Nelson Lee twisted round and reached over to draw the instrument nearer to him—for it was on the other side of the table.

But, suddenly, Lee stayed his hand.

For an astonishing thing had happened.

Even as Lee was about to grasp the instrument a fly buzzed down from the ceiling—a lazy "winter fly." It flew straight on to the mouth-piece of the 'phone, alighted, and then fell to the table.

It was quite curious, and Lee's attention was momentarily arrested. Allowing the bell to ring the detective bent closer, and examined the fly carefully. The little insect was lying upon its back—quite dead!

"Dear me!" murmured Lee. "That's surely remarkable!"

"Why the dickens don't you answer, guv'nor?" asked Nipper, who was trying to brush the mud from his coat. "That bell's getting on my giddy nerves!"

The lad looked up, and found Nelson Lee regarding him with a strangely concentrated expression upon his powerful face.

A terrible suspicion had entered Lee's head—a suspicion which was at once appalling and almost incredible. Lee took a deep, deep breath.

"If I had answered the call, Nipper, I should have been dead by this time!" he exclaimed evenly. "But a fly—a common house fly—has saved my life!"

CHAPTER II.

A Diabolical Plan—The Scroll-Work Shorthand—Lee's Ruse.

NIPPER stared at his master wonderingly.

"What's that, guv'nor?" he asked. "You've been saved from death by a fly? What's the idea? Is it a new joke?"

Before answering, Nelson Lee crossed over to the telephone-bell and wedged the little hammer. The ringing of the bell was annoying, and the girl at the exchange was evidently persistent.

"No, Nipper, it is not a joke," said the detective quietly. "There is a faint chance that I am wrong; but I think I am correct. And I am not surprised. The Circle of Terror nearly tricked me."

"I'm blessed if I understand, sir."

"I will tell you what happened, Nipper," went on Lee. "Remember, at the same time, that an emissary of the Circle has been 'repairing' the telephone instrument. Keep that fact well in your mind. Just now, when the bell first rang, I reached over to answer the call."

"I know. And you didn't answer."

"For a very excellent reason. Just as I was about to grasp the receiver I saw a fly alight upon the mouthpiece of the transmitter. The fly was in splendid health, by all appearances, although somewhat sluggish, as flies usually are at this time of the year. The insect settled on the mouthpiece—and there it is."

Nelson Lee pointed, and Nipper bent over the table.

"Why, it's dead!" exclaimed Nipper in astonishment.

"Quite dead, I believe," was Lee's rejoinder. "And what caused it to die so suddenly? Why should it be killed by merely alighting upon the mouthpiece? Does not the fact strike you as being strangely significant?"

"Great Scott!" gasped Nipper. "You—you think——"

"Never mind what I think—we will soon put the matter to the test," said Nelson Lee crisply. "Run into the laboratory and fetch a rubber glove. By James! The idea was smart, my lad—diabolically smart!"

Nipper was soon back, rather excited now, and the detective drew the glove on, and then carefully unscrewed the vulcanite mouthpiece. The theatre was quite forgotten now.

Carrying the mouthpiece, Lee repaired to the laboratory. Nipper with him, and here the detective set to work to apply a test. First of all, he examined the vulcanite intently through a powerful magnifying lens, taking care to wear a small respirator over his mouth and nose.

Then, with the aid of certain chemicals, Lee tested the tiny spots of moisture which were visible upon the black vulcanite. The inside of the mouthpiece was covered with these little moisture-spots, and they were almost invisible to the naked eye. After many minutes had passed, Nelson Lee looked up from the bench.

"I thought so, Nipper—I thought so!" he said tensely.

"What is it, guv'nor?"

"Poison!"

"Oh, crumbs! Are you sure?"

"My dear lad, I am fairly well versed in the knowledge of poisons, I believe, and I am not likely to make a mistake," said Lee, who had always made a careful study of every known variety of poison. "I am not surprised that the fly was killed. Indeed, once having alighted upon the vulcanite, it could not possibly have survived."

"Then the poison is deadly to insects?"

"It is deadly to all living matter," was Lee's grim reply. "It is a little-known venom of a peculiarly fatal character. If I had used the telephone I should have brought my lips quite close to the mouthpiece. And this poison, if brought near to the mouth, gives forth a fatal, noxious gas. One inhalation would have killed me on the spot."

Nipper looked rather scared.

"You had a narrow escape, guv'nor!" he said breathlessly.

"Marvellously narrow," agreed the detective. "But we both stood the same risk, for I might have told you to answer the 'phone. Think of the cunning of the plan! Think of its horrible, diabolical nature!"

"And you might have been murdered but for that fly!" ejaculated Nipper. "Oh, it's almost a miracle, sir!"

"No, Nipper; merely a natural sequence of events," replied Lee evenly. "Flies usually alight on telephones and electric-light bulbs and articles of that nature. There was nothing extraordinary in this case; but it was providential that I noticed the fly's sudden death. It was that incident which gave me the clue."

"And if you had been bowled over, guv'nor, I shouldn't have known what had happened," said Nipper. "I should have thought that you'd fallen in a fit, or something."

Lee nodded.

"Exactly. And then you would probably have seized the telephone, with the intention of ringing up for a doctor," he said grimly. "That was the Circle's pleasant little calculation, I assume. They reckoned to finish us off at one blow."

"The—the devils!"

"As you have good reason to know, the Circle of Terror lives well up to its name," went on the detective. "In all its undertakings the Circle has displayed nothing but ruthlessness and audacity and a complete disregard of humanity. Trains have been wrecked, in spite of the fact that they were filled with innocent passengers. The Circle cares nothing for human life."

Nelson Lee again examined the vulcanite mouthpiece. The inside was coated with the deadly poison, but it was scentless and almost invisible. At a distance it was practically harmless.

As Lee explained, however, if the telephone had remained untouched all night, by the morning the poison would have evaporated into the atmosphere of the room, and the air, in consequence, would have become vitiated to a slight degree—not sufficiently to cause any harm.

The Circle's plan was easy to understand.

The "telephone man" had probably been on the watch, and as soon as he saw Lee and Nipper leave he at once presented himself and accomplished his work. He must have done this actually under the eagle eye of Mrs. Jones; but she, being ignorant of telephones, had noticed nothing unusual. It would have been easy for the man to coat the vulcanite with poison under the pretence of doing something else.

Nipper's sudden return had been unexpected, and the man had taken fright. But he had done his work, and perhaps he ventured back and had seen Lee and Nipper enter. If so, then he had at once entered a public telephone-box and had rung up Lee's number.

Solely owing to the seemingly insignificant incident of the house-fly, Nelson Lee's life had been spared. It was a narrow escape, but the detective was provided with one more proof of the Circle of Terror's fear of him. In a way, Lee was complimented—but he could well do without compliments of that nature!

Having settled the matter beyond dispute, Nelson Lee carefully placed the mouthpiece aside, and then returned to the consulting-room. The fire had been made up and was blazing cheerfully.

"Now for that pocket-book, Nipper," said the detective, seating himself in an easy-chair and lighting a cigar. "We have escaped the Circle's death-trap, and we may find that their agent's visit was of some use, after all."

"I've taken a squint inside, sir, and I can't make anything of it," said Nipper, handing the pocket-book to his master. "Looks like a lot of spidery scrollwork, or something of that sort."

Nelson Lee opened the little book, and became interested at once.

On all the pages, as Nipper had said, were many curious signs. They were printed, and seemed to be an elaborate series of spirals and flourishes. A series of these placed together formed a kind of ornamental scroll.

But under each was an ordinary alphabetical character—in the opening pages of the book, at least. Further on were sentences, with the spirals over them. Nelson Lee frowned for a few moments, and then his face cleared.

"Oh," he murmured, "I understand, Nipper—I understand!"

"That's more than I can, anyhow!"

"These peculiar flourishes are the characters of an unknown type of shorthand," explained the detective. "Don't you see, Nipper? This book is merely a kind of manual for the learning of the system."

Nipper grunted.

"What's the good of that?" he growled. "I thought the book might contain something of value—something we could make use of."

"My dear lad, so it does."

"Do you call that fat-headed shorthand valuable?"

"Extremely so."

"Well, I'm blowed if I can see where the value comes in," said Nipper. "We both know shorthand, sir, but not that funny-looking system. What do you think it is, anyhow?"

Nelson Lee pored over the book for some little time before answering.

"This shorthand is apparently known only to the members of the Circle of Terror," he said at last. "It is, in short, a secret system of the utmost value. In all probability all instructions for Circle agents are written in this curious scrollwork shorthand. To everybody else the characters are meaningless."

"A kind of cipher, guv'nor?"

"Far better than a cipher," Lee declared. "All codes and ciphers are capable of being unravelled. But this shorthand is utterly unreadable unless one is perfectly familiar with the complete system."

"And this is a book of instruction?"

"Exactly. From the fact that it was on the 'telephone man's' person I deduce that he is a comparatively new member of the Circle," proceeded the detective. "He is learning the system himself. This kind may be of the very greatest importance, Nipper."

"We'll learn the system, you mean?"

"As soon as possible," agreed Lee. "We will master it ourselves. Then we shall be in a position to read any secret message or document which may fall into our hands. There is no telling how valuable the knowledge may prove."

"It will be a stiffish job to get the hang of it, guv'nor," said Nipper, gazing at the queer characters over Lee's back. "It's a jolly slow shorthand, too, I should think."

"That is of no importance. The system was not invented for speed, you may be sure. The chief characteristic is that it appears to be merely an ornamental scroll, whereas it is perfectly legible writing to one who understands."

Nipper nodded.

"Ah, but we've forgotten something, sir," he said shrewdly.

"Forgotten what?"

"That fellow will soon find out that he's lost the book," replied Nipper, with a shake of his head. "Perhaps to-night, or perhaps to-morrow—anyhow, sooner or later—he'll learn of his loss, and then very likely he'll report to the High Lord, or some Johnny under him."

Lee carefully removed the ash from his cigar.

"That is very astute of you, my lad," he observed. "As you say, the man will discover his loss before long, and the High Lord, learning that we know the secret of the shorthand, will probably discontinue its use—or will make redoubled efforts to get rid of us. H'm! The value of our find is somewhat lessened by this new thought."

"So what's the use of our learning the giddy system?" asked Nipper. "It'll be a sheer waste of time, won't it?"

Nelson Lee remained silent for some minutes. Then he turned to Nipper briskly, swung himself out of the chair and faced the lad.

"Come, we will get to work, young 'un," he exclaimed. "An idea has occurred to me which may make everything right. At all events, it is a decidedly sporting chance. We are going to copy out every word and every character in that book!"

"What the thunder for?"

"I will tell you. It is quite on the cards that our unknown friend will arrive home before discovering his loss. What do you think he will do then, Nipper?" asked Lee. "What do you think he will do when he finds that his valuable pocket-book is missing?"

"He'll swear hard!" said Nipper promptly.

"Very probably," smiled Lee. "But after that?"

"Why, he'll make a report to his chief that he's lost it."

The detective shook his head.

"I think not. The chances are that he will do his utmost to recover the book," he said. "For, you will readily understand, the man will get into extremely hot water if the High Lord discovers that the secret of the shorthand is known to us. Our friend's instinct will lead him to recover the property."

"But he won't know where he lost it."

"On the contrary, he will be almost positive," declared Nelson Lee. "He will remember the struggle he had with you, and will know that the book dropped out of his pocket at that time."

"In a public place like Gray's Inn Road," said Nipper doubtfully. "Why, the fellow will conclude immediately that it has been picked up by a passer-by, or that I picked it up—most probably the latter."

"Agreed. He may think that. And he may also suspect that the book is lying where it fell," continued Lee shrewdly. "that is, in the gutter, in total darkness. And he will therefore hurry over here before daylight comes. Once the book is again in his possession he will breathe freely, and will never suspect for a moment that we have learned its secrets."

Nipper's eyes gleamed.

"You mean to put the book back into the gutter?"

"Exactly—after we have copied out its contents in their entirety," was Lee's calm reply. "The man will never suspect the depths of our ruse, and will be quite satisfied. And we, for our part, will have nothing to grumble at. The secret will be in our possession, and the Circle of Terror will continue to use the shorthand, unconscious of that most important fact."

The detective's idea was a splendid one; but it all depended upon whether the Circle's agent would return to search for his lost property. The chances were quite in favour of his doing so.

The time was now about nine o'clock, and Lee and Nipper set to work with a will. Very carefully, and with great accuracy, they copied out every stroke and letter exactly as they were placed.

Lee took a new note-book, and made a facsimile of every page in the shorthand manual. Thus, when completed, the detective's note-book was every bit as valuable and instructive as the original itself.

But it was necessary to copy the spiral-like shorthand characters with the very greatest care—for they had to be precisely the same, or it would have been impossible to learn the system.

It was slow work, therefore, and three hours had sped by before the task was completed. It was, in fact, after midnight by the time the last character had been copied.

Lee's note-book was now a replica of the original, and could be used for the learning of the curious shorthand system.

"Ah! I am glad we have got it done," exclaimed the detective, with a sigh of satisfaction. "Thirteen minutes past twelve! By Jove, we shall have to lose no time now, my boy."

Nipper took the leather covered copy-book and descended the stairs. When he emerged into the street everything was quiet and pitchy black. A slight drizzle of rain was falling, but it was scarcely more than a mist.

Gazing up and down keenly, Nipper saw that he was quite alone and unobserved. He stepped forward and placed the pocket-book in the gutter just against the edge of the kerbstone. It could not be seen from the sidewalk itself, and its dark cover rendered it invisible from the road.

It was certain that no chance passer-by would spot it. But if the man came, deliberately endeavouring to locate the book, he would be successful within a few seconds.

Nipper hopped upstairs again.

"What now, guv'nor?" he asked. "Bed, I suppose?"

"Not just yet, my boy. You have a vigil to keep," replied the detective. "If it becomes too wearisome I will relieve you. You must remain at one of these windows—the room being in darkness—and keep a strict eye upon the pavement below. We shall then know for certain whether the ruse has been successful."

"I suppose it's necessary, guv'nor," growled Nipper.

"Very necessary, and you shall have the honour of being the first to keep watch," smiled the detective. "I do not intend to go to bed myself, but will spend an hour or so in the laboratory. If, by three o'clock, our friend has not arrived, I will take over your vigil."

And so, five minutes later, Nipper was at his post. It was, of course, quite dark, and the lad was naturally invisible. But he could quite plainly distinguish the pavement below, and all who passed along it.

An hour went by, and then another, Nipper was beginning to feel sleepy and chilled. But he was glad that three o'clock was drawing near. At last, glancing at his luminous dialed watch, he saw that the hands were just upon the hour.

"Only another minute, now," thought Nipper gratefully.

And then he noticed a dim figure approaching from the direction of Holborn. The man grew closer, and then flashed the light of an electric torch into the gutter. This was interesting, at all events.

And a moment later Nipper's eyes gleamed with satisfaction.

For the man, having first flashed his light upon the door below, turned his attention to the gutter. And in a few seconds he suddenly bent down and picked something up.

"The wheeze has worked!" murmured Nipper. "By jingo, the guv'nor was right enough. That chap thinks everything is O.K., now."

The "wheeze" had certainly panned out well. The Circle's emissary, of course, must have known that his telephone trick had failed, and he was therefore all the more satisfied to recover the shorthand instruction book.

And the next day Nelson Lee and Nipper set themselves the task of learning the curious system. All day they worked, and by night they had gained sufficient knowledge to be able to read and write the strange characters. By the day after that they were even more proficient, and they little guessed how soon their knowledge was to prove of the utmost importance!

CHAPTER III.

A £50,000 Prize—Nelson Lee Makes the First Move.

IT was just two days later when Nelson Lee had a most distinguished visitor. A magnificent Rolls-Royce landulette came to a standstill opposite the detective's apartments in Gray's Inn Road, and a few minutes later a small, aristocratic looking gentleman was ushered into Lee's consulting room.

He was elderly, and grey-haired, and he walked with a slight stoop. The visitor needed no introduction to Nelson Lee, for the detective recognised his client on the instant.

For Lord Mount-Bevon had been a famous politician, and his likeness had been published in portrait and caricature some thousands of times. He had retired from politics some years since, however, on account of his advancing years.

"You received my wire this morning, Mr. Lee?" asked Lord Mount-Bevon, as he shook hands.

"Yes, and I made a point of remaining at home," was the detective's reply. "I gather, from the tone of your wire, that your business is of some importance?"

His lordship sank wearily into a chair.

"It is of the most appalling importance, Mr. Lee," he declared gravely. "I scarcely know what to think or what to do. The police have frankly told me that they can do practically nothing in the matter."

"I sincerely hope that I may be able to render you assistance," said Lee. "You have, I understand, just motored from Mount-Bevon Abbey, in Sussex?"

"Precisely," replied the peer. "As you are no doubt aware, Lady Mount-Bevon is holding a house-party during the present week, and things are rather lively down there. We have many wounded soldiers, you know, and my wife is making something of a display for the poor fellows. Brave lads—brave lads! Two of my own sons among them, too, begad!"

"Yes, I remember reading several paragraphs in the papers concerning her ladyship's kindness and generosity," exclaimed Lee. "I trust that nothing has occurred to mar the comfort of your noble guests?"

Lord Mount-Bevon slowly shook his head.

"No, I don't suppose our arrangements will be much upset," he confessed. "It is really a personal matter I have called to consult you upon, Mr. Lee. You have, I presume, heard of the Circle of Terror?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Who has not?" he countered. "Indeed, your lordship, I have had one or two strenuous adventures in connection with the Circle of Terror's campaign against honest humanity."

"Well, it seems that these terrible people have chosen me—or rather my wife—as their next victim," said Lord Mount-Bevon seriously. "I have come to you for advice, Mr. Lee. I do not know what to do for the best. I am worried and troubled to an overwhelming extent."

"Perhaps you will let me know the facts?"

"Quite so—quite so. Well, yesterday morning I received a letter, Mr. Lee," said the peer. "It is the most extraordinary communication it has ever been my lot to peruse. And the insolence of it—the astounding effrontery! By Heaven, sir, I was almost white with fury as I read."

"I think I can imagine the contents," said Lee gently. "Have you brought the letter with you?"

"Yes, it is here."

"Then perhaps it would be as well to start by letting me glance over the epistle for myself," said Lee. "I gather that the Circle of Terror has threatened you with dire punishment unless you pay them a substantial sum of money?"

"Worse than that, Mr. Lee—far worse. Money itself would not worry me so greatly. But these scoundrels have actually ordered me to hand over to them the famous Mount-Bevon jewels—which are valued, as you probably know, at well over £50,000!"

"Dear me! Then the matter is indeed grave."

"I think you realise how very serious my trouble is," said the other, passing a hand over his brow. "The Mount-Bevon jewels are heirlooms, Mr. Lee. They have been in the family for hundreds of years, and their safety has always been one of the very first considerations with every successive Mount-Bevon. Their value is great, but it is not so much the monetary side of the question which concerns me. I could stand such a loss without serious hardship. But to hand over the family heirlooms seems sacrilege!"

"Perhaps you will show me the letter?" suggested Lee.

"Oh, yes. Of course—of course!"

His lordship produced a pocket-book, and from this extracted a court-sized envelope of expensive make. He handed this across to his companion. Nelson Lee withdrew a sheet of notepaper, the style of which was quite familiar to him—for he had seen a communication of a similar nature on two previous occasions.

At the top was printed a beautiful purple circle—small, but extremely neat and refined looking. And below the following letter was printed in neat, bold type:

"Headquarters. Date as postmark.

"My Lord,—It really seems to us that the Mount-Bevon jewels are serving no good purpose by remaining in your possession. Their sole purpose is to add to the charms of Lady Mount-Bevon, and those charms are such that jewellery is quite superfluous.

"Therefore, we have come to the conclusion that the family jewels should be handed over to us in their entirety on the evening of Wednesday next, the twenty-first instant.

"You will therefore carry out the following instructions. The jewels must be placed in a small leather handbag and dropped into the hollow tree which is situated close to the private golf links of the Mount-Bevon Estate, in Sussex. They must be placed there not later than eight o'clock in the evening and left entirely and absolutely unguarded. If you have police on the spot, you will do so at your peril.

"It is with extreme regret that we are obliged to give this order, but we think you will realise that refusal to comply will be not only disastrous, but absolutely fatal. If you have the least doubt regarding this point, kindly recall to mind the affairs of the Southern Counties Railway and the Grand Imperial Assurance Company, Limited.

"THE CIRCLE OF TERROR.

"The Right Hon. Lord Mount-Bevon."

Nelson Lee could scarcely restrain a smile.

"Really, the audacity of these communications is astonishing!" he exclaimed. "It seems that the Circle of Terror is becoming more and more daring as time passes. I sympathise with you exceedingly, your lordship. You have come to me for advice, I understand?"

"That is my object."

"Well, I will give you the same advice as I gave to Sir Roger Hudson and Mr. Vickers Slone," replied Lee quietly. "I strongly urge you to do precisely as this letter intimates. Do not for one moment consider thwarting the Circle."

His lordship set his lips firmly.

"You tell me that I should tamely submit?" he asked. "It is impossible, Mr. Lee—utterly impossible! I should never rest again if I allowed——"

"It is with regret that I notice you adopting the same attitude as the

two gentlemen I mentioned," went on the detective. "I readily appreciate your feelings, and can understand them perfectly. But pray consider."

"I have already considered——"

"Pardon me. I do not think you have," interjected Nelson Lee. "Sir Roger Hudson refused to comply with the Circle's demands. As a result two railway trains were wrecked and a valuable bridge was blown up—and in the end Sir Roger submitted. Mr. Vickers Slone also refused to comply, and the next day two disastrous fires broke out, and the insurance company were forced to pay every farthing. And Mr. Slone, too, paid over the money."

"I know—I know. It is appalling!"

"You have used the right word," declared Lee. "It is, indeed, appalling. But the Circle of Terror is so extraordinarily powerful that to baulk them is to invite disaster. If you refuse, my lord, you may be certain that something of a singularly deadly character will take place. I do not wish to alarm you, but it is even possible that one of your sons may be murdered—or, perhaps, your daughter——"

"Great Heaven above! You do not mean to suggest that these infernal scoundrels will go to such terrible lengths," protested the peer, aghast. "You cannot be serious, Mr. Lee."

"I am deadly so. In all earnestness I press you to hand over the jewels," declared Lee. "By so doing you will enable me to make an investigation. For, if you take my advice, I will enter whole-heartedly into this affair. On the other hand, if you persist in your present attitude, I must regretfully decline to help you even in the slightest degree."

Lord Mount-Bevon bowed his head.

"I am impressed by your words, my dear sir," he said very quietly. "If a police official had urged me, as you have urged me, I believe I should have disregarded him. But you have convinced me that you are right—that it will be better to comply without making a fight. For it is an impossibility to fight an enemy who is at once intangible and beyond reach. The odds are all on the side of these hidden criminals. Mr. Lee, I will do as you advise."

"I am glad," was all Lee said.

"To-day is Wednesday, the twenty-first," went on the peer. "It is to-night that the Circle's demand has to be complied with," went on his lordship. "The jewels, of course, are at the Abbey, and it will be a simple matter to obey the instructions. But what do you propose to do, Mr. Lee?"

Nelson Lee smilingly shook his head.

"I must ask you to refrain pressing me upon that point," he replied. "I promise, however, that I will do my utmost to outwit the Circle of Terror. It is a stupendous task, my lord, as you will readily realise, and I may even lose my own life in the attempt."

"Good gracious!" gasped the other. "Then you must do nothing—nothing, Mr. Lee!"

"On the contrary, I shall do everything that is in my power," was the detective's reply. "It may interest you to know that my life was attempted in a peculiarly diabolical fashion only a few nights ago. By actively employing my wits against the Circle I am running no added risk. And it is just possible that I may be able to discover much. I hope so. But please tell me, have you mentioned this affair to any of your household?"

"Not to a soul, except my wife," replied Lord Mount-Bevon. "She knows, of course, and she is terribly upset, as may well be imagined."

"Let me advise you to keep the whole thing quiet. Tell nobody else of what you are being forced to do," said Lee. "If the thing is generally known among the party some enterprising young men may take it upon themselves to investigate—and that would be disastrous."

"I quite realise that. And I intend to place the jewels in the hollow tree with my own hands," declared the peer. "I shall do it quietly, after dark, so that none other shall know."

"Excellent."

"And you—— Oh, but I am forgetting," went on his lordship. "I am forbidden to ask questions, am I not? I feel sure, however, that you will work in my best interests, Mr. Lee. I am not wholly consoled, but certainly relieved. It is always a relief to have come to a settled decision."

Very shortly afterwards Lord Mount-Bevon took his departure, and Lee pondered over the facts which he had just learned. Nipper had been out, but when the lad returned Lee briefly put him in possession of all that had passed.

"What's the programme, guv'nor?" asked the lad eagerly. "I suppose we shall go down to Sussex——"

"Then you suppose quite wrong, my lad," interjected Nelson Lee. "'We' shall not go, for I intend to undertake the journey myself. You will remain in London on this occasion and occupy your time as you think best."

"Oh, I say!" protested Nipper. "I might be useful——"

"And, on the other hand, you might be precisely the opposite," interrupted Lee. "I don't mean to suggest that your services are of no value, Nipper—don't think that. But in an affair of this nature one is, perhaps, far more capable than two. It is essential that my movements should be absolutely secret, and if you were with me it would be difficult."

"Well, it's pretty rotten, but I suppose you know best," said Nipper disconsolately.

The lad was really disappointed, but he knew better than to raise objections. He hoped, however, that he might be able to make use of himself later on. Nipper little imagined at that moment that he, too, would be hot on the track the very same evening!

During the remainder of the day Nelson Lee made certain preparations. He fully realised the gravity of the task he was undertaking. The great detective did not make the mistake of underestimating the strength and power of his enemy. But he was eager and anxious to get at the truth—to wrest the secrets of the Circle of Terror into broad daylight.

Once he could get to close grips with his foe he had little fear of the consequences. It was this fighting in the dark that galled him—this groping with invisible perils.

He was ready to risk all if there was even the slightest prospect of being rewarded in the way he desired. His greatest wish was to learn the identity of the Circle's chief—the High Lord.

And any opening was welcome, however small it seemed.

At five o'clock Nelson Lee emerged from his rooms. But not even Nipper would have known the famous detective. He was disguised with amazing cleverness, and he acted his part to perfection.

To all appearances he was an elderly countryman in his "Sunday best." There was an air of innocence about his face which invited confidence, and his walk was a masterpiece of acting. In one hand he held a stout ash-stick, and in the other a carpet-bag.

Lee travelled to Victoria by motor-omnibus, and entered a train which

would land him at Great Bevon at about six-fifty. It would be nearly dark by then, and his further plans were all cut and dried.

After all, Nelson Lee could not do much; everything would depend upon what happened at Mount-Bevon Park.

He arrived at the little village station, and proceeded on foot along the quiet country road which led to the Abbey. This famous residence was situated three miles away; but the extremity of the park was only a mile and a half from the village.

By the time the detective arrived at this spot all was dark. The evening had been rather dull and the sky overcast. The air was still, but there was no prospect of rain.

From directions which had been supplied to him by Lord Mount-Bevon—Lee had given his lordship a slight inkling of his plan—he knew that once he arrived at the lower edge of the park he would be comparatively close to the golf-links, and by following a certain course he would very soon locate the hollow tree.

This latter was a well-known landmark on the estate. It was a great oak, which had been struck by lightning many years before. It stood out, gaunt and grim, upon a rising hillock. No other tree was near it, and even in the dimness Nelson Lee would be able to locate it.

By eight o'clock Lee was securely ensconced in the fork of a high tree which grew about two hundred yards from the old oak. From his position the detective could see in every direction, and the lights of the Abbey gleamed in the distance.

During his walk through the park he had seen nobody, or any living thing. But a few minutes after he had occupied his position he saw a dim form approaching through the gloom.

He recognised it as that of Lord Mount-Bevon.

The peer had come to deposit the jewels in their hiding-place. And, having done so, he immediately returned into the darkness. Probably his lordship would have been surprised could he have known that his movements had been observed.

Lee was feeling satisfied. He was on the spot well in advance, and he was convinced that there were no Circle spies in the neighbourhood. The detective had donned the disguise so as to be well prepared; but it was not really necessary, as events had turned out.

But the detective always believed in being ready for an emergency, and if a Circle agent had seen him on the road he would not have suspected that benevolent-looking countryman of being the cleverest detective in the country.

Lee knew that he might have to wait hour after hour. But he did not mind this. He was on the spot in good time, and he believed he would accomplish some good purpose. Somehow, he had a feeling within him that his time would not be wasted on this occasion.

How the Circle's agent would come, the detective did not even guess at. Perhaps there would be more than one; in any case, Lee was ready to suit himself to the needs of the moment—when that moment arrived.

He surmised, however, that a motor-car would be sent, or, perhaps, a man merely on a motor-cycle.

Certainly Nelson Lee did not suspect the actual truth.

And he did not suspect the actual length his vigil was to be. He had an idea that he would have to wait until well after midnight, and it was for this reason that he had told himself that he was well in advance.

The truth was surprising.

For the Circle's emissary arrived at exactly eight-twenty!

The man arrived just twenty-five minutes after Nelson Lee had occupied the position in the tree-fork. And his coming was startling in itself.

Lee did not smoke, for that would have been unwise. But he had stuck an empty pipe into his mouth, and this was some little comfort. For the detective was acting solely on the assumption that he would have to wait hour after hour.

At a quarter-past eight, however, he suddenly sat very still.

On the night air a curious throbbing sounded. Or, rather, the throbbing was felt rather than heard. And it seemed to swell somewhat, and at last grow distinctly audible to the ear.

Then, suddenly, it ceased altogether.

Nelson Lee wondered what could have been the cause of the strange sound; but he was destined to learn in a very few seconds.

He was gazing round, hoping to see what the cause of the mysterious throbbing was, when, faintly, he heard a kind of swishing high above his head. With a sudden start, Lee transferred his attention to the sky.

The dome of the heavens was dark and obscure; but away to the north-east a dull something was moving swiftly.

"By James!" muttered Nelson Lee amazedly, "an aeroplane!"

The throbbing, of course, had been caused by the aeroplane's engine; but the latter was evidently silenced wonderfully, otherwise the noise of it would have been much more audible.

The pilot, knowing that he was above Mount-Bevon Park, had switched off, and was now volplaning to earth. In a moment Lee guessed that the mysterious machine carried the Circle of Terror's emissary.

This was a startling surprise, at all events!

The detective had never suspected that the Circle would adopt such means to fetch the famous Mount-Bevon jewels. But Lee was rather dubious. He saw the aeroplane nearing the ground rapidly.

"I have an idea the pilot will misjudge the distance," he thought. "It is almost impossible to see the ground from above——"

And then Lee uttered a subdued gasp.

For, like a sudden stab in the darkness, a bright beam of light had appeared from the sky. It was cast downwards in a wide arc, and illuminated the park-land with startling distinctness.

It was like a brilliant lamp, hung in the sky—only it was moving swiftly. Lee knew at once that the aeroplane was fitted with a powerful searchlight. And with the aid of that the pilot, of course, could land with ease.

For the surface of the park just here—and for some distance—was smooth grassland, and almost treeless. Nelson Lee occupied a position in one of the trees on the edge of the clear stretch.

He watched with considerable interest. The strange aeroplane glided down, and then landed beautifully. The machine ran along the ground for several yards, and then came to a standstill. At the same moment, the light was switched off.

"Smart!" murmured Lee grudgingly—"deucedly smart!"

He noticed that the aeroplane had come to earth on the other side of the little plantation—of which this particular tree was a member. The hollow oak was beyond the plantation, about four hundred yards distant. Therefore, the pilot would have to go round the plantation in order to reach his objective. The oak tree, of course, was invisible from the stationary aeroplane.

Nelson Lee nimbly hopped to the ground, and hurried round the edge of the trees, the pitchy dark background concealing his movements completely. After a few moments he paused.

Quite distinct to his ears came subdued voices:

"Wait here—I shall only be three minutes!"

"Right, old man. Don't be longer."

Lee stood quite still. In the gloom he could just see the aeroplane. It was a smallish monoplane, and he guessed that it was the same machine which had once appeared over London. Obviously, it was a two-seater, and the "observer" was going to fetch the hidden jewels.

What should Lee do?

How could he act? He had not anticipated anything of this nature, and for the moment he was nonplussed. But his brain was working swiftly, and he rapidly went over the chances and risks.

And within a minute he had come to a decision—a daring, amazing decision.

"I'll try it!" he muttered between his teeth. "It may mean disaster, but this is a chance in a thousand!"

The great detective hurried back, and edged his way round the plantation. Once on the other side, he was not visible from the aeroplane, and the hollow oak tree was about a hundred and fifty yards away, on the rising hillock.

The dim figure of the Circle man was just visible against the grass, and he was running towards the tree. He disappeared into the blackness which surrounded it. And then Nelson Lee acted.

With the speed of a deer he crossed the intervening space. With noiseless tread he approached, and then saw the shadowy figure of the aeroplane's passenger before him. At the very same second the man saw Lee.

They stood for one tense moment facing one another.

Lee could just see that the fellow had the little handbag containing the jewels in his hand. He was attired in a great fur coat and a flying safety-helmet. A pair of huge goggles concealed his features completely. It was rather a startling apparition to come upon suddenly.

"Hands up!" rapped out Lee curtly. "I've got you covered——"

The man did not utter a word, but, with disconcerting suddenness, he acted. Nelson Lee, cautious as he was, had not been prepared for the move. The fellow's hand swung up like lightning.

Then—swish!

The heavy bag sped through the air and crashed full upon Nelson Lee's forehead. The detective staggered back, and fell limply to the grass.

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CHAPTER IV.

Nelson Lee Learns the Identity of the High Lord.

THE man in the fur coat and goggles bent over the form which lay upon the ground. Then, with a display of considerable strength, he lifted it and hoisted it high above, aiding himself by using the tree-trunk as a rest. Then he dropped the helpless form into the hollow of the trunk.

"You'll stay there, my beauty!" he muttered pantingly.

Picking up the bag of jewels, he took a swift glance round, and then hurried back with all speed to the waiting aeroplane. He found the machine standing just as it had been left, and the pilot was beside it, waiting.

"You've been a fair time, Megson," he muttered impatiently.

"Couldn't help it," replied the other. "There's danger, I believe. We'd better get off without delay. I've got the loot all right."

"Good! Hop in!"

In a moment the two men were in their seats. The pilot was in front, and he was also be-goggled and fur-coated. The aeroplane was evidently fitted

with a patent starter, for suddenly the engine gave a little cough, and then commenced to hum musically. It was a very subdued hum, but suggestive of tremendous power.

At the same second a powerful searchlight was switched on, and it cast a strong beam of light ahead along the stretch of grass.

The small monoplane sped across the smooth ground for several yards, and then rose abruptly. Up she soared, higher and higher, the engine "all out." When about a couple of hundred feet high the pilot swung her round, and then commenced a spiral ascent. Evidently he did not intend to fly across country until he was at a lofty altitude.

Megson, as the other man had been called, sat still behind, quite comfortable in his cushioned seat. He was looking into the leather bag with the aid of a small electric torch. There were several jewel cases, and one or two of these he opened. The prize, he saw, was a magnificent one.

"Fifty thousand!" he murmured. "Jove! It's a fine haul!"

The searchlight had now been switched off again, and presently the aeroplane set off across the dark countryside at a terrific pace. She was a speed machine, and in the still night air she reached fully a hundred and ten miles to the hour. But this was nothing out of the common. Modern aeroplanes can travel at a much faster rate than that—especially the little "scout" monoplanes and biplanes which are used at the battle-front.

The pilot turned his head.

"We've got away O.K.," he shouted above the whistle of the wind. "I thought we should, somehow. That was wrong, though? You said there was danger? Did anything happen?"

"I'll tell you later," roared Megson.

It was certainly a little difficult to converse under the present conditions; although the engine was not noisy. In most aeroplanes conversation is absolutely out of the question, but this machine was wonderfully silenced.

Looking down, Megson saw the faint light of a town below. The machine was heading straight across country; and probably not a soul knew that it was flying high above. For at the present altitude the engine's throb must have been inaudible.

The man in the rear seat gazed at the back of the pilot's head, and then chuckled.

"How will it end?" he murmured to himself. "It's a risky game, but I simply couldn't resist it. This fellow is completely deceived. The question is, can I keep up the game for long?"

The chuckle disappeared, and a curiously familiar set of the firm jaw appeared below the big goggles.

That jaw seemed strangely like Nelson Lee's!

What could it mean?

To tell the truth, the man in the rear seat was Nelson Lee!

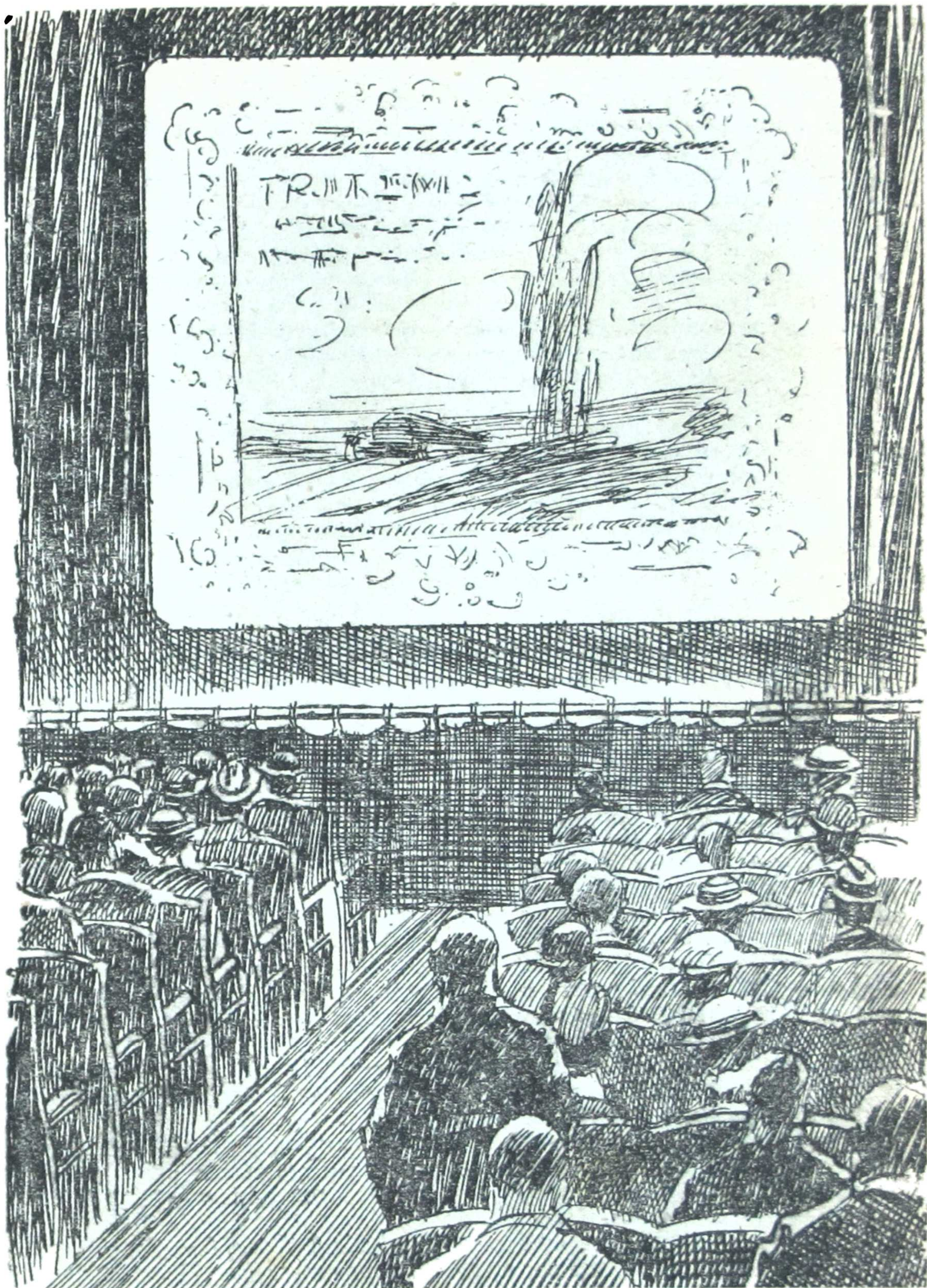
Amazing as it seemed, the great detective was in the Circle of Terror's aeroplane, flying speedily across country, behind a pilot who had not the slightest suspicion of the truth.

But how had the singular change come about?

Although seemingly impossible, the explanation was quite simple. Nelson Lee, before approaching the hollow tree, had decided upon this daring course; he had fixed his mind upon overpowering the observer—the real Megson—and taking his place in the aeroplane.

The detective had faced the man just under the hollow tree, and Megson had succeeded in getting in the first blow. It was a surprise attack, and Lee had been taken off his guard,

But he was not bowled out.



The scroll-work on the advertisement slide was nothing more than several lines of the "Circle Shorthand." There was a message written upon the slide.—(See p. 29.)

The blow from the heavy bag—heavy with the jewel-cases—had sent the detective staggering back. He fell limply to the ground, momentarily dazed. And Megson, thinking he had completely stunned his adversary, bent over him hastily, reaching for the jewel-bag at the same time.

But Nelson Lee proved the better man, after all. Although in great pain, he had seen that here was a chance which was not likely to occur again. He reached up, gripped Megson round the neck, and swung the man down with terrific force. Megson turned a complete somersault, and crashed down heavily.

His head struck a projecting root, and he lay still. A moment's examination told Nelson Lee that the man was only knocked senseless for the time being. It had been a swift reversal of the positions, and the honours were with Lee.

The detective rapidly tore off Megson's coat and goggles and helmet. Then he secured the stunned man's hands and ankles, so that escape would be difficult, if not impossible. For when Nelson Lee tied a knot it was a good one.

After that Lee had donned the coat and helmet and goggles, and had hoisted his beaten adversary into the hollow trunk of the tree. Then, effectively disguised by the headgear and goggles, Lee hurried to the waiting aeroplane. The pilot was completely hoodwinked.

And now the situation was somewhat dramatic.

Nelson Lee was in Megson's place, flying to an unknown destination. The great criminologist knew well enough that he was probably running into terrible danger—literally flying in the face of Providence—but he was not alarmed.

He was fighting the Circle of Terror; he was pitted against powerful and daring foes, and it was necessary to match cunning against cunning. It was necessary to perform daring and perilous acts in order to win success.

Lee was ready to take the tremendous risk for the sake of gaining first-hand knowledge. If the Circle of Terror could act with audacity and boldness, so could Nelson Lee. He was not to be outdone.

He counted upon being successful in at least one object. That object was to locate the secret hangar—the hidden hiding-place—of this aeroplane. Once having discovered that he would probably be able to follow up his investigations with greater successes.

But Nelson Lee was to receive a disappointment.

He had expected to be flying for perhaps an hour—during which time over a hundred miles would have been covered. But after twenty minutes had passed the pilot suddenly shut off the engine. Only the swish of the propeller and the whistle of the wire stays sounded.

"We're there!" roared the pilot.

Nelson Lee looked down. All was black, except for a hazy glow in the far distance. Right beneath the ground was pitchy and impossible to see. It was like looking down into bottomless darkness.

But at one spot about a mile ahead a twinkling red light showed. It was perfectly still, and obviously directed upwards; otherwise it would not have been so easily visible. Nelson Lee realised at once that the red light was a signal—a signal from confederates below.

The pilot had steered by compass, and had almost overshot the red light. Indeed, he had actually done so, and had then swung round, searching for it. He had known that it was somewhere in this particular district. Lee, behind, had not known that the course had been altered.

By clever airmanship, however, the pilot had located the signal, and now he was volplaning swiftly down. Nelson Lee knew that the spot could not

be a very great distance from Mount-Bevon Park, for there had not been a sufficient elapse of time for a long flight.

As a matter of fact the red light was showing upon the lonely stretch of heath between Bexley and Dartford, in Kent. The time was only just eight-fifty—comparatively early in the evening—but the heath was deserted and lonely.

The aeroplane descended swiftly, and again the searchlight was switched on. As before, the pilot brought the machine gently to earth, although the ground here was considerably rougher. But he was a superb airman, and handled his mount with consummate skill.

The 'plane came to earth only fifty yards away from the red light, and Nelson Lee now saw that a large closed motor-car was standing upon a narrow road, which was innocent of hedges or ditches. Two men were standing beside it—and one of them had evidently shown the red signal.

The pilot turned round in his seat—Lee had not moved.

"Are you asleep, Megson?" he demanded curtly. "What about your orders?"

"All right——"

"It's not all right, you fool!" snapped the other. "There's not a second to be lost. Remember, it's not nine yet. Get out, and hurry to the car!"

"My dear chap, I'm going!" said Lee easily.

To tell the truth, the detective had not known what to do. But the airman had given him an inkling, and Lee lost no time in leaping to the ground and hurrying towards the motor-car.

Almost at once the detective heard the monoplane's engine restart, and, glancing back, he saw the machine rising into the air again. The pilot had lost no time in getting into the air. Obviously, the plan had been to drop Megson here, with the jewels. The aeroplane had presumably gone off to its secret hangar.

Lee was concerned.

It had been easy for him to deceive the airman in the darkness, but he was now faced by two men! Matters seemed to be getting awkward—and before many minutes had passed Nelson Lee was to find himself in an extremely tight corner.

The two men by the car hurried forward to meet the detective.

"Got the loot, Megson?" asked one eagerly.

"Yes," panted Lee.

"Good! Hop into the car, man—not a moment to lose," said the other. "We don't want to be spotted. Everything's gone off superbly so far."

Nelson Lee was forced to comply. He saw that there was a third man at the wheel of the car, and the detective set his teeth grimly. Well, he had entered upon this adventure with his eyes open, so he must face the consequences. It must be admitted, however, that Lee had not anticipated anything of this nature.

He stepped into the car, and one of the two men took the jewel bag from him. They were both dressed like gentlemen, and seemed highly respectable citizens. They both bundled into the limousine, and the vehicle at once started forward.

It had been quick work, indeed!

Nelson Lee was inwardly alarmed, but quite prepared for trouble.

He was further disconcerted a moment later, for one of the men switched on an electric light, which was fitted in the roof of the car. The luxurious interior was now brilliant, and Lee was sandwiched between the two other men.

It was an uncomfortable predicament. But events had happened so

rapidly that he had been unable to avoid the position. Both his companions were in high good humour, and they pressed him with eager questions.

"How did you get on, Megson?" asked one. "Any trouble at the Abbey? For Heaven's sake take that infernal goggle-thing off. You'll have to, anyway, in a few minutes——"

"I prefer not to," interjected Lee curtly.

"What? Are you insane, Megson?" said one of the men sharply, and with a note of suspicion in his voice. "You know what the chief's orders are, don't you? Before we get into Eltham you've got to be as spruce and tidy as——"

The man ceased speaking, for his companion had suddenly wrenched at Lee's pair of goggles. They had both become suspicious, in fact. In the strong electric light they had noticed a certain unfamiliarity about "Megson's" build and figure.

"It's not Megson!" gasped one of the men. "Quick, Venning! Hold him!"

Nelson Lee threw further pretence to the winds. He started up in his seat, intending to get his back to the off-side door; from that position he could cover both men with his revolver.

But the detective was not allowed to act.

The pair were ready for him, and in a second he was down on the cushions, held tightly. Then, while he was secured, Venning tore off his wig and false whiskers—the disguise of the old countryman, for Lee had not, of course, discarded it.

A moment later Venning uttered a gasp of fury and amazement.

"Do you see, Stamford—do you see?" he snarled. "This fellow is Nelson Lee! How in wonder's name did he manage to—— Look out!"

For the detective had made a despairing effort. For a moment it seemed as though he were about to gain the mastery. But the odds were overwhelming, and at last he was forced back again.

Then, while he was still held, Venning tore something from his waistcoat pocket. Lee did not see it properly, but it seemed to be a little brass object, cylindrical in shape. The next moment it was held tightly against Lee's nostrils, and a sudden numbness seemed to grip his flesh. It was as though his nose had become frozen. And with this sensation came a lazy, sleepy feeling, and the detective knew that some powerful drug had been sprayed into his nostrils. He had been forced to breathe, and the drug was doing its work.

Although still partially conscious he felt incapable of resistance, and the sensation of laziness was grateful to him. He did not seem to care what happened to him. And after that all became blank.

Solely owing to utterly unforeseen circumstances Nelson Lee was in the enemy's hands, a helpless prisoner.

When reason came to him again he lay for some time quite still and silent. Then he opened his eyes, and remembrance came back to him rapidly. He awoke to his full wits almost within a minute; the drug was evidently not unpleasant in its action.

Lee had no headache, but his limbs seemed to be tightly pressed together. The explanation of this was simple, for the next moment the detective saw that he was securely bound. He remembered everything, and wondered how much time had elapsed. He had an idea that barely half-an-hour had passed.

He was lying upon a soft couch, and the wall close beside him was covered with heavy purple-coloured tapestry. A subdued reddish light filled the apartment—for Nelson Lee knew that he was in some strange kind of room.

Turning his head slightly he was able to see the body of the room; for he had been partially facing the wall. And then he received a surprise. He was not alone. A smallish man in a flowing gown was standing before a mirror—a small mirror which rested upon a table.

He was unconscious of the fact that Nelson Lee had awakened. The detective had made no sound, and the other man was apparently engaged in adjusting a yellowish, soft object which he held in his hands.

Even while Lee was wondering where on earth he could be, the man bent nearer to the glass. And his features were clearly visible to the detective. For a full three seconds he had a perfect view of the other's face. And Nelson Lee had the greatest difficulty in repressing an exclamation of absolute amazement.

For he knew, in a flash, that he was in the presence of the High Lord of the Circle of Terror!

And in spite of his perilous position, Lee was wildly elated. He had seen the High Lord's features clearly—and had recognised them. He knew that face only too well, and much became clear to him in a flash.

By pure accident Lee had learned the High Lord's identity!

Until this moment the chief's personality had been unknown—a myth. Lee had been able to form no theory as to the scoundrel's hidden identity. Yet, now that he knew it, much that had been a puzzle became startlingly plain.

Lee knew that he was not mistaken—he could not be mistaken. Too often had he seen that powerful, determined, relentless face. For, although this was the first time he had seen the High Lord as himself, the detective recognised in the Circle's chief an old enemy—a man who had pitted his wits against Lee's on many an occasion.

Not long before this affair Lee had been in the presence of the High Lord in a house at St. John's Wood; it had been during his efforts to fight the Circle when they victimised Mr. Vickers Slone, of the Grand Imperial Assurance Company. But on that occasion the High Lord—the Dictator, as he called himself—had worn a close-fitting yellow mask, and this self-same flowing gown which Lee now saw.

By sheer chance Nelson Lee had been permitted to see beneath the mask, and he knew what his chief enemy was. The High Lord, having his back turned, had no idea that Lee had come to his senses.

But, although Nelson Lee was elated at his remarkable discovery, he realised, at the same time, that it would probably be of little use to him. For, surely, the High Lord would never allow him to go free again? He was in the hands of the Circle of Terror now, and they would make short work of him.

The High Lord turned, and Lee at once allowed his head to drop. He remained in this position for some minutes, with his eyes closed. He felt that his companion was looking at him. And Lee had no intention of allowing the High Lord to discover that he had been observed.

The detective heard a soft footstep, and then his shoulder was gently shaken. Lee remained quite inert, and allowed the other to shake away for a full minute. He wished the Circle's chief to believe that he was still unconscious. There was a chance—a bare chance—that Lee would escape with his life. But if he allowed the High Lord to know that his identity was known, then Lee's prospect of living was utterly gone.

At last the detective moved slightly, and then flickered his eyelids.

"Ah, you are coming round, eh?" murmured a soft, silky voice. "That is excellent, Mr. Lee. I am anxious to have a chat with you. You will find that the effects of the drug soon wear off."

Remembering how quickly he had recovered the full use of his wits, Nelson Lee opened his eyes wide, and allowed a blank expression to fill them for a moment. Then he became fully alert.

"Where am I?" he muttered thickly.

"We have met once before, Mr. Lee," said the High Lord smoothly. "Perhaps more than once—who knows? You have been warned several times to mind your own business, and now that you are in my hands you must not grumble if I treat you in a somewhat unconventional manner."

The voice was oily and soft, and every word contained a hidden menace.

Nelson Lee, looking straight up, saw a horrible yellow face staring down at him—a face which was ghastly and repulsive. The High Lord was wearing the yellow mask, and it concealed his own features completely. He would have been surprised could he have known that Nelson Lee had, a few minutes before, seen those features.

"The High Lord of the Circle!" muttered Lee, as though just understanding.

"Exactly. You are clever, my dear Lee—extremely clever," said the Dictator silkily. "But, unfortunately for yourself, you are not clever enough. The Mount-Bevon jewels are in my possession, and by the morning they will be on their way to the Continent. But by then you will be dead!"

"Your words rather amuse me," said Lee, determined to show no sign of alarm. "I am interested exceedingly. May I inquire what time it is now?"

The High Lord smiled.

"You think you have been unconscious long?" he asked. "Not at all—not more than half an hour. You have only been in my presence for about ten minutes. The time is now close upon ten o'clock. Quite early? My agents have lost no time, you think? It was after eight when the jewels were taken from the hollow tree. But then, you see, we have the advantage of modern methods of travelling."

"It was through no astuteness on your agents' part that I am now in this position," said Nelson Lee calmly. "I have myself to blame entirely. But I am glad, for I am learning much."

"Much that will be of no use to you," sneered the High Lord menacingly. "I believe in being frank with a man of your stamp, Mr. Lee. Before twelve hours have passed you will be dead—quite dead. I am going to make an example of you—an example which will cause the world to lift up their hands in horror."

"You are in a cheerful mood," said Lee smoothly. "But why be so sure? I am not dead yet, and unforeseen incidents occur. I may even recover the Mount-Bevon jewels and return them to their owner——"

The High Lord laughed harshly.

"The jewels will leave Liverpool Street Station for Harwich by the first mail train in the morning," he said. "If you can recover them before they arrive at Harwich you are welcome to them! That is fair enough, is it not? You are welcome to them, Mr. Lee, and I give you my promise that Lord Mount-Bevon will not be further troubled by the Circle of Terror."

"Right!" exclaimed Nelson Lee promptly. "That is a bargain!"

"Precisely—a bargain. If you can carry out that suggestion—if you can recover the jewels before they reach Harwich—you may keep them," said the High Lord, with an amused laugh. "I will not go back on my word."

Then, suddenly, he bent over the couch, and his masked, yellow face was very near to Nelson Lee's.

"You fool—you pitiful fool!" he breathed harshly. "Do you think you will escape from me? Your fate is already sealed. My agents are waiting outside this apartment—waiting only for me to give the word!"

"While I am alive——"

"Bah! You are dead—dead to the world already!" snarled the High Lord of the Circle of Terror. "There is no escape for you—no loophole. By seven o'clock to-morrow morning you will be no more!"



CHAPTER V.

Nipper Hits the Trail—The Secret of the Cinema—Nipper Acts.

NIPPER jammed his cap on, and bundled himself into his overcoat. "I'm off!" he muttered disgustedly. "I can't stick this any longer. Why the dickens couldn't the gov'nor let me go with him? I'll bet a quid he's got himself into a tight corner of some sort!"

Nipper wouldn't really have wagered a sovereign, but he was not far wrong! For even at that moment Nelson Lee was in the hands of his enemies.

It was just after nine o'clock, and the lad had been at his master's room in Gray's Inn Road all the evening—waiting anxiously in the hope that he would hear something of Nelson Lee.

But the evening had been blank, and Nipper was disconsolate and uneasy. He ought really not to have expected any word from Lee so early, but he was impatient. He had an idea that his master had gone into danger—and Nipper was nervous.

If he was sharing the danger he wouldn't care a snap. But he felt irritable and cross with everybody and everything in general. There was nothing Nipper hated so cordially as inactivity, especially when he knew that Lee was engaged upon some hazardous enterprise.

And so, at last, Nipper had decided to go out.

Perhaps Fate had something to do with that journey of his; at all events, he was destined never to reach his destination. He had made up his mind to visit some very great friends of Nelson Lee's—and Nipper's—who resided at Chelsea, near the Embankment. He could at least find consolation there.

Just in case his master returned, Nipper left a note on the consulting-room table, stating where he had gone. He knew that Lee would ring up at once, if he returned and found Nipper absent.

It was a fine night, and the youngster was soon stepping out briskly along Gray's Inn Road. Anything was better than sitting still. Many and many a time Nipper had had such fears as these; but to-night they seemed more acute, somehow. There was a feeling of impending tragedy in the air.

The lad mounted a motor-'bus in Holborn, and went inside. He secured the seat just within the entrance. From this position he could see everybody who entered and left the 'bus. Not that Nipper took much notice of his fellow-passengers. He was, however, naturally observant.

And it was while the 'bus was passing along Knightsbridge that he received something of a shock.

The vehicle slowed down, owing to traffic, and Nipper saw a man leave the pavement, run across and leap upon the step. He hung there for a moment, gaining his balance, and the light from the interior of the 'bus—subdued though it was—showed his face very distinctly.

It just happened that Nipper was looking at the man idly, without interest. But somehow his features seemed familiar. Nipper wrinkled his brow, and watched the man as he passed up the stairs to the top, having paid his fare to the conductor first.

And the lad caught a momentary profile view. Like a flash he realised the truth. The man was the agent of the Circle of Terror who had tampered with the telephone in Nelson Lee's consulting-room two or three days earlier!

"Phew!" breathed Nipper, with subdued excitement. "That's the chap right enough! I'll swear he's the same rotter. I knew his beastly eyes in a tick!"

The "telephone man" was disguised, for he was wearing a neat moustache, and his hair was of a different colour. His clothes, too, were ordinary tweeds, whereas when Nipper had seen him before he had been attired in uniform.

But his eyes gave him away. Nipper was an expert at seeing through facial disguises. A man may alter the appearance of his face, but he cannot alter his eyes. And Nipper always looked straight at the eyes, and mentally divested his subject of moustache or beard.

He was quite convinced that he had made no mistake now.

"He's the brute!" Nipper told himself. "He's the hound who tried to kill the gov'nor the other night. I've a jolly good mind to get off when he does and follow him! It'll be something to do, anyhow!"

Nipper was glad that he had not rung up his friends in Chelsea. If he had done so he would have felt compelled to go over there. But he was quite free to do as he liked, and this little development promised to be interesting. It would serve to take his mind off the worries which possessed him.

He had come to a decision quickly, and now he waited for the Circle agent to come down. The man descended at a spot in Fulham Road, in the neighbourhood of Walham Green. Nipper took care to keep himself back; and then he, too, alighted.

His quarry was crossing the dark road, and evidently had no idea that he was being shadowed. He did not once glance back, and Nipper found his task an easy one.

And within a minute the lad received a further surprise.

The man suddenly turned into a dimly lighted doorway. Hurrying up, Nipper found it to be the entrance to a small picture theatre called the Cosy Cinema. It was only a small hall, but quite select.

And Nipper was astonished.

He remembered one previous occasion, when the Circle of Terror had first started its campaign. He had been tracking a member of the Circle then, and that man had also turned into this small cinema. Of course, all sorts of people patronise "the pictures," but Nipper thought the fact rather significant.

It was curious, at all events, that this Circle man should enter the same hall. Moreover, it was close upon ten o'clock, and people do not usually enter picture palaces at that hour. In less than fifty minutes the place would be closed.

The man paid for a sevenpenny seat, and passed inside. Nipper did the same, and when he entered the hall he found that the "feature" drama was on its last reel. His quarry had taken a seat four rows from the back, and so Nipper placed himself in a position where he could keep his eyes on the man.

After about ten minutes the drama came to an end, and then followed an

interval. Nipper remembered that the intervals at this hall were unusually long, and he settled himself down to wait.

As before, he also remembered, some advertisement slides were shown. He saw that the Circle man was quietly sitting in his seat smoking a cigarette. He was watching the slides with interest.

Nipper took little or no notice of the advertisements. The third slide which was shown, however, was different from the other two. It was neater, and had a rather elaborate surround of ornamental work.

Looking at it idly during the first few seconds, Nipper then noticed that the surround was composed of a kind of scroll-work.

"Great Scott!" gasped Nipper, under his breath.

It was as much as he could do to prevent himself yelling out aloud. His face went red with excitement, but he had been trained to control himself under the most nerve-trying circumstances. And he controlled himself now.

But he was absolutely astounded.

The scroll-work on the advertisement slide was nothing more nor less than several lines of the "Circle shorthand," as Nelson Lee had christened it. There was a message written upon the slide!

In one instant Nipper realised the amazing truth.

This picture-theatre was the meeting place of the Circle! At least, it was the source from which the ordinary members of the secret organisation gained their instructions.

And it was for this reason that every member had forced to learn the curious phonographic system. The men were obliged to come here for their orders—probably they had been previously instructed as to the time they should arrive—and they had to read those orders on these innocent-looking advertisement slides!

It was a wonderfully cute idea.

In full view of a packed house every member of the Circle of Terror could receive his instructions without a soul having a suspicion. The police could raid the place a dozen times, but they could find nothing.

As a meeting place a better scheme could not have been conceived. A man might get orders to blow up the Houses of Parliament, and none save he would be the wiser!

For the shorthand was so totally different from Pitman's, or any of the well-known systems, that the ordinary public would not even recognise a stroke. To the ordinary observer it was merely a mass of ornamental scroll.

It was an extraordinary plan, and Nipper could not help admiring the man who had thought it out. So the Cozy Cinema was the Circle's meeting place—or one of them, and this man Nipper was following had come here to get orders.

Calmly, in full view of the audience, the Circle again read the words. They were large, of course, and as clear as daylight. It was child's play to read the message right off—to those who were "in the know."

And it happened that Nipper was "in the know."

All these thoughts had passed through the lad's brain rapidly, and not many seconds had elapsed. The slide might be removed shortly, so he stared at it eagerly, reading the hidden words with some difficulty, for he was not proficient yet.

And as he read his face became set and grave.

For the message upon the screen was an awful blow for Nipper, and his worst fears were realised.

In ordinary longhand, the words were as follows:

"Instructions for No. 35. Nelson Lee has fallen into our hands. Plans have been made for his immediate removal. No. 35 must be at Eitham

to-morrow morning—Thursday, the twenty-second—with the big motor-lorry, at five-thirty precisely. He is to fetch a heavy brass-bound box and deliver it without the slightest delay to Scotland Yard. The contents will be of great value. After leaving Scotland Yard No. 35 is to abandon the lorry a mile off, in order to destroy traces. No. 35, if he carries out these orders to the letter, will be well rewarded."

This strange and sinister message was in full view of the audience, and it impressed nobody, save the Circle agent and Nipper. Everybody else did not even know that it was there.

Nipper was momentarily stunned.

He had had ample time in which to read these significant words. Nelson Lee had fallen into the Circle's hands! Plans had been made for his immediate removal. Nipper felt like weeping with mortification and fury.

But he was not allowed to ponder over the dreadful news.

Almost as soon as the slide had been removed the "telephone man" left his seat and left the building. Nipper hurried after him, and emerged into the street to see his quarry mounting a passing motor-'bus.

The lad dashed forward, realising that he had nearly been too late. He saw the Circle agent disappear inside, and then heard the bell ring three times in quick succession. Nipper leaped upon the step.

"Full up!" said the conductor shortly. "No room!"

"I can stand——"

"Got four standing already. Full up!"

And Nipper was obliged to drop off the 'bus. It was galling in the extreme, but it couldn't be helped. He had lost his man, but Nipper realised that it was not of much consequence. The young detective had learned all that was necessary already.

Moreover, it was better perhaps that the 'bus was full up. If Nipper had been allowed to enter the Circle man might have recognised him; and then trouble might have followed. For the scoundrel would have guessed that Nipper had been following him. He would not have guessed, however, that the lad had read every word of the shorthand message.

Nipper waited for awhile, and then mounted another 'bus, bound for the City. He climbed on top and sat down in the rear seat. Here he gave himself up to deep thought.

He was worried to a terrible extent.

Nelson Lee was in the Circle's hands! Before morning, perhaps, he would be killed. Nipper scarcely felt capable of going home. The shock was so great that his brain was somewhat numbed.

But what did that message mean?

What was the box which "No. 35" was to fetch from an unknown address in Eltham at five-thirty in the morning? What did the box contain? And why, above all else, was it to be delivered at Scotland Yard?

Nipper had terrible suspicions, and he felt almost frantic.

If the message had been more precise, the lad would have rushed off to Eltham at once. But a journey there would be futile. No. 35, of course, knew where to go, but Nipper did not. And that made all the difference. Nipper was in the galling position of knowing the dreadful truth, but yet he was powerless to go to his master's rescue.

By this time, too, Nelson Lee might be dead.

"Oh, I won't believe it!" panted Nipper despairingly. "It's too horrible! The poor guv'nor!"

Nipper's elation at having discovered a most important secret—the secret of the Cozy Cinema—had died completely away. Everything in his mind was overshadowed by the knowledge that Nelson Lee was in peril, and possibly dead.

What was the meaning of that strange message? Why was the brass-bound box to be fetched from Eltham? Nipper asked himself the message time after time. And at last he came to a positive decision.

He knew that he could do nothing alone. And so his thoughts turned to Scotland Yard. He would go straight to the famous police headquarters and get in touch with Detective-inspector Lennard, of the C.I.D.

Lennard was a most capable officer, and a shrewd, hard-headed man. He and Nelson Lee were firm friends, and had been for years. They had passed through many adventures together, and Lennard was always the first to acknowledge that his unofficial colleague was as smart a man as ever breathed.

And so Nipper went to Detective-inspector Lennard, and found the Yard detective in his private office.

CHAPTER VI.

The Brass-Bound Box—And What It Contained—Nelson Lee Scores.

THIS is the best we can do, Nipper. I'm not very hopeful, for your information is vague in many respects."

"That's the worst of it, Mr. Lennard," said Nipper gloomily. "But I think we stand a chance of collaring the rotter with the brass-bound box. And if we do succeed we may get on the track of the guv'nor."

Nipper and Detective-inspector Lennard were upon the road between Lee and Eltham, and the time was just five-thirty. It was only just dawn, and the road looked dim and chill in the quarter-light.

Not a soul save these two was about. The road in both directions was quite deserted, and the inspector was looking somewhat doubtful. But he kept up a cheery conversation for Nipper's sake. He could see that the lad was pale and haggard and intensely worried.

To tell the truth, Lennard was decidedly pessimistic. He was of the opinion that this enterprise of theirs would prove fruitless—so far as aiding Nelson Lee was concerned. They might succeed in waylaying the lorry with the brass-bound box, but that would not be of much use.

Nipper had greatly impressed the Scotland Yard detective the previous night, and Lennard had received special instructions from his chief to proceed to Eltham with the lad. Lennard had grave fears concerning Nelson Lee's safety.

The message upon the screen of the picture palace was extremely significant and sinister. Under ordinary circumstances Nipper would certainly not have divulged that secret to a Yard official. But now the lad's "guv'nor" was in dire peril, and he would have gone to any length in his efforts to get on the track.

But Nipper did not go into full details, even then. The main facts were, however, sufficient for the inspector. Nelson Lee had embarked upon an affair on behalf of Lord Mount-Bevon; and as a consequence the detective had landed himself in difficult straits. From Nipper's information it would appear that Lee was doomed.

But what could be done.

Until Nipper had seen that shorthand across the screen the lad had not even known that Lee was in danger. But he knew now, and that knowledge was all the more galling by the fact that the most essential details were lacking.

A motor-lorry was to be at Eltham at five-thirty—that was all. Eltham is a somewhat large and straggling neighbourhood, and it was quite impossible

for Nipper to know where his master was. And it was not even certain that Lee was in Eltham at all.

The whole affair was most disconcerting and complex.

And, under the circumstances, Lennard had advised one course of action. That was to station themselves upon the road on the London side of Eltham and wait. The motor-lorry, containing the mysterious box, would certainly pass that way on its journey to London—to Scotland Yard.

At that time in the morning there would not be many lorries about, and probably the first one that came along would be the Circle vehicle.

In any case, there was a decidedly sporting chance of being successful in waylaying the lorry. And, once that was accomplished, developments might follow. Lennard had not thought it necessary to bring other C.I.D. men with him. The lorry would contain merely the driver—No. 35—and it would be an easy matter to arrest him.

But, upon the whole, the situation was not rosy.

"It's gone the half-hour," declared Lennard, glancing at his watch. "I don't suppose we shall have to wait long, now, Nipper."

"I'm fed up with waiting," said Nipper, miserably. "Oh, Mr. Lennard, do you think we shall be able to find the guv'nor? I'm so jolly worried I can't keep still for a second. I'm all on the jumps."

"I can well understand your feelings, young 'un," said the inspector kindly. "But don't worry—that will do no good. We must hope for the best, you know. I dare say everything will turn out all right in the end."

Lennard spoke cheerfully, but the words were not sincere. In his own heart he believed the worst, but he would not upset Nipper for the world. The poor lad was quite agitated enough as it was.

It was the waiting which had been such a trial. But at last the period came to an end. For, at a quarter to six two lights appeared in the distance ahead. It was still gloomy, for the dawn had not fully broken. And almost at once Nipper and Lennard saw that the lights were carried by a somewhat old and dilapidated motor-lorry. Curiously enough, in that tense moment, Nipper found himself thinking of those instructions on the picture-palace screen. It would not be much sacrifice to abandon this old vehicle, for it must have been nearly at the end of its life.

The lorry came rumbling and rattling along, and Lennard braced himself for that which was to follow. He saw, to his satisfaction, that only one man was upon the motor-van. It was covered and bore no name of any description.

As it drew close Detective-inspector Lennard stepped into the middle of the road, and held up his hand. If this lorry proved to be quite an innocent local tradesman's van, then, of course, it would be allowed to proceed. But it was soon proved that the watchers had been rewarded for their vigil at the first attempt.

"Stop!" shouted Lennard sharply.

The man on the lorry instinctively grabbed his brake, and then changed his mind. Instead, he swerved somewhat dangerously, and it was his obvious intention to outwit the official detective.

But Lennard was not to be frustrated in that way—neither was Nipper. As the lorry rumbled past they both broke into a swift run, and managed to grasp the tailboard. In a moment they were both in the vehicle, and they saw before them a huge, solid wooden box bound with brass at the corners and edges.

"Now, then, my man!" rapped out Lennard curtly, "so you thought you'd try a game with me, did you? I am a police officer, and you will be well advised to submit quietly."

In order to make the man submit even more quietly the inspector snapped

a pair of handcuffs over his wrists before he was aware of Lennard's intentions. The lorry had now come to a standstill, and there was a momentary silence.

"What's the game?" demanded the driver, with a sullen scowl. "This is a fine thing, ain't it? What have I done? My name's Higgins, an' I'm cartin' this box over to New Cross——"

"Yes, I know all about that," interposed Lennard smoothly. "You'd better say as little as possible, my man. You'll do yourself no good by telling lies. What's in this box?"

"How should I know?"

"I'm not asking how you should know," replied Lennard sharply. "What does it contain?"

Higgins, as the driver called himself, was obviously agitated and alarmed. Nipper could see that he was the man who had been referred to in the instructions as No. 25—the man who had attempted to kill Lee and Nipper in their own rooms. He was a criminal of the worst type.

"What's the use of questioning the rotter, Mr. Lennard?" put in Nipper impatiently. "We'll bust the box open and have a look inside for ourselves. That's the best way, I reckon."

The driver looked round with scared eyes.

"Don't you open that box!" he panted hoarsely.

"Oh, indeed!" flashed Lennard rapidly. "So we mustn't open it—eh? I'm afraid you are getting frightened, my friend. That does not look at all healthy, to my thinking. Yes, Nipper, we will open the box at once."

"If you can!" sneered the prisoner.

It certainly seemed to be a difficult task, for the brass-bound box was fitted with a heavy, solid lid with huge, iron hinges. The front was fastened down by means of no less than four massive locks. Obviously the case contained something of exceptional value.

But Nipper was resourceful. There were several steel repairing tools lying upon the floor of the lorry, and the lad selected a heavy crowbar and set to work with a will. As he didn't care how much damage he did, he very soon made an impression. The first lock was wrenched off almost at once, for, with the leverage of a sharp-pointed crowbar, even a heavy lock was forced to give way.

The others followed quickly, and then Nipper threw the lid back with a gigantic heave.

A gasp of horror came from the lad's lips.

"Great Heaven," he panted, "it's—it's the guv'nor!"

The still form of Nelson Lee lay within the box!

It was an appalling discovery. Lennard, as he gazed within, was quite positive that Lee was stone-dead. But even as this terrible thought entered his mind, the doubled-up form in the box moved slightly, and a deep sigh sounded.

"He's alive!" roared Nipper in a tremendous shout of joy. "The guv'nor's alive, Mr. Lennard."

The lad went nearly off his head with excitement. In two minutes Nelson Lee had been lifted out and was laid upon the floor of the lorry. Then Nipper and the inspector bent anxiously over him. The arrested man stood looking on, pale and frightened. He had sense enough not to make a dash for liberty, for, handcuffed as he was, it was quite impossible for him to get far without being re-arrested, even supposing he escaped from Lennard, which was extremely doubtful.

Nipper was breathing hard as he bent over his master. Lee was in a sorry plight. For the first few minutes his face was blackish, and it was

impossible for him to speak or know what was occurring. He was breathing in great gulps, and Nipper feared that the detective was either poisoned or dying from some other cause.

But as the minutes passed it was seen that Nelson Lee improved perceptibly, and after a comparatively short while he opened his eyes and gazed dully about him. Then, suddenly, a look of intelligence entered his eyes.

"Why, it's Nipper!" he exclaimed lazily. "Good old Nipper! I thought perhaps you'd come along before it was too late. Good for you, young 'un!"

"Oh, guv'nor!" choked Nipper.

There were tears in the lad's eyes, and even the hardened Lennard felt something which seemed suspiciously like a lump in his throat. He swallowed it down indignantly, and bent closer to Nelson Lee.

"Cheer up, Lee!" he exclaimed heartily. "I'm here, too. What, in the name of all that's extraordinary, have you been doing to yourself?"

"Hallo! Hallo! Lennard, too!" said Lee in a firmer voice. "Well, this is a pleasant surprise. Upon my soul," added the detective in surprised tones, "I have not arrived at Scotland Yard, surely? If so, my amiable friends must have made a sorry miscalculation."

"No, you're not at Scotland Yard," said Lennard. "You're about half-way between Eltham and Lewisham."

Nelson Lee struggled into a sitting position, and then, with Nipper's assistance, rose to his feet. He was somewhat unsteady, but growing stronger every minute.

"Only just out of Eltham!" he ejaculated. "Then I suppose I was only in that infernal box for about fifteen minutes. Another fifteen, and I should have been dead!"

"What's the matter with you, guv'nor?" asked Nipper anxiously. "I reckon you've been drugged, haven't you?"

"Suffocated is the word, Nipper—deliberately, fiendishly suffocated!" replied Nelson Lee, in a hard, cold voice.

"Thank Heaven you're safe, sir!" said Nipper fervently.

Nelson Lee sat down on the corner of the box and breathed heavily for several moments. His face had resumed its normal complexion by this time, but he was still far from being right.

"I won't go into details here," he said quietly, "but you have saved me from the most horrible death a man can experience. Indeed, I went through all the horrors before unconsciousness mercifully came to me."

Lee pointed to the box below him.

"You see this ghastly contraption?" he went on. "I was placed in there by the High Lord of the Circle of Terror, and then, before I could move a finger to save myself, the lid was crashed down upon me. See how it is made, Nipper. Just examine, Lennard. When the lid is closed it is airtight—absolutely and utterly airtight."

"Good heavens!" muttered Lennard, in a tone of horror.

"Do you understand the ghastly nature of the trap?" continued Lee. "It was the intention of the High Lord to have me conveyed to Scotland Yard. Imagine my fate. I was almost done by the time you opened the box. If you had not rescued me, my death would have been certain. By the time I reached the Yard I should have been stone-dead—suffocated!"

"Oh, the devils!" panted Nipper.

"They are worse than that, if such a thing is possible," declared Lee grimly. "I was told that it was merely the Circle of Terror's method of

displaying their ruthlessness. My fate was to be an object-lesson for the world. I was to be delivered at Scotland Yard—a corpse!”

“The dastardly rogues!” exclaimed Lennard fiercely. “But we’ve outwitted them, Lee—praise be to Heaven! I do not mind admitting that I had grave fears, and to see you alive is splendid. Nipper, I am sure, is overjoyed. The poor lad had been well-nigh distracted for hours past.”

Lee patted his young assistant upon the back.

“You needn’t tell me your yarn yet, young ’un,” he said kindly; “but I know that you’ve saved me—you always manage to turn up at the right time. And you, Lennard—you’re a useful sort of chap now and again.”

There was great gladness in Lee’s voice as he spoke. But his expression changed quickly, and he took out his watch—which had not been removed—and glanced at it. Then he looked up again, with a tense, eager light in his eyes. Notwithstanding the dreadful time he had just passed through, the keen detective instinct was uppermost in him.

“By James, I was almost forgetting!” he exclaimed quickly. “We may just have time to do it, Lennard!”

“To do what?” demanded the inspector.

Nelson Lee’s eyes sparkled.

“I believe I have got the High Lord in a cleft stick!” he exclaimed, with all his old vitality. “There is a distinct chance that I may be absolutely successful in this case, after all.”

And, in quick sentences, Nelson Lee explained his interview with the High Lord of the Circle. He explained how the chief had sneeringly offered to let Nelson Lee keep the Mount-Bevon jewels if he could regain them before the Harwich mail-train arrived at its destination.

“When he made that offer,” added Lee, “he fully intended to have me killed. We may recover the jewels—we shall recover them, if there is sufficient time.”

“But the High Lord won’t keep his word,” said Lennard doubtfully. “It will only mean further trouble for Lord Mount-Bevon.”

“I’ve got an idea that the Dictator, as he calls himself, will remain fast by his bargain,” replied Lee. “Criminal and murderer though he is, I believe he will consider it undignified to go back upon his word. Time will show, of course.”

After that things moved apace.

Detective-inspector Lennard took the wheel, and the whole party drove into Lewisham in the lumbering motor-van. On the way Nipper told Lee of his important discovery, and how he had got upon the track. The detective was astonished and highly pleased.

He himself, it appeared, had been left in the tapestry-hung room until early morning. Then his bonds had been removed, and he had been forced into the brass-bound box. It was later proved that the box had been left by the side of the road, in the darkness, quite by itself. Thus the police were quite unable to discover the house in which Lee had been imprisoned.

But the famous detective, in spite of all the excitements and perils, was entirely successful.

Once Lewisham was reached, Lee hired a powerful car, and in this he and Lennard and Nipper rushed up to Liverpool Street Station. While Lee had been getting the car Lennard had handed his prisoner into the local police-station, and had telephoned to the Yard.

The trio arrived at the famous Great Eastern terminus ten minutes before the departure of the first Harwich express. They did not show themselves until the last minute. But the railway officials had already received instructions, owing to Lennard’s telephoned warning.

At the very last moment the gate was closed, and it was not until then that anything unusual was observed. But, in short, the train was arrested; it was not allowed to proceed out of the station, and every passenger was quietly informed that he or she was under observation. Scores of Scotland Yard detectives swarmed through the compartments. Upon Lennard's instructions they had been sent to the station, and had entered the train as ordinary passengers.

The result was highly satisfactory. Within ten minutes the Mount-Bevon jewels—quite intact—were found in the possession of a well-dressed gentleman, who was, Lee at once saw, none other than the man Venning, who had helped to overpower him in the limousine the previous night. Venning was not the name he was known by, for he was quite famous in the City as a shrewd man of business.

He was taken totally unawares in the train. Everything was found in order; his passport was perfect, and he was ostensibly travelling to Holland on a very innocent business deal. But for Lee's positive information—kindly given to him by the High Lord himself—the Mount-Bevon jewels would have been lost for ever.

It was the irony of fate that the High Lord's offer should recoil upon his own head. Needless to say, Venning was committed for trial, and it was certain that he would receive stiff punishment. Thus another member of the Circle of Terror had found Nelson Lee more than his match. The man was possibly a member of the Circle's inner committee; but this, of course, could not be proved.

Another blow had been struck at the grim society. The Circle's great campaign of terror was not panning out so well as the scoundrels had first imagined. And that very same afternoon—after Lord Mount-Bevon had joyously received his jewels back—a communication from the Circle of Terror was delivered at Gray's Inn Road.

Nelson Lee had expected something of the sort, but, upon the whole, he was pleasantly surprised. The detective had been resting all day, and he and Nipper had exchanged stories and compared notes. But there was one thing which Lee had not yet revealed.

As he opened the letter which had just been delivered he smiled slightly, and then read the words with real amusement. Nipper looked over his shoulder, and gripped his master affectionately.

The message ran:

"Congratulations! You have won this round of the game. I will stick to the letter of my promise, and Lord Mount-Bevon will be troubled no further. I admire you intensely, my dear Lee; but you have signed your own death warrant, and, incidentally, Nipper's. The Circle of Terror will not allow you to live.

"THE HIGH LORD."

Lee tossed the communication on to the table.

"These threats become somewhat monotonous when they are so often

Write to the Editor of

ANSWERS

if you are not getting your right PENSION

repeated, Nipper," he remarked easily. "But I fancy the Circle means business this time."

"Great Scott! Haven't they meant business so far, then?"

"Between the two of us, young 'un, we have discovered much," went on Lee, smiling at Nipper's reply. "But I think my discovery beats yours, my lad. Our campaign against the Circle is progressing splendidly, and I am now going to reveal to you an amazing fact."

"What is it, guv'nor?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"While in that unknown house at Eltham I discovered the one thing I have been striving for all along," declared Nelson Lee evenly. "I learned the identity of the High Lord himself. Yet that gentleman has no suspicion that I found out his secret. We have both met the High Lord before, Nipper."

"Why, I've never seen him at all!" protested the lad.

"On the contrary, you have seen him time and again," was the detective's reply. "Now, don't shout, but I solemnly declare to you that the High Lord of the Circle of Terror is none other than Professor Cyrus Zingrave!"

"Pro-Professor Zingrave!" stammered Nipper dazedly.

"Exactly," said Lee. "I saw him distinctly for an appreciable time. I am not mistaken, Nipper. The High Lord is Professor Cyrus Zingrave—once famous as Chief of the League of the Green Triangle!"

Nipper was flabbergasted.

It was an astounding revelation. Solely owing to Nelson Lee's efforts the League of the Green Triangle had been wrecked, and Professor Zingrave had been forced to flee. Now, it seemed, the master criminal had returned, and was waging a war on humanity which was ruthless and unscrupulous.

Nelson Lee took Nipper by the shoulders.

"We've got to stand together, you and I, my boy," said the great detective quietly. "We are pitted against an old enemy, and all his hatred is centred upon us. Professor Cyrus Zingrave is a clever man, and it would be foolish to say otherwise. We must be prepared for very strenuous times in the future."

"I'm ready, guv'nor," said Nipper promptly.

"Good lad! And so am I," he declared emphatically. "The Circle of Terror will have some strenuous times, too, I fancy!"

And, as events proved, Nelson Lee had never spoken a truer word.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK, under the Title of

"The Monk of Montessor,"

Will be published another Long
Complete Story of NELSON
LEE v. "JIM THE PENMAN."

Send this Copy to Your Friend at the Front!

THE ISLAND OF GOLD

A Story of Treasure Hunting in the South Sea Islands

By FENTON ASH

You can begin this Story to-day!

ALEC MACKAY, the hero of our story, with CLIVE LOWTHER, an old chum, DR. CAMPBELL, and BEN GROVE, a hearty old "sea dog," are comrades in an expedition to the South Seas in search of a supposed treasure island.

They meet with many adventures. One day, Alec and Clive are lost in a rocky and cavernous part of the island. They sit down to talk matters over, but immediately become the targets of a troop of huge apes, who threw pebbles at them from the rocks above. Alec examines one of the stones and finds it to be coated with gold—one of those for which the party is searching!

They fall in with a party of blacks led by a stalwart native named OLTRA, and an Irishman—one PETE STORBIN, who warns the treasure hunters against a rascally filibuster—PEDRO DIEGO, and his gang By some means the pirate has got to know the object of the expedition. This points to the necessity of a stronghold, and the very day following its completion, Pedro Diego attacks.

(Now read on.)

The End of the Fight.

TOM READ and his sailors, meantime, were also fighting like heroes against heavy odds, when, in the midst of it all, there came the crashes of the great masses of rock down the mountain side.

The roar was deafening. The boulders came hurtling down, leaping against the base of the rock on which the platform stood, flying into a thousand pieces like exploding shells, with a noise like the booming of cannon.

The air became filled with rolling clouds of dust, so that the assailants could not see what had happened, or who or what it was that was attacking them. They could scarcely see one another; but they could hear the earth-shaking crashes, and as the dust-laden air was filled with flying pieces of rock, it seemed to their terror-stricken minds that the people on the rock, or some other unknown and unexpected foes, had opened upon them a terrific cannonade.

There was a momentary halt, an outcry of screams and cries, of curses and revilings, and then began a stampede back to the boat.

On the platform, a terribly fierce, determined struggle was still going on between the defenders and those who had gained a temporary footing there; but now the falling rock and the cries and shrieks of dismay and fear among the filibusters below told a tale of their own to the natives, who suddenly took heart again, and rushed to the assistance of the white men.

Diego and those with him were surrounded, and had to fight hard to make their escape. In the end, however, he and a few of his men made their escape, leaping back over the boulders, and disappearing amid the thick cloud of

dust and the flying pieces of rock, leaving several of their party dead or wounded behind them.

Alec and Read paused for breath and looked round. Many forms were lying about. Two of the sailors and several natives—Menga amongst them—were stretched on the rocky floor. Down Alec's face a little stream of blood was trickling. Tom Read had a wound in the left arm, which another sailor was binding up for him.

Kalma came up to Alec with a cloth he had got from somewhere, and insisted on binding round his head, for the young fellow had received a nasty cut, which he owed to the pirate leader himself, and which might have been fatal if it had not been partly parried by the devoted Menga.

Their foes by this time were rushing panic-stricken down the shore towards their boats, scrambling into them, and pushing off in frantic haste.

As soon as they were clear of the shore and beyond the reach of that awful cannonade of rock, they began looking round for their vessel, and here a fresh surprise awaited them.

In the near distance, a large number of canoes could now be seen coming towards them. They were filled with natives, and by their demeanour and the way they were brandishing their spears, firing their guns, and shouting and gesticulating, it was pretty clear they were not friendly visitors so far as the filibusters were concerned.

Meantime, those men who had been left on board the Hawk, seeing the canoes approaching and their hostile demonstrations, had deemed it prudent to shift their position. They were moving, therefore, in such a manner as partly to avoid the oncoming canoes and at the same time meet their own boats on their way from the shore.

No doubt the men left in charge were a scratch crew, unused to handling her, and doubtless, also, they knew nothing of the sunken reef, even if its existence was known to Diego himself.

However this may have been, it came about that, in going to meet the boats, the Hawk was run on the reef; and there she stuck fast, in spite of all the efforts of those on board to back her off.

History records that the British troops "swore terribly in Flanders." However strong their language may have been in those old days, it could not well have exceeded in emphasis what we may imagine Diego and his lieutenants indulged in when they found their vessel aground on the reef and a crowd of canoes filled with hostile natives in sight.

But yet worse was in store for the discomfited gang. They had now all left the shore and scrambled into their boats. There they were safe from any further avalanches of rocks, and the party on the Crow's Nest were for a while too busy tending their wounded to trouble much about them.

It looked as if there might be time to get the Hawk off and steam away before the canoes could come up. The boats were rowing hard, therefore, with that intention, when there came again the boom of a cannon, and a big shot came hurtling and screaming over their heads.

Looking to see whence it came, the yacht was visible, no longer in tow of the motor-boat, coming along under her own steam, evidently making for the gap, and firing as she came on.

The next shot was aimed at the Hawk, and another smaller explosion that followed with a burst of smoke and splinters on the vessel, told that it was a shell and that it had found its mark.

This destroyed the last hopes of the beaten crowd. With the yacht coming to close quarters on the one side and the canoes closing in on the other, it was obvious that all hope of saving their ship must be abandoned. If they

stopped longer to try to get it her off, it would only end in their being all captured.

Pedro Diego saw this, and realised that his one chance of escape now lay in making off at once in the boat before either the yacht or the canoes got near her.

In a voice choking with blind fury, he gave the order to turn about once more and start off along the coast.

In order to execute this retreat, they had to pass in front of the Crow's Nest, well within rifle-shot, and Alec could have punished them still more severely had he so chosen. But he refrained from taking advantage of it. He saw how the land lay, and was now quite satisfied with things as they were.

He did not, indeed, restrain his natives from sending a few shots amongst the retreating foe, but he took no part in it himself.

The natives in the approaching canoes, however, were not going to let the gang escape so easily if they could help it. No sooner did they see that their old, hated enemies were trying to escape than they put on steam and started in pursuit.

An exciting chase followed. The filibusters, smarting under all their disappointments and defeats, plucked up courage so far when they found they had only the natives in pursuit as to make a running fight of it. But when the yacht, having got safely back through the gap, appeared in the wake of the canoes, and began to catch up to the fugitives, the last spark of the fighting fire died out.

The defeated ruffians ran their boats ashore, left them there, and ignominiously took to their heels.

And so finally ended Diego's attempt to capture the explorers' yacht and their camp.

The half-dozen men left on board the Hawk surrendered to Captain Barron, and he sent a party of his own men to take charge. Then he passed a tow-line on board, and, after a little trouble, pulled the disabled vessel off the reef. So far as could be seen, she did not appear to have suffered much real damage.

But now the victors were faced with a curious and perplexing problem. How were they to get Dr. Campbell and his party down from their ledge, high up on the face of the mountain? Captain Barron went on shore to consult with Alec, whom he shook warmly by the hand, and there were almost tears in his eyes as he spoke to him, and thanked him for what he had done.

"Ye helped me out of an awful hole, my lad," he said, "and gained me the time I wanted, and ye did it knowin' what terrible cost it would mean for yerself. I can't thank ye; words won't come. I can only say Heaven bless ye for it!"

"That's all right, captain," Alec returned cheerily. "You'd have done as much for me. I'm so glad it's all come out right! It was such hard lines your plan failing."

"Ah!" said the skipper, with a sigh. "'The best-laid plans o' mice and men.' You know the rest. It applies well here. Instead of outwitting those scoundrels, they outwitted me. Great Scott! How would it have gone if you had not put your oar in as you did?"

"Well, well! All's well that ends well, captain. Not only have we beaten them off, but we captured their ship; and there are our friends come back, without our having to go and hunt for them underground. I suppose they must have followed some passage they found, and then found it brought them out there."

"Yes," said the captain, looking up at the doctor and waving his hand to

him, "I suppose it's something of that sort. But how the dickens are we going to get them down here?"

That was the puzzle, and while the two were considering the point they were joined by Storbin, who had given up the chase of their fleeing enemies and come ashore to greet them.

He came swaggering up, with a more wonderful figure than ever, with a yet bigger plume of feathers, his sword jangling, and all his brass armour-work clattering.

He was attended by a bodyguard of natives, and had the air of a victorious general on the field of battle.

"Sure, thin," he said, "Oi've kep' me wurrd, as ye see, an' it's a very lucky toime that I'm come it seems t' me."

"That's true enough! I'm very glad to see ye, and to thank ye for myself and me leaders," returned the captain heartily. "I think we can all congratulate one another. You've chased an old enemy; we've beaten dangerous foes off, and got their vessel. I'm not a great hand at words, and I guess our leader will thank you better than I can when he joins us. At present he's up yonder."

"So I percave," said Storbin, looking very perplexed. "How did he get there, an' how will he be gettin' down agen?"

"Just the question we were discussing when you came along," Barron told him. "By the by, where is your royal and august master?"

"Somewhere over there!" Storbin nodded his head in the direction of the canoe. "It's comin' ashore he'll be shortly!"

The captain then gave the Irishman as briefly as possible an account of what had happened, and explained the difficulty they were in.

"We'll have to make use of Tom Read's harpoon-gun again, I fancy," Alec suggested. "It'll be an awkward business to manage even then, but I don't see any other way."

More talk ensued, and various ideas were suggested. Tom Read was called in to assist at the council. His wound had fortunately proved to be only a graze, though a rather nasty one. He was cheery and good-humoured, however, and full of glee at the way things had turned out.

In the end, Alec's suggestion was adopted. The apparatus was brought, and the doctor was informed as well as could be done by signs of what was intended so that he and all his companions might get out of harm's way.

When all was ready, they retired up the passage for some distance, and Read started to try to get a harpoon with a line attached into the passage, which, as has been mentioned, opened out considerably just near the outlet, thus luckily making the operation rather more hopeful than would otherwise have been the case.

The first time the missile missed, and, striking the rock, fell back. The second went into the passage, but the weight of the line dragged it out again before those above could secure it.

(Continued overleaf.)

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However, at the fourth attempt they succeeded, and communication was established so far as a light line went.

Then a heavier rope was sent up, and, after that, some crowbars, chisels, hammers, and other tools, for the prisoners above had to arrange some means of holding the end of the rope securely before they could trust themselves to come down by it.

It was just getting dark when the doctor, Clive, and Grove descended and were able to shake hands with their friends.

Dr. Campbell took Alec aside.

"I saw it all, Alec," he said, with emotion. "I saw how you determined to try to gain Captain Barron the time he wanted, at no matter what cost to yourself. It was a most courageous act on your part. No words of mine can be adequate to thank you. You saved the yacht, and so saved us all."

"Pooh, pooh, sir!" Alec returned lightly. "You saved us on your side by turning on that shower of rocks. It was that that did the trick at the critical moment."

The doctor shook his head.

"~~That~~ has nothing to do with what you did. All the same, I am bound to say I do not know how to feel thankful enough that those rocks were there ready to our hands, and that the idea was put into my mind to make use of them."

Relieved by the defeat of the filibusters and the capture of their vessel of the fear of further attack, the explorers were able for the first time to give their attention seriously and wholly to their treasure-hunting.

Deciding that it would be a very difficult and awkward matter to try to follow the underground watercourse through the chimney, the doctor resolved to reach the ground above it from the outside.

But the mountain proved to be absolutely inaccessible on every side, for during the next few days they travelled completely round it, only to be met with frowning walls of rock which no man could scale.

Now, therefore, was the time to make use of his aeroplane, which had not yet been utilised. It had been impossible to trust it on shore so long as there had been expectation of attacks by Diego's gang.

It was unpacked accordingly, the various parts fitted together, and a day or two later the doctor made a trial trip in it.

The astonishment of the natives when they saw the white chief rise in the air and circle to and fro across the face of the soaring mountain, as a gigantic eagle might have done, can scarcely be described. A scene ensued which baffles description, the men first falling on their knees and then on their faces in lowly abeyance, then, after he had returned to earth, breaking out into the wildest singing and dancing in celebration of the astounding event.

Having satisfied himself that the machine was in good working order, the daring aviator made several subsequent trips, taking a passenger each time. In this way he landed Alec, Clive, and Grove on the top of the mountain, and afterwards taking up a tent for shelter at night and sufficient food to keep them going for a day or two.

They were lucky enough to discover a roomy cave, large enough to take the aeroplane complete, and, having stowed it away in this shelter, they started to explore the new ground around them.

(Another thrilling instalment of this grand yarn next week.)