

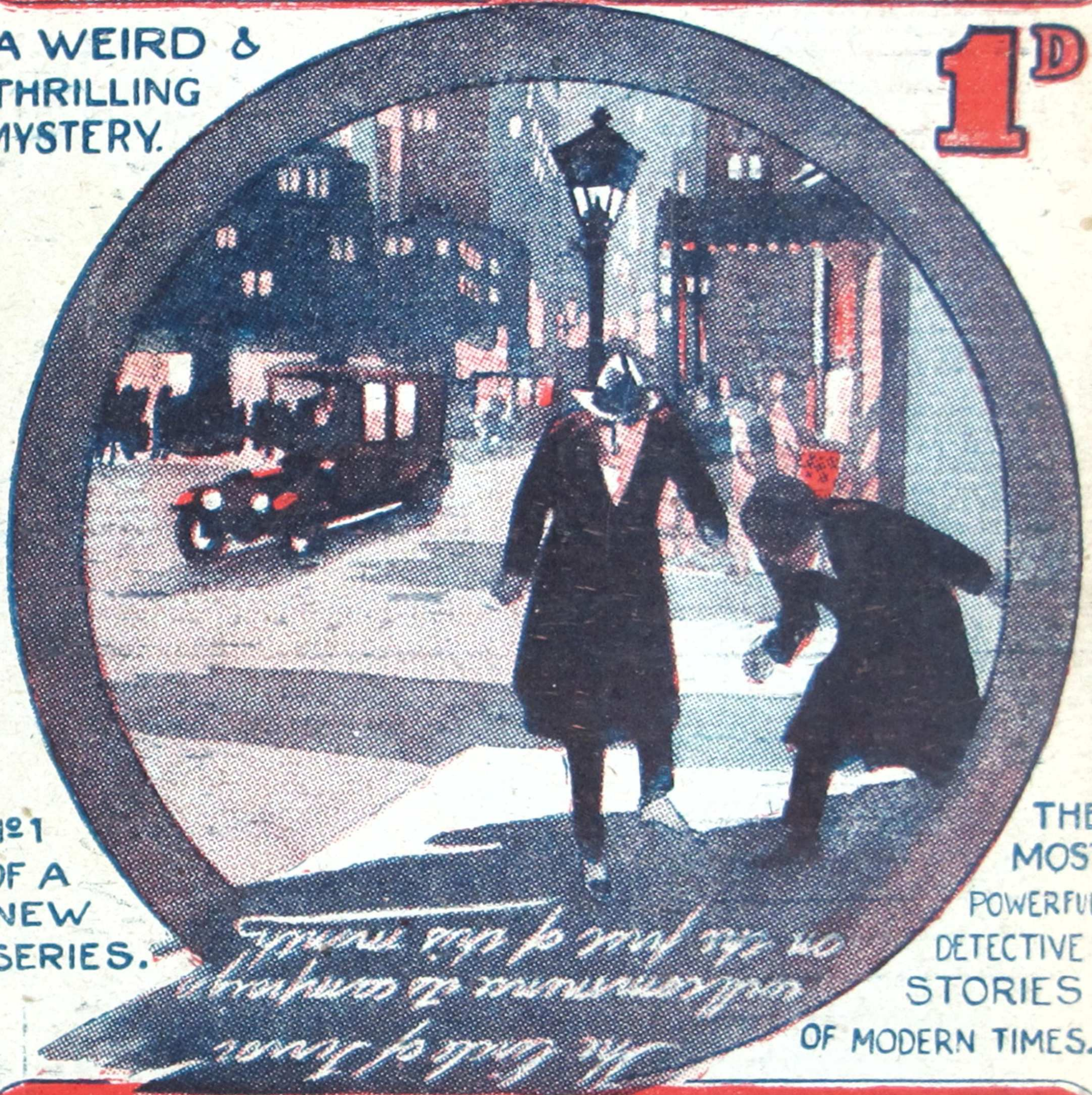
No. 85.—DETECTIVE TALES FOR ALL.—1^D.

Week ending
Jan. 20, 1917.

THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY

A WEIRD &
THRILLING
MYSTERY.

1^D



No 1
OF A
NEW
SERIES.

THE
MOST
POWERFUL
DETECTIVE
STORIES
OF MODERN TIMES.

THE CIRCLE OF TERROR

A TALE OF NELSON LEE V. THE CIRCLE OF TERROR
BY THE AUTHOR OF "THE GREEN TRIANGLE," ETC., ETC.

INCORPORATING THE "BOYS' REALM."

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A Magnificent little weapon. British Made from Start to Finish. Guaranteed to be the strongest shooting and most accurate Air Pistol on the Market. Will shoot any kind of No. 1 Pellets, Darts, or Round shot. Just the thing for indoor or outdoor practice. 1,000 charges may be fired with 'Titanic' force at a cost of 1/- only. Trains the eye and cultivates the judgment. Packed in strong box with supply of Slugs and Darts. Price 12/6 each. Postage 6d. extra.

May be obtained from any Gunsmith or Ironmonger, or direct from the maker: **Frank Clarke, Gun Manufacturer, 6, Whittall Street, Birmingham.**

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BLUSHING CURED.

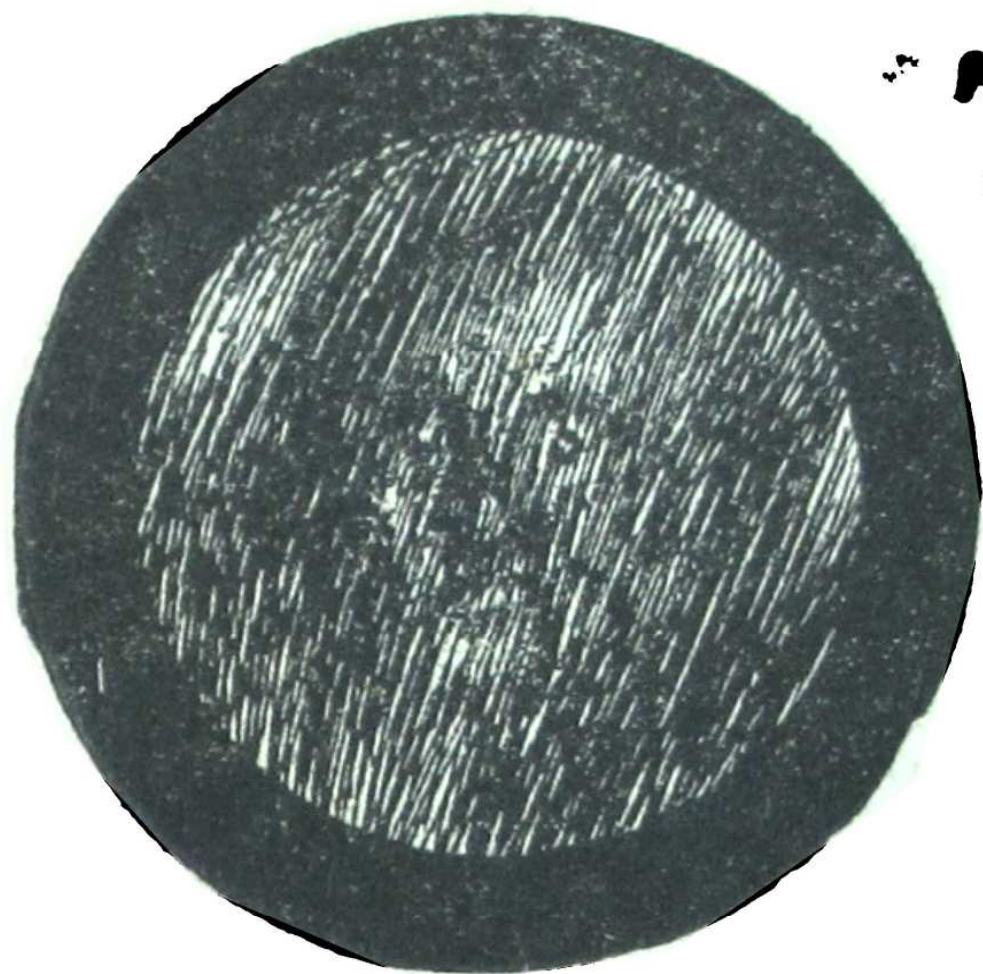
Quickly, Permanently. **GUARANTEED REMEDY** which NEVER FAILS. Send only 3d. stamps to **JULY EDISON, M.H., 87, Great George St., LEEDS.** (Mention paper.)

A Magnificent Complete Story of Sexton Blake, Detective, and Tinker, his Assistant.

"The Clue of the Bowler Hat; Or, THE VENGEANCE OF TOM GOLDING."

In This Week's

UNION JACK—1^D.



THE CIRCLE OF TERROR

No. 1 of a Magnificent
New Series.

*By the Author of "The League
of the Green Triangle," etc.*

CHAPTER I.

A Strange Find—What is the Circle of Terror?

NELSON LEE and Nipper were walking along the Strand. There was nothing particularly remarkable in this fact. That which was remarkable was destined to occur very shortly afterwards. The famous criminologist and his young assistant were on their way to interview a certain rather unimportant client in the neighbourhood of Charing Cross.

The morning was clear and beautifully fine. There was a crispness in the atmosphere which set one's blood tingling through one's veins. A brisk walk on such a morning was excellent from every point of view.

And Nelson Lee, who strongly believed in exercise, had proposed a walk. At first Nipper had been rather in favour of a taxi; but he was glad now that he had taken his master's advice. He was enjoying the stroll tremendously. It was not often that such clear weather conditions prevailed in London.

Lee and Nipper had little idea at that moment that the day was to prove one of the most remarkable in history.

"We shall probably be running down to Norwich one day this week," remarked Nelson Lee as he tossed a cigarette end away. "That affair of Sir John Selbridge's maimed horses interests me exceedingly. We shall perhaps find out the culprit if we travel down to the spot. I fancy it is a case of petty revenge myself."

"Hardly a big enough case for you to trouble over, is it, guv'nor?" asked Nipper.

Lee smiled a little.

"Under ordinary circumstances, perhaps not," he replied. "But Sir John writes me this morning to say that the maiming is being continued. And if only to save the sufferings of dumb animals I feel inclined to take up the affair. The local police don't seem to do much."

"Then there's that other mysterious business," remarked Nipper. "That strange incident that happened down at Bath, I mean, sir. What about that?"

"I am inclined to let that slide for a day or two," was the detective's

reply. "It does not strike me as being sufficiently important to warrant a special journey to the West of England. Later developments may, of course, induce me to take up the case. At the present, however, I am not particularly keen."

Nipper was about to reply when his eye caught a highly polished card which lay in the dry gutter. The lad's attention was attracted to it by a momentary gleam of gold. It was the sunlight reflected on the rich gilt edge of the card. Almost mechanically Nipper stopped, bent down, and picked the thing up.

The card was about the size of an ordinary business card, but was much more elaborately produced. The pasteboard was glazed wonderfully, and the edges gilt in the most expensive style. The card was quite plain, and bore no wording.

Then Nipper turned it over in his fingers.

"It largely depends upon certain events to-day whether we go to Norwich or not," remarked Nelson Lee, as he lit up another cigarette. "For myself, Nipper, I believe that— Dear me!"

Nelson Lee broke off abruptly. He had quite suddenly discovered that he was addressing his remarks to the thin air. At least, Nipper was no longer by his side. It was most annoying to find one's self talking to the blank atmosphere. Several passers-by, too, looked at Nelson Lee curiously—probably wondering why he was talking to himself so loudly.

The detective frowned, and looked back to see what had become of his young assistant. Nipper was standing in the centre of the pavement—incidentally impeding the foot-traffic to a large extent—closely examining something which he held between his fingers.

Nelson Lee retraced his steps quickly, and gave Nipper a jab in the ribs which effectually woke him up. The youngster gave a gasp.

"Ow! What the thunder— Oh, it's you, sir!"

"Whom did you think it was?" snapped Lee. "What do you mean by falling behind and blocking up the sidewalk in this fashion? It may interest you to know that I have been talking to the air itself—"

"Serves you right, gov'nor!" growled Nipper, rubbing his ribs. "I suppose I'm not under orders to keep by your side, am I? If you go jabbering away without looking to see if I'm with you, that's your look-out. Besides, I had a thundering good reason for stopping behind."

The pair were walking on again now, and Nelson Lee smiling a little at his young assistant's hurt tones.

"And what, may I ask, was the good reason?" said Lee.

"This, sir!"

And Nipper shoved something beneath his master's nose.

"That! What on earth is it?" asked the detective. "My dear lad, don't hold it there—I don't want to eat it! It appears to be a visiting card, by what I can see. There is nothing particularly surprising or startling—"

Nelson Lee paused abruptly. He had taken the card now, and had turned over the blank face, and was now looking at four words, which were neatly printed in the centre of the card—four words only. But they were so striking that Lee puckered his brow in thoughtful perplexity.

For the inscription which the card bore was:

"THE CIRCLE OF TERROR."

Just that, and nothing else.

"What the merry dickens can it be, sir?" asked Nipper in a puzzled voice. "That's what made me stop in the middle of the pavement. It's a

rum kind of business card, ain't it? The Circle of Terror! That sounds like the title of a new serial story or the latest six-shilling novel."

Nelson Lee looked at the card again.

"I must admit that I am curious," he exclaimed. "The Circle of Terror, eh? Rather a striking thing, this. Possibly it is an advertisement, but I hardly think so. The cost of producing cards of this nature would be tremendous—that is, to produce them in large numbers. And large numbers, of course, would be essential if it were merely an advertisement."

"Why, hallo, Lee! What are you doing down in this quarter of the world?" exclaimed a cheery voice suddenly.

The detective looked up, and a moment later he was shaking hands with a square-looking man in a dark tweed overcoat and bowler hat. He was Detective-inspector Lennard, of the Criminal Investigation Department, New Scotland Yard. Lennard was one of Lee's oldest friends, and the pair had been in many tight corners together.

"How are you, Lennard?" said Lee cordially. "I haven't seen you for some little time. You are walking this way? Good! We'll have a little chat as we walk."

The inspector greeted Nipper by pulling his ear and then slapping him upon the back. The lad grinned and returned the compliment—at least the latter part of it. He couldn't very well pull the ear of a Scotland Yard official.

"Rather curious thing," remarked Lennard. "I was just thinking of you, Lee. Two minutes ago I picked up something in the gutter, and I'd like you to look at it. For myself, I'm hanged if I can determine what it is or what it means."

And the inspector produced from his pocket a gilt-edged card precisely similar to the one which Nipper had picked out of the roadway higher up the Strand.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" ejaculated Nipper blankly.

"Dear me!" was Nelson Lee's comment.

And by way of an answer to Lennard's remarks Lee produced from his own pocket the other card. The inspector had been about to speak, but he pulled himself up and stared at the two slips of pasteboard.

"So you've got one, too!" he exclaimed. "Well, what do you make of it, Lee? What on earth can it mean? And it's rather remarkable, isn't it, that we should both find similar cards——"

"Upon my soul! What is this?" ejaculated Lee suddenly.

He bent down quickly, and picked up from the pavement still another gilt-edged card! Lee, Nipper, and Detective Inspector Lennard came to a halt. This card, they at once saw, differed slightly from the other two.

It was exactly the same size, but the words—"The Circle of Terror"—were surrounded by a beautifully printed, broad ring of delicate purple. The thing, like the others, was got up in the most elaborate manner.

Nelson Lee was about to speak when he turned his head. A few words, uttered by a passer-by, had attracted his attention. Two ladies were just near, and they had paused for a moment.

"My dear! How should I know!" exclaimed one. "A purple circle——"

"But the words, Harriet!" interrupted the other lady. "'The Circle of Terror'! Dear me, it sounds quite dramatic——"

Lee looked curiously at his two companions.

"Other people seem to be sharing our wonderment, Nipper," he remarked. "Yes, by Jove! There are at least six people in sight at this present moment who are examining the gilt-edged cards!"

Nipper and Lennard glanced up and down the pavement and across the

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busy roadway. The spot was just against the site of the old Tivoli, and was one of the busiest in the Strand. As Lee had said, several people were walking along, curiously looking at white slips of pasteboard in their hands. Obviously they had just picked them up. And Nipper's keen eyes noted one or two tiny spots of white lying on the pavements in both directions.

The mysterious gilt-edged cards were everywhere! A boy passed, holding a card without the purple circle. Then Nelson Lee spotted an elderly gentleman adjusting his glasses; the elderly gentleman held a card with the circle printed upon it.

"Oh, it must be an advert.!" said Nipper decidedly.

"Rather an expensive way of advertising," remarked the inspector, in a thoughtful tone. "And it doesn't sound like an advert. either. And whoever heard of publicity cards being strewn broadcast over the roads?"

Nelson Lee continued walking, and the other two kept pace.

"If these things were just common leaflets, it would be more easily understood," he said. "And, as you remark, Lennard, it does not sound like an advertisement. Even the publication of a new novel, bearing the title of 'The Circle of Terror,' would not warrant such expenditure. The whole thing is too expensive for an advertisement. I must admit that I am puzzled and interested."

"It's queer," declared Lennard, "infernally queer!"

What could the explanation be?

Who was responsible for the broadcast distribution of the expensive cards? And how were they being dropped? Nobody seemed to know how the cards had appeared; they had simply been discovered.

And not only in the Strand.

Nelson Lee very soon learned that the mysterious slips of pasteboard—the majority of them bearing the purple circle—had been found in almost every main London thoroughfare. In Fleet Street, in Cheapside, in Holborn, in Oxford Street, in Piccadilly, in Regent Street—and even in many main roads on the south side of the river.

The whole of London, in fact, was smothered with the strange cards. Everybody was talking about them; and everybody was mystified. The majority of the cards, it appeared, bore the purple circle.

City men, meeting at luncheon-time, greeted one another with remarks of this nature:

"What's all this queer business about a purple circle?" Or: "Seen one of the 'Circle of Terror' cards, old man?"

Nelson Lee made various inquiries, but he could obtain no information. Nobody, in fact, had the faintest notion as to where the gilt-edged cards had come from, or what they meant. Certainly no publisher was advertising a new novel; and equally as certainly there was no new drama in course of preparation.

And the "Circle of Terror" could not possibly signify any every-day commodity; it sounded more like a modern version of the "Black Hand." But the whole business was so utterly unprecedented that people were interested and puzzled and curious. By evening there was scarcely a soul in the whole of London who had not heard of the purple circle. Even the war news took second place on that eventful day.

Nelson Lee was just as curious as the bulk of Londoners; and, somehow, the great detective felt vaguely uneasy. Why, he could not tell. But he felt within him that this extraordinary manifestation was but a beginning. There would be other strange events to follow.

"Lee was undoubtedly correct!"

The evening papers did not devote much space to the affair of the gilt-edged cards. Every journal, however, had something to say on the subject; and what they said was merely idle conjecture. Any definite statement on the subject was impossible. Whoever was responsible for the affair, at all events, had made a firm impression upon the whole of London.

And somebody, of course, was responsible.

But it was the mysterious nature of the thing which excited public interest more than anything else. It is an old advertising dodge to smother hoardings with posters of a puzzling nature, and then follow up with an explanation a few days later. This seemed to be something of the same sort, only on a much larger scale.

Before the night was far advanced, however, London was to be startled to a degree hitherto unknown in the great metropolis. Even as Nelson Lee had surmised, a further manifestation occurred. But the nature of that manifestation was singular to a degree.

And it proved conclusively that this sensation was no commonplace advertising scheme. It was something greater—something strangely sinister and suggestive of untold POWER.

Nelson Lee and Nipper were busy during the evening. The detective had interviewed a couple of possible clients, and was not very well satisfied. He felt irritable and cross. Possibly the affair of the morning had something to do with his state of mind, for Lee detested anything which could not be explained.

Towards eight o'clock he switched the consulting-room lights off, and passed into the laboratory. Here, with Nipper's help, Lee was soon deeply engrossed in an intricate experiment. Once attired in his laboratory smock, and surrounded by test-tubes and retorts, Nelson Lee's temper usually underwent a change for the better.

By nine o'clock he was smiling and cheerful, eagerly watching the course of the experiment he was undertaking. Nipper, too, was interested, and mighty glad that his master was in a good mood once more.

"Splendid, young 'un—splendid!" exclaimed Lee enthusiastically. "I hardly anticipated such success. This experiment proves my theory to be absolutely correct. And now to proceed, Nipper—we are only half through with it. Hand me that test-tube."

Nelson Lee was intensely pleased with himself, and his face was eager and his eyes gleaming with satisfaction. The events of the day were completely forgotten. The mysterious Circle of Terror and all its works were thrown aside—thrust completely out of the detective's mind. He was wholly engrossed upon this intricate experiment.

Nipper, too, was equally interested, and neither he nor his master heard the clock softly strike nine. They heard it, to be more exact, but the sound did not impress itself upon their brain. And then—

Boom!

"Hallo! What's that?" ejaculated Nipper, with a start.

"Sounds like an explosion," remarked Lee, without looking up from the bench. "Just have a look out of the window, Nipper—"

"Great Scott! Perhaps it's Zepps!" said Nipper excitedly.

"Rather early for Zeppelins, my lad," was Lee's comment. "However, it is quite possible. But I doubt if any Zeppelin, once over London, will ever reach the coast again. I fancy those Hun murder-machines will give London a wide berth."

Nipper was at the window by this time. He pulled the thick curtain aside, raised the sash, and leaned far out.

The night was still and dark, and faintly starlight—an ideal Zeppelin

night. Nipper heard several people in the street below talking excitedly. And then the lad turned his head round.

"Guv'nor!" he ejaculated. "Quick! Look here!"

Lee was rather struck by the urgent tone of Nipper's request, and he was by the youngster's side in a moment. Further talk was unnecessary—for the pair beheld a most astonishing spectacle.

Even as Lee thrust his head into the night four distinct lines of fire shot up into the sky, from four different quarters—all near by.

"Rockets!" gasped Nipper.

And certainly that seemed to be the explanation. For the next moment there were four terrific reports, one closely following the other. Up in the sky four distinct bursts of fire were seen—seen by Lee and Nipper and millions of other people. The bursts of fire flared bright for a few seconds, and then seemed to take a definite shape—as many expensive fireworks do. And the light changed from intense white to a rich, beautiful violet.

"Why, what—I seem to have seen that——" began Lee.

"The purple circle!" yelled Nipper suddenly. "The sign of the Circle of Terror!"

"Upon my soul!"

Nelson Lee was utterly amazed. There was not the slightest doubt that Nipper had hit upon the truth. Up in the sky hung four flaring circles of purple fire—each one distinct to itself. The circles hovered up there, as though supported by invisible strings. Looking down, Lee saw that the purple light illuminated the street weirdly and strangely.

And, as though from a distance, came other reports. Away to the northward Lee faintly saw a glow in the sky—a glow which changed from white to purple. Since a rocket had been fired there, it was reasonable to suppose that other rockets had been fired in other outlying suburbs.

Meanwhile, the four circles still hung almost directly overhead. Thousands of people were gazing at them, and all recognised the mysterious sign—the sign of the Circle of Terror.

What could it mean?

Until that morning nothing had ever been heard of the Circle of Terror. Yet to-night the whole of London was familiar with that sinister purple sign. It was the most amazing puzzle of the century.

Nelson Lee was grave as he gazed upwards, as he saw the circles of fire slowly burn themselves out. This was no advertisement! There was something terribly suggestive of evil in the events of the day.

And later—while millions of Londoners were still discussing the affair—Lee rang up Scotland Yard. The famous detective learned that ten rockets had been sent up—four in the city, and six in outlying districts. And the police had discovered nothing—nothing beyond a few rocket-sticks affixed to various out-of-the-way fences.

The mystery was deeper than ever.

CHAPTER II.

The Chalked Signs—No Explanation—The Mysterious Aeroplane.

EARLY the following morning Nelson Lee routed Nipper out of bed, and showed the lad the daily newspapers.

There were several paragraphs—big paragraphs this time—concerning the startling happening of the previous night. One or two newspapers, in fact, devoted a whole column to the affair, in spite of the fact that some important war news was to hand.

"Nothing much," said Nipper, after he had washed and dressed. "The papers don't know any more than the general public, sir. This Circle of Terror, whatever it is, seems to be causing a sensation, anyhow."

"One of the papers, I see, suggests as an explanation that a big firm—possibly an American concern, since the Americans specialise in novel forms of publicity—is indulging in a tremendous advertising 'stunt,'" observed Nelson Lee. "That theory, however, is ridiculous."

"Why, gov'nor?"

"No firm, however enterprising, would deliberately infringe the Defence of the Realm Act by firing ten brilliant rockets on a still, dark night," replied the detective. "Last night was an ideal Zeppelin night, and a raid was, I believe, expected. Under those circumstances, the firing of the rockets was an outrageous breach of the law."

"But the culprits haven't been discovered——"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"My dear Nipper, pray consider," he interrupted. "If this were an advertising scheme, the advertiser's name would certainly be divulged at the appointed time—probably within the next few days. And then what would happen? The heavy arm of the law would descend, and the bold advertiser would be arrested."

"He'd only be fined a hundred quid, sir."

"Oh, no. He would not get off so lightly as that," said Lee grimly. "At the very least the advertiser would receive six months' imprisonment. And that game wouldn't be worth the candle. No, Nipper, there is something strangely deep in this queer business. I vaguely suspect——"

"Suspect what, sir?" asked Nipper curiously, as his master paused.

"Perhaps I had better not voice my opinion at this early stage," said Lee. "I must think, and——"

There was a tap at the door, and the next moment Mrs. Jones, the landlady, entered. It was quite early in the morning, and she had brought up the letters.

"Good morning, Mr. Lee," she exclaimed. "Good morning, Mr. Nipper. The letters, sir." She hesitated as she handed the bundle to the detective. "The postman's full of that there purple circle affair, sir. Lor' o' me! What's the world comin' to, I'd like to know! I shouldn't be surprised if them Germans had something to do with the whole——"

"No, Mrs. Jones," laughed Lee. "The Germans are innocent this time, I believe."

"Which I ain't so sure," was the landlady's comment. "Fair muddled I am, sir—fair worried, too. What with gilt-edged cards thrown on the ground, and noisy fireworks goin' off up in the sky when law-abidin' people want to be quiet, an' writin' chalked over all the pavements, it's more than I can stand quietly. Such writin', too! I had it from the postman, sir. He's been readin' of 'em in almost every street——"

"My dear Mrs. Jones, please be more explicit," interjected Nelson Lee. "Writing chalked on the pavements, did you say?"

"That's right, sir. So the postman says, anyhow," replied Mrs. Jones. "I ain't seen 'em myself."

"The postman was pulling your leg," remarked Nipper.

"I wouldn't let him do no such thing!" declared the landlady indignantly. "Pullin' my leg, indeed! I'd pull his ear if he came any tricks——"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"Quite so—quite so," he murmured. "Thank you, Mrs. Jones, that will do. One moment, though," Lee added, as he glanced up from his

letters. "Do not serve breakfast until nine-thirty this morning. Nipper and I will be going out."

"Very good, sir."

And Mrs. Jones departed, leaving Nipper glaring at his master.

"Going out, are we?" he exclaimed. "Going out before breakfast? That's a jolly fine piece of news, anyhow! And me simply starving to death——"

"You appear to be surprisingly robust for a starving youth," said Lee easily. "Never mind, Nipper. The walk will sharpen your appetite to such an extent that you will create a record."

"But what's the idea, guv'nor?" growled Nipper, who was tremendously hungry.

"Curiosity, my dear lad—mere curiosity," was Lee's calm reply. "Mrs. Jones's story of chalked writing on the pavements has interested me. We will sally out and see for ourselves."

"Oh, rats! Can't we have breakfast first——"

"You young glutton! And how many chalk-marks do you suppose would be legible after breakfast?" asked Lee grimly. "If any such marks exist they will very soon become brushed off by the constant foot-traffic. Moreover, there is a possibility of rain."

Accordingly, Lee and Nipper started out. Nipper declared that Mrs. Jones was an old frump, and that the marks the postman had referred to had probably been chalked by some humorously inclined errand-boy.

But it was very soon discovered that this theory would not hold water. In Gray's Inn Road itself there was nothing unusual occurring. But as soon as Holborn was reached Lee and Nipper turned to the left and proceeded towards the Circus. Almost opposite Gamage's the pair came across the first visible evidence of the truth of Mrs. Jones's remarks.

A knot of people were standing upon the pavement, gazing down. Other pedestrians were inquisitively pausing and trying to catch a glimpse of something on the ground. Lee and Nipper soon arrived at the spot, and in a few moments were able to read the following inscription, which was thickly chalked and very plain:

**"THE CIRCLE OF TERROR WILL COMMENCE ITS CAMPAIGN
ON THE FIRST OF THE MONTH."**

"Well, that's definite enough, at any rate," remarked Nipper. "What the dickens can it mean, guv'nor? 'Will commence its campaign'? What campaign? I wouldn't mind betting this was done by some funny kid——"

"No fear!" exclaimed a tall youth, who had overheard the latter part of Nipper's remark. "No kids did this, I can tell you. Why, these marks are all over London! They're everywhere—in the Strand, in Fleet Street, at the Bank, in Liverpool Street, in Piccadilly—everywhere!"

"How do you know?" asked Nipper curiously.

"Well, I've seen a good lot of them with my own eyes," replied the tall youth. "And everybody's talking about 'em!"

Lee drew Nipper aside, and they continued their walk. The detective was very thoughtful, and did not make any remarks regarding the curious pavement message they had just seen. On Holborn Viaduct there was another little knot of people at a certain spot. And another inscription was to be seen written upon the smooth pavement. This one was chalked within a roughly drawn circle—the circle itself having been made with purple crayon:

"THE REIGN OF TERROR IS COMING!"

Nelson Lee was very grave. If he had had a lingering doubt that the

Circle of Terror manifestation were the work of some enterprising advertiser, that doubt was now demolished.

For it was quite certain that these written threats were not in the nature of an advertisement.

"I have a vague suspicion that all this is merely the beginning of some great criminal campaign," remarked Lee thoughtfully, as he and Nipper walked on. "What the campaign is to be I cannot possibly imagine. But there is every indication that some bold and clever criminals are at work."

"Phew!" exclaimed Nipper.

"No honest citizen fired off those rockets," went on Lee. "No honest citizen would have reason to write such messages as these which appear upon the pavement. It seems that we have until the first of the month, my lad."

"That's less than a week, guv'nor."

"Exactly. The unknown, whoever he is—or whoever they are—does not mean to waste much time," continued the detective. "And there is something singularly sinister in that second chalked sign—'The Reign of Terror Is Coming.' If we only knew the source of all these happenings, Nipper, it would be a different matter, but we are groping in the dark. We know nothing—absolutely nothing."

A few yards further on—just in King William Street—there was another of the chalked signs. This one ran:

"THE CIRCLE OF TERROR—WE TERRORISE!"

People were questioning one another with somewhat blank expressions, and there was a general feeling of curiosity and uneasiness. The mysterious character of everything connected with the unknown Circle of Terror caused people to wonder whether, indeed, a strange terror was to be let loose upon the land.

Within the short space of twenty-four hours the sign of the purple circle had become familiar with every inhabitant of London. For those who had not seen with their own eyes had been told by others.

And some time later, after Lee and Nipper had returned to Gray's Inn Road, the amazing news came to hand that the chalk marks extended over every district of London. The messages themselves were nearly all the same—and a fair example has been given. They all indicated that a terrible period of unrest in the land was to commence on the first of the new month.

It was obvious, of course, that the unknown chalk writers had been at work during the night. That nobody had been actually seen writing upon any pavement was not at all remarkable. For with the streets darkened so drastically it would have been impossible to see suspicious movements. And it was noticed that all the messages were written upon portions of pavement which were in the deepest gloom at night.

Quite a considerable proportion of people were inclined to believe that enemy agency was responsible for the manifestations. It was thought that a revolution was to be engineered in Great Britain—a great upheaval, which would send the entire country into confusion and create untold terror. This, in turn, would result in Germany winning the war. For with England at sixes and sevens—particularly the munition workers—it would be impossible for the country to continue hostilities. This theory, of course, was a fantastic one, but it found a certain portion of adherents. And these people, too, put forward the suggestion that all our great munition factories were in danger of being blown up.

These panic-mongers, however, were scoffed at by the majority, who

scarcely knew what to think. Nelson Lee himself was firmly convinced that the Germans had nothing whatever to do with the affair. The Circle of Terror was something quite British. Whether it was a dangerous criminal organisation or not remained to be proved. But certainly all the evidence seemed to point in that way.

So far there had not been a minute lost; one surprise had followed after the other. Londoners had been given no rest. And it was very soon obvious that the mystery was not to be solved yet awhile.

Nelson Lee was greatly interested in the whole affair, and during the morning rang up Detective-inspector Lennard. The latter declared that the police were groping in the dark, and they had no explanation to offer. But he asked Lee to call round at the Yard for him at one o'clock. They would then lunch together and have a chat.

There was other work for Nelson Lee to be doing, but he thrust it all aside. He was more uneasy than he cared to admit—but decidedly interested and keen. He elected to take Nipper with him as far as Charing Cross; the youngster would then proceed on an errand to the West End.

When the pair started out from Gray's Inn Road by taxi it was after midday, and the atmosphere was hazy and dull. It had been hazy all the morning in fact, but no rain had fallen. The clouds were low, and the air sharp and keen. There was, however, no wind.

The taxi bowled along, and Lee was not inclined for conversation. He sat gazing at the people who thronged the streets, and it was easy to see that there was but one topic of conversation among the majority of folk. Everybody was rather tired of war talk, and this purple circle business was something new—something novel and mysterious and interesting.

The curiosity of the general public had been aroused.

There was a feeling in the air that other strange events were to occur. There was no telling what would happen next.

And at about twelve-forty-five something did happen!

Something which caused all the previous events to pale into insignificance. At last the human element was brought into the open. So far everything that had occurred had occurred mysteriously, as though by unseen hands. But on this occasion two men at least were seen by hundreds of thousands of people.

It was just as Nelson Lee's taxi was in Trafalgar Square, about to cut down into Whitehall. The traffic was very thick, and the roar of the innumerable motor-buses and taxis and commercial vehicles caused a general noisy din.

Lee's taxi was pulled up, and it slowed down almost to a crawl. Both the detective and Nipper were looking out at the crowds of people, and quite abruptly a very remarkable thing occurred.

Lee saw a boy point up into the sky, and heard him yell. Several passers-by near him followed the direction of his pointed finger. They, too, looked up, and other shouts followed. And in less than a second thousands of people were gazing up into the hazy sky.

"Great Scotland!" roared Nipper.

He dragged at his master's arm, but Lee needed no prompting. He was already looking above him. And there, high in the haze, and coming from the direction of the river, was an aeroplane.

"A German raider!" exclaimed Nipper excitedly.

And this, indeed, was the first thought which entered Nelson Lee's mind. The aeroplane was coming downwards in a steep volplane—looking almost as though it were about to choose Trafalgar Square as a landing-place.

This, however, was impossible, for sheer disaster would have followed any attempt to land.

The machine had dropped from the low clouds; a minute before it had been completely invisible. Everybody thought that the machine was German, and bombs were expected at any second.

But no bombs fell, and when the 'plane was a little nearer Nelson Lee could easily see that it was no German. The machine was a Britisher, of the fast, wicked-looking racing type. And it was travelling at a speed of fully a hundred miles per hour.

"The pilot must be dotty!" ejaculated Nipper. "He's coming down all the time. If he ain't careful he'll go whack into old Nelson up there—and that'll about finish the pair of 'em!"

"It is certainly amazing, young 'un," remarked Lee. "Surely this cannot be a military machine? No officer would be so foolhardy as to jeopardise his own life and that of the public by flying so low——"

Nelson Lee ceased speaking abruptly, and drew his breath in with a sharp hiss. For his keen eyes had noticed something of which Nipper was yet in ignorance.

Upon the lower surface of the white wings of the aeroplane there were four words—huge words in black letters—"The Circle of Terror"!

"Well, I'm hanged!" muttered Nelson Lee. "See, Nipper! Cannot you read?"

Nipper did read, and was too astonished to make any intelligible remark. He simply gasped.

The racing aeroplane was now absolutely overhead. Traffic was at a standstill, and the roar of the 'plane's engine was harsh, insistent, and told of terrific power. For after volplaning the pilot had started up again, and was now roaring away across Trafalgar Square like a streak.

Everybody watched spellbound. An episode such as this had never before occurred, and the silent awe changed to a roar of amazement as the words were seen upon the wings.

This was defying the law at all events!

The machine was expected to flash across the Square and disappear almost at once. But it did no such thing. The low altitude at which the machine was flying made it dangerous to turn and manœuvre—for it was scarcely more than a hundred feet higher than the top of Nelson's Column.

But directly over the National Gallery the aeroplane swung sideways with an abruptness which either told of a reckless pilot or a remarkably clever one. With a slight dip and a harsher roar from its engine the machine circled round, banking to such an extent that it seemed to be in imminent peril of side-slipping. But it was then obvious that the pilot was not reckless, but perfectly cool, and absolute master of his machine.

It came across the square again "all out," and as it passed directly over it was seen that there were two men seated in the body. It was impossible to distinguish their features, for they wore thick mufflers and helmets which completely disguised them.

And as Nelson's Column was passed there was a sudden flutter of white, and this was seen to be a large number of the now familiar gilt-edged cards. They fluttered to the ground in all directions.

The aeroplane shot off directly over the Strand, flying parallel with that famous thoroughfare at a height of about three hundred feet—certainly no higher. It was gone almost in a flash, the high buildings concealing it from view.

And into Nelson Lee's taxi one of the cards floated, and fell right into

Nipper's lap. Other cards were falling all round, and were eagerly being scrambled for and picked up.

Lee expected the thing to be merely a copy of the one he had already seen the previous day. But the first glance told him that this was not the case.

For there was a full paragraph printed upon the glossy card—printed superbly within a large purple circle. The words ran as follows:

“THE CIRCLE OF TERROR WILL COMMENCE ITS OPERATIONS ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE NEW MONTH. LOOK OUT FOR DEVELOPMENTS! THE MOTTO OF THE CIRCLE IS—‘WE TERRORISE!’”

Nelson Lee looked at Nipper, and Nipper looked at Nelson Lee. They had both finished reading the words upon the card, but neither, at the moment, felt capable of making any remark.

And from the direction of St. Paul's came the faint, steady hum of the mysterious aeroplane. Surely the machine would be stopped—would be brought down?

People told themselves that the aeroplane could certainly not escape. But it did escape—and disappeared as strangely as it had come.

CHAPTER III.

The Warning Letter—£20,000 Demanded—The Train Wreck.

FOR any aeroplane other than a military machine to fly over London in war time was absolutely unheard-of.

To fly over London, moreover, in broad daylight, and at such a low altitude that the general public was in grave danger if any mishap had occurred! And even military machines were never seen right over the metropolis.

Where had this mysterious aeroplane come from?

How was it possible for the stranger to fly to London, and over London, without being stopped?

The general public asked these questions indignantly, and there was heated condemnation of the authorities when it was made officially known that the aeroplane had not been traced, and that it had succeeded in getting clear away.

The majority of folk could not realise why the unknown machine had been allowed to escape.

Strenuous efforts had been made to head it off and bring it to the ground; but all these had failed, not because the military airmen were inefficient, but solely because of atmospheric conditions. The state of the weather had allowed the machine to escape.

After travelling right over St. Paul's and the Bank of England, scattering the gilt-edged cards everywhere, the “Circle machine”—as it was called—had made off towards London Bridge. Over the river it had commenced climbing rapidly, and had disappeared into the haze in less than ten minutes. From that moment not another sign of the aeroplane was seen.

Nelson Lee was not at all surprised to learn this. It was obvious to him that the airmen had flown away high above the clouds, and their machine was so fast that they had made their escape from the vicinity of London before any of the searching military machines could penetrate the haze.

Possibly, later on, news would come through of a mere satisfactory nature; but Lee did not reckon on this.

Lee's luncheon with Detective-inspector Lennard was somewhat delayed, and when it came off the latter was able to add no further information to that which Lee already knew—excepting, perhaps, in one particular.

The strange happenings, it seems, were not confined to London alone, for news had come from Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Newcastle, Glasgow, and all the principal cities, that the gilt-edged cards had been picked up. Obviously a great secret organisation was at work.

“To tell you the truth, Lee, the Yard is rather staggered!” exclaimed Lennard gravely. “What in the name of all that's infernal can it mean? The very extent and power of this unknown Circle of Terror is too apparent to be overlooked. Upon my soul, we at headquarters are at our wit's end.”

“I am not surprised to hear that, my dear fellow!” exclaimed Lee. “To be quite frank, the police are placed in a most awkward position.”

Lennard nodded gloomily.

“Confoundedly awkward,” he replied. “The public, of course, expects us to discover the truth—solve the whole puzzle—within about twelve hours. And if we don't do it we shall simply be jeered and insulted——”

“It's hard lines!” interjected Lee, with a smile. “But that's all part of the day's work, my dear Lennard. So far as I am concerned, I have an idea that you won't solve the riddle for a long time to come—if you solve it at all!”

“That's cheerful, at all events,” grunted the official detective. “But look here, Lee, what's your honest opinion? What do you think is the cause of this hullabaloo? Who do you think is responsible?”

Lee thoughtfully stirred his coffee.

“Who? I am not a magician,” he replied. “I cannot mention names; there has been no inkling of any personality in the Circle's warnings. I simply believe that a large criminal band is about to commence operations on a big scale. What tactics they will adopt and who is at the head of the concern is, of course, a puzzle which time alone will solve. But, from the evidence at hand, I should say the band is powerful, and that it has plenty of money behind it.”

“But what is this ‘campaign’ they talk of?”

“A campaign against society, I presume.”

“Burglary, fraud, forgery, and all that sort of thing?”

“Possibly.”

“We'll give the hounds ‘Circle of Terror!’” exclaimed the inspector grimly. “All this bluff and bluster won't do them any good. One slip, and we'll have the whole gang tripped up. The only thing which worries me is the size of the job! The whole country is scattered with purple circles! Who ever heard of such a case? Even the United States can't equal it! It seems like a nightmare!”

And the majority of people were beginning to feel as though they were in the middle of a nightmare, too. In peace time all this sensation would have been unnerving enough; but in the midst of a great war it seemed unbelievable. The public—or a proportion of it—naturally connected the enemy with the strange happenings.

But Nelson Lee held his own views.

The aeroplane's flight right over the City had caused a general feeling of excitement, and perhaps just a little panic. This was no German aeroplane, which could be potted and brought down. It was British, and had almost certainly risen from some secluded spot on British soil.

And the fact that the police had made no arrest caused widespread un-
casiness.

That very night Nelson Lee received something which was not altogether unexpected. But it was the first personal communication from the Circle of Terror--the first letter addressed to one particular person. All the other messages had been printed for the benefit of the general public.

The great criminologist had been out with Nipper, and when the pair returned, at about ten o'clock, they were discussing the latest development. Little clumps of people were everywhere--standing at street corners, or at gateways.

A further demonstration from the sky was expected, and the public was on the watch. But, so far, nothing had occurred, and Nelson Lee suspected that nothing would occur.

Then, when the detective got indoors, he found several letters awaiting him. He threw himself into an easy-chair in his consulting-room, and leisurely proceeded to open the correspondence. Nipper, meanwhile, poked the fire into a cheerful blaze, and took a look at the evening paper.

"Hallo! What on earth-- By James!"

Nipper looked at his master as the latter uttered the exclamation.

"What's wrong, guv'nor?" asked the lad.

"This is interesting, Nipper--very interesting," was Lee's smooth reply. "A letter from the Circle of Terror--a letter addressed to me personally. This makes things much more intimate."

"My hat! Let's have a squint!" said Nipper eagerly.

"Squinting, Nipper, is injurious to the eyesight," remarked Lee, with perfect calmness. "Besides, I haven't read the thing myself yet. Have a look over my shoulder if you are in such a hurry."

The detective had taken from an expensive parchment envelope a single sheet of notepaper. The letter was short, and had one peculiarity. It was not written by hand; it was printed, and printed excellently.

"It's a circular," said Nipper bluntly. "That's a printed--"

"Certainly it is printed, but the type was set up for my especial benefit," interjected Lee. "See, my name is at the bottom, and the wording proves that it was composed for my consumption alone. These mysterious people are nothing if not thorough. Dear me, I suppose I ought to be impressed!"

Nelson Lee spoke banteringly. As a matter of fact, he was impressed; but not in the way the writers of the letter intended. Lee was not likely to be intimidated by an anonymous--for that is what it amounted to--threatening letter. The printed lines ran as under:

"Headquarters,

"Date as postmark.

"Sir,--We think it possible that you may be called in to investigate a certain affair which will occur in the course of a few days. Having a real regard for your undoubted detective abilities, we have no wish to put you to unnecessary trouble.

"Accordingly, it may interest you to know the following fact--any interference from you, in any way whatsoever, will be rewarded by swift and silent death. You will be well advised to take this tip and steer clear of

"THE CIRCLE OF TERROR."

"Nelson Lee, Esq., Gray's Inn Road, W.C."

Lee laughed softly.

"File it away, Nipper," he said. "It is rather an interesting document. I feel highly flattered. Even before this mythical gang starts operations they betray the fact that they are nervous of my small ability."

"They say any interference from you will be rewarded by swift death,"

observed Nipper. "That's the usual fatheaded threat, of course. But interference in what, gov'nor? There's been nothing happen so far."

"But surely this is a certain indication that something is going to happen?" was Nelson Lee's reply. "It will be interesting to watch events, young 'un. I am intensely curious to know what the first move will be."

"So am I, sir," said Nipper. "A bit anxious, too!"

It was two or three days, however, before the pair got word of the opening move on the part of the unknown and unseen Circle of Terror. The word "circle," in this case, obviously implied a society or league.

And during those three days the general public were not allowed to forget the recent happenings. Several mysterious things happened. In Birmingham and Manchester and Liverpool the inhabitants were treated to a display of the rockets which had so startled London.

And in London itself another epidemic of chalk-marks broke out. But this time they were merely purple circles roughly drawn on the pavements and walls. And one morning several huge kites were discovered soaring high above the open spaces of London, and from them were great streamers, such as are used for advertising purposes. On the streamers there was nothing but that ominous sign.

As Detective-inspector Lennard had said, the thing was becoming something of a nightmare. No matter where one went, there were purple circles. The curiosity of the public was aroused to fever-pitch.

The whole of England was talking about the uncanny happenings; but the whole of England was mystified. Such a series of events as this had never before occurred in history.

And on the first day of the new month there was one man in London who knew the tactics they had adopted.

That man was Sir Roger Hudson, chairman of the Southern Counties Railway. Opening his letters in his private office, Sir Roger was astounded to find a printed communication—precisely similar in style to that received by Nelson Lee—which was at once startling and absolutely laughable. For the request made in the letter was not only extraordinary, but farcically absurd.

It was printed, and addressed to Sir Roger Hudson personally.

The railway magnate read the communication, gasped, turned red in the face with fury, and then burst into a roar of laughter. Sir Roger was a big, fleshy man, with brisk manners and a crisp way of speaking which generally made his underlings obey his orders without the slightest question.

He was about fifty-five years of age, and as hail and hearty as a man twenty years younger. He had not missed a day at his office for years, and in all his movements he was as regular as his own railway service—which was renowned for reliability.

Sir Roger thrust the letter aside for the time being. But after several pressing matters had been attended to he sent round a message to Scotland Yard, and in a very short while Detective-inspector Lennard was seated in the chairman's private office at the railway company's terminus at Edgware Road.

The inspector was closeted with Sir Roger for about half an hour, and when he took his departure he was looking somewhat thoughtful and serious. Lennard glanced at his watch as he passed through the big booking-office, and compared it with the railway clock. Then he nodded to himself, and at once chartered a taxi.

"Lee will be interested in this," he told himself grimly.

And he was soon bowling towards Gray's Inn Road. When he arrived

Nelson Lee was engaged with a client. The latter, however, departed almost at once, and the detective was very pleased to see his official colleague.

Lennard was wearing a curiously grim expression, and both Lee and Nipper regarded him expectantly. They knew that expression well! The inspector had something of importance to tell, and Nelson Lee, at least, half guessed what it would be.

"Well, they've shown their hand at last," began the inspector bluntly.

"The Circle of Terror, you mean?" asked Nipper.

"Who else should I mean? Personally, Lee, I don't quite like the look of things, and I think you'll agree with me that the situation is a bit—well, delicate. I've just come from Sir Roger Hudson, chairman of the Southern Counties Railway."

Lennard produced a letter from his pocket.

"This is what Sir Roger received this morning," he went on. "Read it, Lee, and tell me what you think of it. Sir Roger is inclined to ridicule the whole thing and openly ignore it. But I'm not so sure that that policy is a wise one."

Lee took from the envelope a sheet of notepaper and glanced at it. It was exactly the same as the communication he had received. The words were printed, and at the top, in the centre of the sheet, was a neatly printed purple circle.

"Headquarters,

"Date as postmark.

"Sir,—You are herewith ordered to carry out the following instructions. Obtain the sum of £20,000 in gold specie, and have it placed under the small evergreen bush which is precisely adjacent to the three and a quarter mile-post beyond the wayside station of Thorngate, at 3 a.m. on the morning of the third instant.

"Failure to comply with these instructions will result in disaster. The money must be placed at the above-mentioned spot, and must be left unguarded. Any attempt on the part of the police to watch the spot will be fatal. We advise you to comply without resistance. We are all-powerful, and, no matter what attitude you adopt, we shall ultimately gain our ends. So it will be better from every standpoint if you submit at once.

"THE CIRCLE OF TERROR.

"Sir Roger Hudson, Bart."

Nelson Lee passed the missive across to Nipper, and before commenting upon it carefully selected a cigar from his case and lit it.

"Do you know what I should advise?" he asked quietly.

"To throw the thing into the fire, I presume."

"No, Lennard. I should advise Sir Roger to obey the demand—to comply without resistance," was Lee's surprising reply. "By doing so he will save a great amount of expense."

The inspector stared.

"Then you think it's really serious?" he asked.

"Deadly so."

"H'm! I was rather pessimistic myself, but I hardly expected you to be so submissive," remarked Lennard. "It's a tall order, Lee. Twenty thousand—in gold, too. Gold in war-time!"

"Phew!" whistled Nipper amazedly.

"I am not surprised," went on Lee. "I more than half expected something of this kind. All the manifestations which have lately been occurring have not been engineered for nothing. And the absolute audacity with

which they have been accomplished is sufficient proof of the Circle's hidden power."

The inspector stroked his chin.

"But the thing seems so preposterous," he protested. "Sir Roger laughed at it, and swore that he would never pay a farthing. A demand for twenty thousand pounds to be placed against a deserted milepost on the railway! Pshaw! It sounds like a shilling shocker!"

"Precisely!" agreed Lee. "And it sounds—genuine. Remember the motto which this mysterious Circle has adopted—'We terrorise!' If that money is not meekly handed over there will be violence—and deadly violence at that."

"Of what nature?"

"Ah, that I cannot say. But if Sir Roger sticks to his present attitude, time will certainly show," replied Lee evenly. "If the baronet comes to me for advice I shall do my best to persuade him to send the money as ordered."

"But that's absolutely admitting defeat."

"Exactly. But can you recommend a better course? A railway company is peculiarly open to attack," said Lee. "And if the money is not paid it is morally certain that the Circle of Terror will make an example of the Southern Counties Railway in order to terrorise subsequent victims. That, at all events, is my opinion. And if Sir Roger were to comply it would give Scotland Yard a chance to investigate. Probably three or four weeks will pass before the next demand for money is made—for this is certainly only a beginning."

"The beginning of a reign of terror—to quote their own expression!" exclaimed the inspector gravely. "This looks like a sinister business, Lee; and there's no starting-point for the police, either. Why, the whole business is without precedent in history!"

But Nelson Lee shook his head.

"Not exactly," he commented. "Let me remind you of a campaign which occurred in the United States many years ago. You remember, surely? Many railways companies were absolutely terrorised and intimidated into paying large sums of money to a ruthless, well-organised gang of criminals."

"You suspect this Circle is adopting the same tactics?"

"Yes, but on a much larger scale. In the States the gang I referred to confined their attentions to the railroad companies," went on Lee. "I fancy this organisation—this Circle of Terror—will have a more widespread field. In America some of the companies were forced to run pilot engines ahead of their trains in order to prevent them being wrecked. For months the police could do nothing. And it seems to me that we here are in very much the same predicament."

"This'll be a test case, anyhow," exclaimed the inspector. "Sir Roger Hudson positively refuses to take the slightest notice of that letter. He laughed at it—scuffed at it. He says that it's only a try-on, and that he'd be a fool to send the money. Well, we sha'n't have long to wait."

Lennard took his departure soon afterwards, leaving Nelson Lee serious and thoughtful. The great detective was not engaged personally in the case, but he was, nevertheless, greatly interested. He intended following up the affair right along. It was not his business, however, to go to Sir Roger Hudson with advice. He would probably be snubbed if he did.

Sir Roger, for his part, declared that he had a right to police protection, and that the police ought to be able to frustrate any evil designs. As for sending the twenty thousand pounds down the line and leaving it there to be calmly stolen—the very idea was preposterous.

"Bluff!" exclaimed the baronet brusquely. "Sheer bluff! It's nothing but attempted blackmail. It might even be the work of some isolated criminal—a man who has nothing to do with this Circle of Terror business at all. By George, I'd never hold my head up again if I gave in!"

And he dismissed the thing with an expressive grunt and a wave of his hand. It was not worthy of calm consideration, in Sir Roger's opinion.

But Nelson Lee was not quite in agreement.

He took a far more serious view, and fully believed that the threat was no idle one. But the matter was in the hands of the police, and it was for them to deal with it. Until Lee was approached he would certainly not interfere.

To tell the absolute truth Nelson Lee was uneasy. He was far-seeing and acute. He could look ahead and could foresee many perils. Sir Roger, on the other hand, held the view that the whole thing was a game of bluff.

During the remainder of that day, and all the following day—the second of the month—the police did everything in their power to discover the identity of the men who were responsible for the recent happenings. But there was no starting-point; there was not a single clue for them to follow up.

The police discovered absolutely nothing, and when the morning of the third dawned the situation was precisely as before. What would happen that day? What would be the result of Sir Roger's point-blank refusal to obey the command?

Hudson himself was certain that nothing would happen. The police, however, were not so optimistic, and many men were detailed for special duty. The money, of course, was not paid—the demand had been ignored.

The morning passed uneventfully, and Sir Roger, in his office, had almost forgotten the whole incident; he had dismissed it from his mind as unworthy of serious thought. And then, at about twelve-thirty, a clerk entered with a note, which, he explained, had just been delivered by District Messenger.

The baronet tore it open, and found within a gilt-edged card, on which was printed a purple circle. Within the circle were the words: "You were warned. You must now take the consequences!"

Sir Roger glared at the card, and for the first time was struck by a twinge of uneasiness.

Before he could think much on the matter, however, the general manager burst into the chairman's private office with a white face, and with a sheet of flimsy paper in his hand.

"Well, Mr. Evans, what is it?" demanded Sir Roger irritably.

"A telegram has just come through, sir," replied Mr. Howard Evans, the general manager. "I am afraid it is rather serious——"

Sir Roger Hudson started.

"Serious! What do you mean?" he demanded curtly.

"The express from the South Coast has been wrecked two miles south of Yalemore Junction," said Mr. Evans hoarsely. "So far as is at present known no lives have been lost, but several people are badly injured."

"Good heavens!" ejaculated the baronet, starting to his feet. "What can be the meaning of it, Mr. Evans? The line south of Yalemore Junction is clear and straight, and I cannot possibly see how an accident——"

"The train was wrecked, sir—deliberately wrecked!" was the manager's quiet interjection. "It appears that a bomb was secretly placed on the line, and that it exploded as the train passed over that portion of the track. And near the spot several cards were found—all bearing a purple circle!"

CHAPTER IV.

Nelson Lee's Visitor—The Plan—The First Capture.

THERE was a sensation when the news came out in the early editions of the evening papers. There was no particularly important war news on this day, and editors made the most of the train-wreck.

That it was the work of the Circle of Terror was soon publicly known; the police could not prevent that fact leaking out. But the newspapers knew nothing of the demand for £20,000, and its refusal.

This being so, the general public were mystified; it seemed to them that an unprovoked attack had been made on the railway company's train—an attack which was at once murderous and pointless.

Fortunately, nobody was killed. Several people were injured—three seriously—and many had miraculous escapes. The express engine had been completely wrecked, and the two front coaches telescoped. Driver and fireman had escaped with slight injuries.

To those who fully understood the position, this evidence of deadly purpose could not be disregarded. The Circle of Terror had lost no time in revealing their power and determination. The utter ruthlessness of the act was appalling.

With a total disregard for the safety of the public, the Circle had wrecked an express merely to prove that their threats were no idle ones.

Nelson Lee heard the news long before the papers were out, and he was of the opinion that the train had been wrecked as a warning for the future. It was intended to show that the Circle would not stand any nonsense.

Sir Roger Hudson was nearly prostrated. The shock was a terrible one for him. He had been convinced that the whole affair was a game of bluff; and this prompt and ruthless act told him how mistaken he had been.

But he was as firm as ever.

He was by nature a self-willed man—a man who would always have his own way, and would stand no interference from anybody. He now knew that he was up against something of a deadly serious nature. At first he had thought the affair farcical, but the train wreck convinced him that it was just the opposite.

But his determination was stronger than ever. Under no circumstances whatever would he be bullied into paying the money which the unknown scoundrels demanded. His blood was up, and if his mysterious enemies were anxious for a fight, he was quite ready to oblige them. Sir Roger Hudson swore that he would never give in.

The absolute gravity of the situation, however, made him realise that something would have to be done. The police seemed to be helpless, and the baronet came to a decision before the day was out.

In the early forenoon of the following morning—the fourth of the month—he stepped from his private motor-car opposite a certain building in Gray's Inn Road. A few minutes later he was shaking hands with Nelson Lee in the latter's consulting-room.

The detective plainly saw the effect which the recent events had caused. Sir Roger was rather pale and haggard, and his eyes were sunken. He had passed a very sleepless night, and had been worrying more than he cared to admit.

"I have come to you for advice and help, Mr. Lee," he began bluntly. "Scotland Yard may be able to cope with the situation, but I shall feel far more satisfied if you are working separately and independently. In very many cases you have succeeded where the police have utterly failed. I there-

fore come to you with every confidence, and with the feeling that you will be successful."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I am not infallible, Sir Roger," he said quietly. "Perhaps you have only heard of my successes? I have had quite a number of failures."

"Well, I have every confidence in your ability," went on the baronet. "You have, of course, read of the railway accident which occurred yesterday? You know also that it is the work of that infernal gang of scoundrels who term themselves the Circle of Terror? Well, Mr. Lee, there are some inner facts connected with the case of which you are unaware——"

"I think not, Sir Roger," interrupted Lee. "It happens that I know everything from the very start. I know that you received a demand for the sum of twenty thousand pounds, and that you refused to pay it."

"And I still refuse!" exclaimed Sir Roger angrily. "I still refuse—absolutely! I am glad you know all the facts, Mr. Lee—all that happened, that is, previous to this morning. You will not be surprised to learn that I received a further infamous communication by the morning mail."

"No. I expected you to receive one."

"Read this!" exclaimed Sir Roger, with sudden fierceness—"read this, sir! I have never been so furious in all my life!"

And the baronet glared at Nelson Lee as though the detective had been responsible for the whole series of happenings.

The letter was in the same style as the others, and bore the same heading. It ran:

"You have been foolish, and you have now learned that to your cost. You have also learned that we are absolutely ruthless. We give you until the morning of the fifth—same place, same time. Our motto is, as we have before stated, 'We Terrorise.' A third chance will not be offered.

"THE CIRCLE OF TERROR."

"Much as I anticipated," declared Nelson Lee smoothly. "Possibly you were staggered when you learned of the railway accident, Sir Roger?"

"I was dumbfounded!"

"For myself, I rather expected something of the sort," went on Lee. "I am afraid you made the mistake of underrating the powers and relentlessness of this mysterious, unseen criminal organisation. I, however, guessed what would occur."

Sir Roger breathed hard.

"I want you to investigate the affair up to the very hilt, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed. "The police are dunderheads—a lot of bunglers—a set of fools——"

"Come, come, Sir Roger," protested Lee. "Surely you are rather hard on the police? You seem to forget that there has been scarcely any time for investigation——"

"What are the police for?" demanded the baronet fiercely. "An organisation such as this Circle of Terror ought never to have been allowed to form itself. If this sort of thing went on, the whole country would be in a state of fear and trembling! Once agree to such a demand as I received, and there would be no safety whatever!"

"I grant that—within certain limits," said Lee. "But you must make allowances, my dear sir. The police cannot wreck any organisation of criminals before it is formed. It is only after they have commenced operations that investigation is possible. And you are in the unfortunate position of being the first victim. In your case these unseen criminals will be parti-



And as the Nelson Column was passed there was a sudden flutter of white, and this was seen to be a large number of the now familiar gilt-edged cards. They fluttered to the ground in all directions.—
(See p. 11.)

cularly painstaking. That is to say, they will make you pay very dearly if you persist in your present attitude."

"Good heavens! Do you suggest——"

"One moment. I understand, Sir Roger, that you have come to me for advice and help?" went on Lee quietly. "You wish me to advise you and to investigate this strange occurrence?"

"I do, Mr. Lee—I do!"

"Very well, then. We understand one another now, and I accept your commission, and will do my utmost to justify your faith in me," Nelson Lee remarked. "And I repeat that you will be unwise if you stick to your unrelenting attitude."

Sir Roger Hudson stared.

"But you do not for one moment mean to imply that I should pay the twenty thousand pounds?" he asked half angrily.

"That is exactly what I do mean to imply."

"Absurd--preposterous!"

"I am sorry you think that."

"How can I think otherwise?" snapped the baronet. "Do you think I have such a sum to throw away--to throw into the gutter, sir? And, quite apart from the financial side of the question, I shall never consent to meekly submit——"

"Sooner or later you will submit," declared Lee evenly. "I promise I will do my best to help you, Sir Roger; but, to be perfectly frank with you, I am not very hopeful of success. That is, immediate success. And it is for that reason I advise you to brush aside your scruples and pay up."

"But why? In Heaven's name, why? I am amazed that you should give me such advice, Mr. Lee."

Nelson Lee crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair.

"But surely it is sound advice, Sir Roger?" he asked. "If you ignore this second letter you may be certain that further trouble will result. You see, there is no time for inquiries and investigations to be made. If you pay the money, however, you avoid further destruction, and stand a chance of receiving the money back."

"How?"

"Well, it will give me a chance to carry out my inquiries," replied Lee. "It will give the police a chance to spread their net. After this initial effort the Circle of Terror will presumably remain quiet for a week or two. During that period I shall be hard at work——"

"No, Mr. Lee, I will not hear of it," interjected Sir Roger curtly. "The company refuses to be intimidated. Why, if we paid the money we should probably receive a prompt demand for a further sum of the same amount."

"I think not."

"Anyhow, I have made up my mind," said the baronet firmly. "To admit defeat now would be humiliating and degrading. I certainly will not admit defeat. But I have a suggestion to make, Mr. Lee."

He bent forward in his chair.

"To-morrow is the fifth," he went on. "At three a.m. the gold has to be placed at a spot three-and-a-quarter miles beyond the small station of Thorngate, one of the most desolate spots on the whole of our system. Well, Mr. Lee, the gold shall be there!"

"But you positively declared——"

"That I would not pay the money? Exactly. I do not intend to pay it. My idea is to lay a trap for the man or men who come to fetch away the gold," said the baronet. "This arrangement I mean to carry out without the knowledge of the police. In short, Mr. Lee, I want you and your

assistant to be on the spot, concealed, and I want you to either capture or shadow the infernal scoundrels who attempt to take the gold away."

Nelson Lee was rather dubious.

"I fail to see how that arrangement will help you," he said quietly.

"It is their intention to frighten me," replied Sir Roger. "Well, I refuse to be frightened, and I wish, if possible, to turn the tables. If they once understand that they themselves are in danger, they will drop the whole business like a red-hot brick. If police were placed on the spot to watch, they would betray their presence, and no capture would result. You and your assistant, however, are unofficial—and that makes all the difference. You are merely private citizens."

"Possibly the plan might be successful," said Lee; "but I hardly think so. I still strongly advise you to avoid further trouble by paying the money and letting it go. Even if Nipper and I are successful, you will not be safe from the Circle's machinations. Further trouble is bound to occur."

"I believe differently. If you succeed in capturing the man or men—for there might be two—this Circle of Terror will realise that the game is not worth the candle," said Sir Roger. "And I have more than half an idea that if you make a capture at all you will capture the ringleader."

Nelson Lee could see that the baronet was set upon his scheme. No amount of argument would make him alter his opinion. Lee held the view that the subterfuge would bring further disaster in its train. If so, it would be Sir Roger's own fault, and he would then perhaps understand that it was foolish of him to pit himself against a clever band of criminals, who were obviously the holders of the trump card.

Nevertheless, Lee could easily understand Sir Roger Hudson's line of reasoning. Lee was ready to admit that there was something in it—but not much. And since the baronet positively refused to adopt any other course, Lee consented.

Sir Roger took his departure in a much better frame of mind, and at once made all arrangements for the carrying out of his plans. He informed Scotland Yard that he had decided to pay over the money; he did not inform the Yard, however, that Nelson Lee would watch the spot on the railway track after the money had been deposited there.

Lee himself did not "blink the fact" that he would probably run considerable risk in undertaking the **commission**. Nipper was willing and ready enough to embark upon **the adventure**. Lee had been warned by the Circle to take no part in any of **their affairs**, but he disregarded this warning deliberately, with his eyes open.

As it turned out, the **undertaking did result** in a capture. But it was a tame affair from beginning to end, and to describe it in detail would be wearisome.

Soon after midnight Nelson Lee and Nipper were concealed beneath a thick hedge within easy view of **the small** white post which announced the fact that they were fifty-three and a quarter miles from London—or three and a quarter miles beyond the village of Thorngate.

It was one of the most deserted spots imaginable. The track ran level with the surrounding country, and on either side were bare meadows and fields. Not a house was visible for miles in either direction.

Close to the track at this precise spot a small country lane ran parallel for perhaps a hundred yards. Lee could easily understand why the spot had been chosen, for it could be easily reached by road.

The night was dark and windy, and overhead heavy clouds rolled across the sky and gave a promise of rain. Indeed, at about one o'clock a slight

shower did occur, but the rain passed off, and Lee and Nipper were saved a wetting.

Their point of vantage was not particularly comfortable. But they were well accustomed to night vigils in the open, and did not grumble. Now and again a train would roar past, but except for this there was utterly no sign of human life.

Neither was there any sign of any action on the part of the Circle of Terror. Lee had half suspected that agents would be there on the watch. But this was not so. The spot was bare and desolate.

At two-thirty Lee realised that it had been unnecessary for Nipper and himself to take up their positions so early. But they had arrived soon after midnight for a definite purpose. Lee wished to be well in advance, so that if any preparations were made by the enemy he would be there to witness them.

But no preparations were made, and the time hung heavily. Both Lee and Nipper carried revolvers, and they kept the weapons handy. The wind sighed through the hedges, and every now and again a few drops of rain would fall. There was nothing very pleasant in the experience.

At two-forty-five a goods train lumbered along the track from London. It came to a halt precisely opposite the spot where Lee and Nipper were crouching. In the gloom they saw the forward guard climb down from his van and place two heavy bundles beneath a small bush which grew close to the small white quarter-mile post. After that the goods train proceeded, and everything became quiet again.

Nelson Lee was expecting a deal of excitement to follow. But that which actually occurred was tame and simple.

After a further wait of nearly an hour a slight hum made itself apparent to the two watchers. And then they became aware of the fact that a small motor-car had come to a halt in the lane just on the other side of the hedge.

Peering through a gap Lee saw that it was a two-seater car, and that it was occupied by one man—one only. He immediately hopped out of his seat, broke through the hedge, and grasped the two bundles which lay beneath the bush.

"Oh, this is kid's work!" murmured Nipper in disgust. "I thought we were going to have a scrap, gov'nor. After waiting half the night——"

Lee ran swiftly forward, leaving Nipper to complete his remarks on his own. The lad, however, followed the detective without hesitation.

There was no fight whatever.

Nelson Lee was upon the stranger before the latter became aware of his presence. He was hampered by the two heavy bags of gold, and was flat upon his back in less than two seconds. A pair of handcuffs clicked over his wrists, and he was a prisoner.

"Treachery, eh?" he growled sullenly. "By thunder, the railway company will have to pay for this—and pay for it dearly!"

The man offered no further remark, but submitted quite calmly to the treatment he received. He was marched to the motor-car and placed in the spare front seat. Then, while Nipper remained on guard again, Lee fetched the bags of gold and placed them in the car also.

The detective half expected—and was quite ready—for a sudden attack from the darkness of the night. At first he believed that a trick had been played—that this man had been sent forward alone in order to ascertain if the coast was clear.

As the minutes passed, however, it was obvious that he had no companions. And the small car was soon bowling along, with Nipper hanging on to the footboard keeping his eye on the prisoner.

At the first big town the man was handed over to the police. He still refused to say a word, and except for a gloomy sullenness seemed quite resigned to his fate.

Lee and Nipper proceeded to London in the motor-car, intending to hand it over to Scotland Yard as soon as they arrived. The famous detective had accomplished his mission. He had carried out Sir Roger Hudson's instructions.

But Lee was more uneasy than ever.

It was clear that the prisoner was a mere underling. Indeed, Lee fully believed that he had been sent by the Circle especially to be captured. It remained to be seen what the next move in the game would be.

CHAPTER V.

Further Violence—The Disappearance of Mr. Evans—Sir Roger Gives In.

SIR ROGER HUDSON was delighted when Nelson Lee made his report the same morning at about nine-thirty.

"This will teach the hounds a lesson!" he exclaimed with satisfaction. "They will realise that they cannot play with me as they wish. In fact, Mr. Lee, I fully anticipate a complete acknowledgment of defeat."

"You are optimistic, Sir Roger."

"Not at all. I merely adhere to my view that retaliatory methods are the most effective," replied the baronet. "This Circle of Terror now knows who is master."

Nelson Lee smiled quietly.

"I sincerely hope you will have no reason to regret having taken this step," he exclaimed. "Of my own views I will not speak. I have advised you once, Sir Roger, and you ignored that advice. But if your enemies throw up the sponge I shall be more than surprised."

Hudson, however, was full of confidence. He believed that he had beaten the Circle—that they would not attempt any further demonstration. Nevertheless, the baronet caused special precautions to be taken over the whole railway system that day.

By late evening he was still feeling intensely satisfied.

The day had passed without any untoward event, and when the chairman at last drove home he told himself that the danger was at an end.

Early the following morning, however, he was aroused from his bed by an urgent telephone message. This was at about five a.m., and the nature of the message was such that the baronet at once rose and drove to the Edgware Road terminus—to his private office.

He was pale, shaking, and in a towering fury.

And one hour later—at about half-past six—Nelson Lee was aroused from his bed by the telephone bell. He, too, quickly arose, and was very soon with his client. He found Sir Roger pacing up and down his office with a brow as black as thunder. He greeted Lee with a furious glare.

"What do you think?" he roared. "What do you think has happened, Mr. Lee?"

"I fully expect that another train has been wrecked," replied Lee promptly.

"No, sir! Worse than that—far worse!" shouted the baronet. "At least, so far as damage is concerned. Fortunately, no lives have been lost; but it is outrageous—appalling! The whole system disorganised——"

"May I inquire what has happened?" asked Lee gently.

Sir Roger paused in his feverish pacing, and faced the detective.

"The Rotherdale Bridge has been wrecked!" he exclaimed, his voice suddenly trailing away to a broken mutter. "Can you realise it, Mr. Lee? The Rotherdale Bridge—the bridge which cost the company a fabulous sum to build, and which took fifteen months to construct. The biggest bridge on the whole of our system!"

"Is the damage very serious?"

"Serious—serious!" Sir Roger Hudson laughed harshly. "The bridge is utterly demolished, Mr. Lee! At four o'clock this morning it was blown sky-high and rendered into so much scrap iron. Blown up by explosives!"

Nelson Lee felt strongly inclined to murmur, "I told you so!" or words to that effect; but he told himself that it would be rather cruel to do so. Sir Roger, however, seemed to read the detective's thoughts, for he suddenly exclaimed:

"Perhaps you will say that I was quite wrong in my conclusions? Perhaps I was, but I am just as firmly determined as ever. The directors and shareholders can say what they choose, but so long as I am chairman I will never knuckle under to these murderous scoundrels."

"But would it not be wise, under the circumstances, to comply with the Circle's demands and admit defeat—for the time being?" suggested Lee quietly. "No good will come of this obstinacy, Sir Roger. You see, I do not hesitate to use plain words. The company has already lost far more than the amount demanded."

"Far more! Why, we have lost hundreds of thousands," declared the baronet fiercely. "But I am obstinate—you can say what you will. I swear that I will not be intimidated—intimidated, mark you, by people we do not know or do not see."

"That is what makes the situation so serious," commented the great detective. "If we knew whom we were fighting you may be sure an arrest would soon be made. But this Circle of Terror is intangible. It is something novel in the experience of the British police."

Sir Roger raved and fumed. In spite of the fresh disaster he would not see that the better course was to follow Nelson Lee's advice.

The railways officials, for the most part, were almost in a state of panic. The whole traffic of the line was completely disorganised. The huge Rotherdale Bridge was wrecked beyond repair. It would be the work of months to erect a new one in its place.

Leo urged his client again and again to pay the money when the next demand came, for the detective was quite certain that such a demand would come.

"Paying up will, at least, put a stop to this dreadful campaign of destruction," Lee declared. "Pray think carefully, Sir Roger. If you still refuse there may be another terrible disaster, and lives may be lost next time. You must not forget that. And I shall perhaps have time to get on the track before the arrangements for the next coup are completed."

Sir Roger brought his fist down upon the desk with a resounding thump.

"I shall not pay a farthing!" he exclaimed hotly. "That is my last word. Not a farthing!"

And, try as Lee would, he could not get the baronet to alter his decision. It was sheer absurdity, of course, and Lee was somewhat angry himself. The powers against a railway company were altogether too extensive to cope with. So far the mysterious Circle of Terror had had everything their own way.

And before Lee had been in the chairman's office an hour a nervous clerk entered with a note, which he declared had just been brought in by a

district messenger-boy. Sir Roger took the letter absently, but uttered a thick shout of fury the next moment.

"Look at this, Lee! A further threat!"

And it was.

It was from the Circle of Terror, and was styled precisely as the former notices. This one declared that Mr. Howard Evans, the general manager of the line, was a prisoner, and that unless the gold was placed at the arranged spot at 3 a.m. the next morning, and left absolutely unguarded, at 4 a.m. Mr. Evans would be killed. If any attempt was made to trace the gold Mr. Evans would suffer the penalty just the same.

"As you see, Sir Roger, the situation is far more serious than you anticipated," exclaimed Lee quietly. "Your general manager has been kidnapped, and his life is now in the balance. Surely you will not—your cannot—remain firm?"

"Evans kidnapped!" muttered the baronet. "He left his own house immediately upon receiving the news and travelled down to the scene of the disaster alone in his motor-car."

It was easy for Lee to understand how Mr. Evans had been kidnapped. The manager had travelled down by car because that was the quickest way of getting to the spot, for the line, naturally, was blocked with traffic.

And the Circle had taken advantage of the opportunity to strike still another blow. And it proved more conclusively than ever that Lee was up against a strongly organised criminal band.

Nelson Lee re-read the note carefully, and then looked across at Sir Roger Hudson. The baronet had sunk into a chair, and he was staring before him dully, as though he could not realise the enormity of the latest development.

"If you keep to your resolve, Sir Roger," said Lee quietly, "you will be the cause of Mr. Evans's death——"

"They don't mean it, Lee—they don't mean it!"

"Upon my soul! How can you say that?" said Lee quickly, with a touch of anger in his voice. "Haven't you had sufficient proof of this Circle's ruthlessness? If they will wreck a railway train, carrying ordinary passengers, you may be sure the scoundrels will have no scruples about murdering your general manager."

The baronet clenched his hands fiercely.

"It is terrible!" he muttered. "The whole thing is ghastly!"

"I agree with you there," was Nelson Lee's reply. "It is indeed ghastly. But that does not alter the fact. If the money is not handed over at three o'clock to-morrow morning, Mr. Evans will be done to death. That is certain."

"Is there no loophole?" groaned Sir Roger.

"None. Your enemies have profited by last night's experience. They declare that Mr. Evans will die if any attempt is made to capture or follow the Circle's agent who goes to fetch the gold away. You are bound to comply now, Sir Roger—your hand is positively forced."

Lee realised that it was a smart move on the part of the unknown enemy to get Mr. Evans into their power.

"I—I will think the matter over, Mr. Lee," said the baronet at last. "I will let you know my decision later. Meanwhile, for the love of Heaven do your very utmost to rescue Mr. Evans. Good gracious! All this worry is killing me—killing me! In twenty-four hours I have aged twenty-four years!"

Soon afterwards news came to hand that Mr. Evans's motor-car had been

found on a lonely portion of an unfrequented by-road, about thirty-five miles from London, wrecked and deserted.

Mr. Evans had been on his way to the scene of the bridge disaster. As general manager, it was his duty to get to the spot as soon as possible, to see with his own eyes the actual extent of the damage.

Apparently he had been stopped and forcibly carried away—perhaps injured. Nelson Lee, however, did not think this probable. He surmised that Evans had been followed and stopped. His car had then been deliberately wrecked. At all events, the manager had disappeared, and there was no clue.

Lee believed that he could, by careful investigation, locate the missing man within a few days. But there was not that amount of time at his disposal. He promised Sir Roger, however, to work his hardest.

The great detective took his departure from the great terminus with the conviction strong within him that he was up against the toughest proposition he had ever tackled. The unknown nature of the perils which beset him would have unnerved a weaker man. But Lee was unaffected—even when he received positive evidence that his movements were being closely watched by the unseen, intangible enemy.

It was as he was proceeding to Gray's Inn Road by taxi. He had chartered the vehicle at the Edgware Road terminus, and had arrived at Tottenham Court Road. The taxi was held up just outside the Oxford music-hall, and was stationary for a few moments.

Suddenly Nelson Lee saw something drop past his left ear. It fell almost at his feet. Bending down, the detective saw that the thing was a small piece of screwed-up paper.

Quick as a flash, Lee twisted round and gazed at the vehicles behind. A motor-bus was immediately at his rear, and he concluded that some humorously inclined person had shied the paper at his head.

When he unscrewed it, however, he smiled grimly. For there was a purple circle printed in the centre of the paper, and within it was the one word:

“REMEMBER!”

“Shadowed, eh?” thought Lee. “Well, I am not surprised. This unknown enemy is a pretty alert sort of fellow. He sends his agents everywhere, and they all accomplish their work in a most masterful style. ‘Pou my soul, I am getting quite interested!’”

He carefully folded up the paper and placed it in his waistcoat pocket. Not for a second did he dream of heeding the grim warning. He was fairly started on the case now, and nothing short of serious injury or death would stop him.

When he got home it was breakfast-time, and he told Nipper what had happened. The lad was rather worried when he heard of the screwed-up piece of paper which had been tossed into Lee's taxi.

“It's rotten, guv'nor,” he said candidly. “There's nothing worse than an enemy who skulks in the background. If he'd only come out and show himself you'd soon polish him off.”

“It is not the policy of the Circle of Terror to show themselves, Nipper,” said Nelson Lee, piling into his breakfast with a hearty appetite. “By James, that bridge wreck was a daring move! Our mysterious friends are living up to their name. They are certainly terrorising the Southern Counties Railway Company!”

“And the general manager's been nabbed?”

“Exactly. He is in the hands of the enemy.”

“What's the programme to-day, sir?”

"Well, as soon as I have cleared the table of eatables, I intend to run round to Scotland Yard and confer with our learned official friends," said Leo briskly. "I am feeling quite in my element, Nipper. I don't think I have been so engrossed in a case for years. All this mystery and hidden peril is stimulating to the nerves!"

"What's to prevent your being shot in the street?" asked Nipper anxiously.

Nelson Lee sipped his coffee and chuckled.

"A touch of nerves, eh?" he exclaimed. "Dear me, Nipper, I did not think you would be so affected! If I were to consider the possibilities of my being attacked out in the open air I should remain indoors for the remainder of my natural life. This is a world of uncertainties, young 'un!"

And Lee went on with his breakfast with great gusto.

Later on he discussed the whole matter with Detective-inspector Lennard and several other Yard officials. Nothing had been discovered, and the man whom Lee had arrested refused to say a single word on any subject. It was certain, at least, that he would not "peach." And even if he had been so inclined, Nelson Lee doubted if he would be able to tell anything of importance.

All that day the detective was busily trying to pick up the trail of the missing Mr. Evans. He visited the scene of the motor-car accident, but found nothing of any importance. The roads were hard and dry, and it was impossible to see any tracks. And while he was down in that part of the country Lee went on to the Rotherdale Bridge. This was a complete wreck. It was on the main line, and all the principal traffic was completely disorganised.

When the detective returned to London it was getting dusk. He tried one or two other avenues of inquiry, but the result was the same.

At eight o'clock he visited Sir Roger Hudson. The baronet was subdued and unnerved, and he received Lee's blank news with little or no animation. All the fire and fury had left him.

Dully and impotently he told Nelson Lee that he had made all arrangements for the carrying out of the Circle's demands.

Sir Roger Hudson had been terrorised into compliance.

CHAPTER VI.

Nipper Picks Up the Trail—The House on Putney Heath—Success!

NIPPER strode briskly along Gray's Inu Road in the gloom of the darkened street-lamps. These latter had been so darkened, in fact, that they provided little or no illumination.

The time was about eight o'clock, and Nipper had been out, as a matter of fact, to have his hair cut. Now, feeling neat and tidy, he was returning home. His master, he knew, was visiting Sir Roger Hudson at the latter's residence in Sloane Square.

The night was inky-dark, and a fairly high wind was whistling along the street. Pedestrians were few, and it was quite difficult for many people to see the pavement edges. Nipper, however, had eyes as keen as a Red Indian's, and he found no difficulty in keeping straight.

The road was clear of traffic, and he commenced to cross. Exactly opposite was his master's house. Nipper was thinking of the strange events which had been happening with such swiftness during the past week, and he was a little uneasy regarding the warnings which his master had received.

He looked up as he neared the pavement, and fumbled for his key. He had it in his hand when he suddenly became rigid and alert. He had seen something which aroused every suspicion within him. Having been actually thinking of the warning which Lee had received, the incident naturally impressed itself upon his mind.

A short man, clad in an overcoat and bowler hat, had at that very moment slipped something into the letter-box of Lee's door. Then, without a pause, and without glancing in either direction, the stranger walked quickly and silently towards Holborn.

Nipper thought rapidly for three seconds, and in that short space of time he came to a decision.

The first thing which had entered his mind was—the stranger had just dropped another Circle of Terror warning into Nelson Lee's letter-box! If so, it was a chance in ten thousand to get right on the track.

But how could Nipper make sure?

To follow the man now, without seeing what he had dropped into the box, would be absurd. But, Nipper reckoned, by the time he had opened the door and had ripped open the letter, the man would have disappeared.

There was only one course to pursue.

Nipper acted with exceptional smartness. Quick as a flash his key was inserted in the lock. He shoved the door open, reached his hand round, and fished the letter out of the box. Without even looking at it he twisted round, closed the door, and hurried down Gray's Inn Road.

His sole thought now was to catch up with the man who had delivered the letter. If the lad had wasted precious time in opening the envelope he would assuredly have lost his man.

But he hadn't wasted a second, and to his satisfaction he saw the short figure of the stranger striding briskly along ahead. Obviously, the fellow had no idea that he was being followed.

"Now I'll have a squint at the thing!" thought Nipper.

He was keeping his quarry in view now, so it was possible to "squint" at the letter. In all probability, Nipper thought, it would turn out to be a tradesman's account. If so, the incident would be rather humorous. It would be a rich fiasco if Nipper discovered that he was chasing an innocent grocer's assistant!

However, the possibility did not alter the smartness of Nipper's action. By keeping the man in sight he was on the safe side. If the letter proved to be of no importance the lad would merely relinquish the chase and return home. So no harm would be done.

On the other hand, a lot of good might result if things turned out as he half suspected. The quick way in which the stranger had slipped the letter into the box and had then departed seemed suspicious to Nipper's alert mind. And his surmise proved to be correct! It had been a chance shot, but it went home!

Passing under a dimmed street lamp Nipper drew from the envelope a thin, highly polished card. Glancing swiftly ahead he saw that his quarry was not looking round. So Nipper took a sharp glance down at his hand, just as he was passing under the light.

That one glimpse was enough!

He saw the familiar purple circle, and at once jammed the envelope and its contents into his pocket. He had no wish to look at it more closely. His sole attention was centred upon the man in front.

"By gum! I was right!" he breathed animatedly. "The rotter's a Circle agent. This may mean something big if I'm lucky! I'm fairly on the trail, anyhow!"

Thus, by prompt action, Nipper had placed himself in an advantageous position. If he had wasted ten seconds—and it would have taken more than ten seconds to open and examine the letter in the dark hall of Lee's house—he would have lost his quarry irretrievably. As it was, Nipper was hot on the scent.

Where the scent would lead to was another matter.

One thing was certain. The fellow had no suspicion of the true state of affairs. If he had seen Nipper at all, he had taken the lad for a mere passer-by. There had been nothing to show him that Nipper had been bound for Lee's door.

Nipper was in high feather. Here was something tangible at last! Hitherto the foe had been hidden in obscurity. But now Nipper was close on the track of a man who was without doubt an agent of the Circle of Terror.

True, the man was probably a mere unit—a mere cog in the wheel. But it was a distinct advance, and Nipper stuck to his man like glue. The stranger crossed Holborn, and stood against the pavement waiting.

"Going to get on a 'bus," thought Nipper. "Right-ho! I'm game for anything!"

Three or four motor-'buses passed, but at last the short man hopped nimbly on to one as it slowly went up Holborn. He passed straight up the steps to the upper deck, and Nipper ran forward and boarded the 'bus, too.

The darkness of the night helped him a lot. Coupled with this was the fact that all lights were dim and practically useless. There was little prospect of the man discovering his shadower.

Nipper saw that his quarry had taken a seat near the front. There was a vacant space at the rear, so Nipper occupied it, and pulled out a few coppers. The 'bus, he had seen, was bound for Putney.

When the conductress came up she naturally applied for Nipper's fare first. So as to be on the safe side, the lad took a ticket for the whole journey. A minute later he heard the man in front book to Walham Green.

The journey was uneventful. The stranger sat in front smoking his pipe, and acting just the same as any ordinary peace-loving citizen. Nipper wondered what the other passengers would have done if they could have known that the short man was a member of the Circle of Terror.

At a quiet spot in Fulham Road the man rose quickly from his seat and descended the stairs. He did not even glance at Nipper as he passed. The lad waited until the fellow had stopped the 'bus and had alighted. Then Nipper nipped down, and jumped off as the vehicle gathered speed.

His eye was upon his quarry all the time, and he was afraid that the man's suspicions would be aroused. But Nipper need not have been anxious. The short man walked straight across the road without so much as a glance behind him. He was either careless, or so certain of his own security that he did not think it worth while to be on the alert. The explanation was probably the latter.

Much must be said, however, for Nipper's shadowing. The lad was a past-master at the art. Even if the quarry had been in fear of a shadower, it is doubtful whether he would have become aware of Nipper's studious attentions.

But within the next few minutes Nipper met with a keen disappointment. He had been hoping that the destination would be some secret meeting-place—a spot where much might be learned. Imagine his feelings, therefore, when the Circle's agent turned into the poster-smothered entrance of a small picture theatre!

A glance at the bills told Nipper that he was outside the Cozy Cinema. Whether the place was cosy or not, Nipper would soon learn for himself, for he instantly decided to enter.

The man in the bowler hat paused before the tiny pay-box and obtained his ticket. He had taken a sevenpenny one, and Nipper did likewise. And the lad groped his way through some heavy, plush curtains, and found himself within the cinema.

It was certainly cosy; quite a nice little place. Nipper saw this after he had been inside for a couple of minutes. Those minutes had been spent in locating his quarry. The man had taken a seat on the end of a row some little distance down the body of the hall. Here he lit his pipe, and settled himself comfortably into his plush seat.

"Oh, rats!" growled Nipper under his breath. "This looks rotten. The chap has evidently done for the day—the delivering of that note was his last job. I don't suppose I shall discover much, after all!"

Nipper was thoroughly disgusted, and glared at the back of the stranger's head as though the fellow had done him a personal injury. The audience was in a roar of laughter, and Nipper raised his eyes to the screen for a moment.

It happened that Mr. Charles Chaplin was being presented to this small but select gathering of the Walham Green public; but even the comicalities of that inimitable screen-comedian did not bring a smile to Nipper's face.

He was fed-up—properly fed-up. After all the trouble he had taken—Oh, it was absolutely wicked!

The picture came to an end before long, and a series of war scenes followed. After this came the topical film, and then an interval. The lights came up—at least, a portion of them did, and Nipper was enabled to examine his quarry more closely. He was a man of about forty, respectable-looking, and having the appearance of a good-class working man.

During the interval several advertisement slides were shown, and Nipper was more irritated than ever, for the slides remained on view an unconscionable long time, announcing So-and-So's superb furniture and somebody else's high-class mineral waters.

But the next film commenced at last, and this proved to be an American drama. Nipper, while keeping his eye on the man in front, managed to become a little interested in the picture.

It was in three reels, and took an hour to show. It was now getting a little late, but the short man did not make a move until the finish of the comedy which followed the feature film.

Then he rose from his place and leisurely made his exit.

Fortunately several other people went out at the same time, so Nipper's exit was not noticeable. His quarry paused on the pavement for a moment to glance at his watch; then he crossed the road and stood waiting against the kerb.

"Hallo! Another giddy 'bus ride!" thought Nipper.

This proved to be the case; but the lad was sure now that he would only track the short man to his home. True, the knowledge might prove to be of use, but Nipper was anxious to do greater things.

A Putney 'bus came along, nearly empty. Again the shadowed and shadower mounted, and this time the former booked to Putney. He did not get off until the 'bus had reached Putney Station.

Again glancing at his watch, he started off across Upper Richmond Road, and was soon walking briskly up Putney Hill. Nipper was a fair distance behind, walking silently in his rubber-heeled shoes.

The time was now close upon eleven, and Putney Hill was quiet and

almost deserted. Therefore Nipper had to go carefully. He was becoming slightly interested again now. He became much more interested when the Heath was reached, and the man ahead showed no sign of stopping.

Right across Putney Heath he trudged, his footsteps being plainly audible to the lad behind. Nipper himself walked as silently as a bush-tracker—Lee had trained him well. In spite of this training, however, Nipper nearly lost his man more than once. The darkness up on the Heath was intense, for the sky was overcast, and there were no lights worthy of the name.

The wind raced across the common in chilly gusts, and once a spot or two of rain drove into Nipper's face. He began to wonder how much longer the chase would continue. And, as luck would have it, the chase ended five minutes afterwards.

The man ahead came to a quiet road where there were five or six houses, placed at wide intervals. Each house stood within its own grounds, and high trees and thick bushes grew in profusion.

At the gate of the first house the short man paused, and then entered. Nipper, hurrying up, just caught a glimpse of the fellow passing round to the rear of the house. And now the lad was thrilling with subdued excitement again.

For he had dimly seen a large board, announcing to all and sundry—Nipper alone at the present moment—that the eminently desirable residence was "To Let." An empty house! An empty house standing in a secluded part of the Heath!

This didn't look as though the short man had gone home. Nipper began to have a vague suspicion of the truth, and he came to a quick decision. For ten minutes he waited, and then he crept silently into the grounds, and made his way like a ghostly shadow towards the building.

The garden was in a badly neglected state, and he reckoned that the house had been empty for some time. Passing round a weed-grown path towards the rear, the lad presently came to a rustic gate. This opened easily, and he passed through. Within a minute he was looking up at the rear windows. All were in darkness—Ah! A tiny crack of light showed in one of the windows—a crack of light which would have been invisible at a distance of twenty feet.

But Nipper knew that the light within was probably that of a candle; and the window was closely shuttered. He had a quiet prowl around, and at last located a rusty iron grating, partially covered with rotten leaves.

Quivering with excitement, Nipper slowly raised the grating, and saw that it gave access to a dank and pitchy-black cellar. The lad felt round to ascertain if his revolver was handy, and then he took a deep breath.

For a second he hung over the grating-hole; and then he slid swiftly and silently into the unknown blackness.

CHAPTER VII.

A Battle Royal—Sir Roger Hudson's Folly—Lee Makes a Vow—Finis.

DETEKTIVE-INSPECTOR LENNARD shook Nelson Lee's hand warmly. "Good-night, old man," he exclaimed. "Let's hope for a better day to-morrow. It looks like a long business to me; but we must pull together as much as possible."

"As in the past, eh?" smiled Lee. "Well, Sir Roger will certainly pay the money this time, for it is now a kind of ransom on poor Evans' life. Close upon midnight, I see. Get off to bed, Lennard. I want to have a

good think. Fortunately Nipper is not here; the young rascal had run off somewhere on his own."

The inspector smiled, and made his exit from Lee's cosy consulting-room. He knew that when Nelson Lee was in the "thinking mood" the great detective liked to be absolutely alone.

The pair had been having rather a long chat, discussing the events of the day. And now Lee was anxious to settle himself in an easy chair, and think over the whole extraordinary situation.

Lennard made his way downstairs, and opened the front door.

He was about to step outside when a private motor-car pulled up sharply against the kerb, and the next second a slight figure came charging across the pavement. The newcomer almost collided with the inspector as he stood in the doorway.

"Why, what— Hallo, it's Nipper!" ejaculated Detective-inspector Lennard.

And it was Nipper.

"Jolly good job you're here, inspector," exclaimed Nipper, his voice husky with suppressed excitement. "I've hit the trail! Come up into the gov'nor's room, and I'll explain— Oh, is the gov'nor at home?" he added quickly.

"Yes, but—"

"Good! Come on—not a second to waste!" panted Nipper.

Somewhat mystified, and not a little curious, Lennard quickly followed Nipper up the stairs. They burst into the consulting-room, and Nelson Lee looked up from his chair with a frown. He had been lolling luxuriously before the fire, and his big "thinking pipe" was well on the go.

"Confound you, Nipper—" he began testily.

"I've found Mr. Evans, sir!" ejaculated Nipper triumphantly. "I've located the missing man! We've got to rush to the rescue at once. I've got a car down below, waiting—"

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"You've been busy, Nipper, eh?" he said smoothly. "Very well; let me hear the yarn. If time is precious, be as brief as possible."

Nipper quickly told his two astonished listeners of the incident which had first aroused his suspicions, pulling the letters out of his pocket as he did so. It proved to be one of the usual gilt-edged cards; but this one bore no wording. There was just the purple circle—evidently a silent warning to Lee that his movements were being taken note of.

The lad explained how he had followed his quarry to the picture palace, and from there to the empty house on Putney Heath.

"I managed to get into a cellar," Nipper continued quickly. "After a lot of fumbling about I found myself beneath the room which contained the light. I could hear voices, and the first words I heard were: 'You scoundrels! You shall pay dearly for this outrage!' I knew at once that it was Mr. Evans speaking, and I could have shouted for joy."

"Good thing you didn't!" said Lennard drily. "Well, what then?"

"Some cheerful sort of chap was telling Mr. Evans that his life depended upon the receipt of a message which was expected to arrive at a quarter to four," said Nipper. "If the message said that the gold had been delivered, Mr. Evans would be set free before daylight. But if the message said the gold hadn't been delivered—well, the captive would unfortunately die at four o'clock precisely."

"By James!" ejaculated Lennard. "They mean business, then!"

"Of course they mean business," said Lee quickly. "As it happens, Evans is safe, for the money is going to be paid, but it will be all the better if we hurry to this empty house and rescue him. We shall probably make a bag of the two rascals who are guarding him. And one never knows, Lennard. A hitch might occur at the last moment. Evans' life is in danger while he is in the hands of the Circle. We must rush!"

Nipper, it appeared, had made his exit from the cellar, and had pelted across the Heath and down Putney Hill. He had hired a private motor-car, and had driven home like the wind, regardless of speed limits.

Lee was tremendously pleased with his astute young assistant; but there was no time now for words of praise. The trio hastened down to the waiting car, and piled into it. There was no chauffeur, for Nipper had driven home himself.

Nelson Lee took the wheel, and very soon the car was speeding Putneywards. It was decided to embark upon the adventure alone. The three of them, taking their opponents by surprise, ought to get the best of the fight. And if any other police officials were taken along the added number might give the alarm unwittingly. It was better for the three to go by themselves.

The motor-car simply buzzed.

The streets were quiet and deserted, except for an occasional motor-bus or taxi, and Lee took no notice whatever of one or two warning shouts uttered by policemen as the car roared along. Lennard, sitting in the front seat, grinned occasionally. It would be rather humorous if he were fined for furious driving!

Down Piccadilly and Knightsbridge into Brompton Road, and then on into Fulham Road. The journey was direct, and the streets were dry. It was only just after twelve-thirty when the sturdy little car roared up Putney Hill.

It had been prompt work—smart work.

Once upon the Heath Lee eased down somewhat, and at last came to a halt altogether. He did not wish to approach too near, and give the enemy warning. The car was left standing upon the grass beside the road, and the trio stole forward quickly on foot. The empty house was a hundred yards ahead of them.

"A sudden rush, eh, Lee?" murmured the inspector.

"That is the best course, I believe," replied Nelson Lee. "If we attempt anything by stealth, we shall probably give ourselves away—and give the enemy a chance of getting away."

The gateway was reached, and the three silent figures entered the grounds.

They mounted the front-door step, and Lee felt the heavy door. Then he shook his head, and murmured that a battering-ram would be required to burst it down. So the rescuers made their way round to the back.

Here, after a careful search, they found a rear door which was obviously rotten. By the feel, too, it was only locked—not bolted top and bottom. A good charge would probably send it flying inwards.

Lee quietly gave his instructions, and then stepped back. He hurled himself forward, and his shoulder smote the door with a terrific concussion. The detective was bruised; but the door burst open with a rending crash.

"Follow me!" roared Lee, flashing his electric torch ahead of him.

A passage lay ahead, and just at the angle of it a crack of light showed beneath a closed door. There was the sound of a chair or a box being pushed violently backwards, and then started exclamations.

But Lee was at the door, and he flung it wide open. A strange scene met his gaze as he paused for a second in the doorway. The room was bare of furniture, and a candle guttered on the mantelpiece, the flame jerking violently in the sudden draught. Against one of the walls lay the bound figure of Mr. Howard Evans, the General Manager of the Southern Counties Railway.

Close by the fireplace two men were standing, momentarily rendered helpless by the sudden and unexpected invasion. They had just risen to their feet, and had evidently been indulging in a game of cards. For a box stood between them, and on it was another candle, and cards and little piles of silver and copper.

"Hands up!" snapped Nelson Lee curtly.

His revolver was ready for action; but the two men did not seem inclined to give in meekly. They were both determined-looking fellows, and one was the man Nipper had shadowed.

"Trapped!" snarled the other fellow—a great hulking ruffian.

In a second he had jerked out a heavy automatic, and he fired at random. The bullet sang past Nelson Lee's ear and struck the wall with a loud "ping!" Lee did not allow him to get in a second shot.

Crack! Lee's own revolver spoke, and a roar of pain and anger followed. The detective's bullet had struck the ruffian's right wrist, and his weapon thudded to the floor. The next moment Lennard and Nipper had flung themselves forward, and a battle royal was proceeding inside five seconds.

It was short and sharp. The injured man was not fit for much, for he was unable to use his right arm. A swinging upper-cut from the inspector's horny fist sent him crashing to the floor.

Nipper was engaged with the other man, and Lee was just about to take a hand. The odds were too much, however, and the fellow yelled that he would give in. Next minute he was neatly handcuffed, and Detective-inspector Lennard grinned breathlessly and cheerfully.

Nelson Lee transferred his attention to Mr. Evans, and very soon the manager was released from his bonds. He was overjoyed to find himself set free, and was found to be uninjured. He explained that he had been stopped while driving to the scene of the bridge disaster, and had been bundled into another motor-car and brought in the darkness to this empty house.

"I fully expected to die, Mr. Lee," he said quietly. "But you have turned the tables wonderfully. What of Sir Roger? Has he sent the money?"

"He is doing so within the next hour," replied Nelson Lee.

"Perhaps it is as well," exclaimed the manager. "Further disaster would only follow if he still remained obstinate."

It was arranged that Lennard should remain in the house guarding the prisoners, and Nipper would remain with him, in case of emergency. Lee would inform the police at the Putney police-station, and help would be sent.

This plan was carried out, and while in the station Mr. Evans was struck by an idea. Lee was engaged with the inspector-in-charge, and Mr. Evans asked if he might have the use of the telephone.

Within five minutes Evans was talking with Sir Roger Hudson.

"I thought I would let you know at the earliest moment, Sir Roger," said the manager. "I have just been rescued by Mr. Nelson Lee and a Scotland Yard detective."

"Bravo! Bravo!" came over the wires. "Splendid, Evans! This is good news, indeed! I am full of admiration for Mr. Lee's prompt rescue. Come straight to my private house. I shall be up, waiting for you."

"Very well, sir," said Mr. Evans.

Accordingly Lee and his companion drove to Sloane Square, and found Sir Roger ready to welcome them. All the baronet's old vitality seemed to have returned to him. He was as bluff and hearty as ever, and delighted with the sudden turn of events.

"Just in the nick of time, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed, rubbing his hands. "Just in the very nick of time! If Mr. Evans had been a minute later in telephoning I should have been unable to cancel the sending of the gold specie. Just one minute——"

Nelson Lee turned quickly.

"You have cancelled the sending of the money?" he asked.

"Of course!"

"Nothing could have been more foolish, Sir Roger," said Lee angrily. "It is a great pity you telephoned, Mr. Evans. This will only result in fresh disaster. I had hoped that there would be no more fatal delay."

Sir Roger laughed.

"Have no fear, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed. "This Circle of Terror has done its worst. They will certainly give up the game as useless after to-night's affair. By George! I have won after all! Just wait and see, Mr. Lee. You'll find out that I am right in my conviction!"

But Sir Roger Hudson was wrong—quite wrong.

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The next morning the London express was partially wrecked on its way to the metropolis. But for the prompt measures of the engine-driver a terrible disaster would have occurred.

A portion of the track had been torn clean up, and the driver caught a glimpse of the damage in the dim dawn light. As it was, a bad accident occurred, and twenty people were injured, and several carriages as good as demolished.

It was a positive sign that the mysterious Circle of Terror was as determined as ever. And at last Sir Roger Hudson was forced to give in. He regretted exceedingly his hasty action of the night before, and readily admitted to Nelson Lee that he had been entirely mistaken.

The £20,000 was paid over, and no attempts were made by the police to trace it. The Circle of Terror had won the day—had won it by sheer ruthlessness and intimidation. The railway company had been terrorised into submission.

And right on top of the fresh train disaster Nelson Lee received another

Write to the Editor of

ANSWERS

if you are not getting your right PENSION

letter from his unknown enemies. And this time there was an added puzzle. For the communication ran:

"You have disregarded our warnings. In future you are advised to avoid further conflict with the Circle of Terror. If you take any action in any affair in which the Circle is engaged, you will be killed as pitilessly as a fly.

"THE HIGH LORD OF THE CIRCLE."

Nelson Lee carefully placed the letter away in a file, and then calmly assured Nipper that at the very first opportunity he would fight the unknown enemy with all the strength he was capable of.

The famous detective had an idea—and it was no misplaced one—that he was on the verge of a long and lasting campaign. He was quite ready for it. His curiosity had been aroused, his man-tracking instincts fired. He would fight the Circle of Terror until he had rooted out its secrets.

At present the unknown society, which had started its operations so amazingly and so successfully, was enshrouded in mystery. It had won the first round in the game, in spite of all opposition and defiance.

What was the Circle of Terror?

How many members belonged to the Circle?

Who were its leaders?

And who, above all, was the mysterious unknown who signed himself "The High Lord"?

These were questions which time alone could answer.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!

"The Great Air Mystery."

**An Absorbing Complete
Story of NELSON LEE
and NIPPER.**

By the Author of "THE BLACK WOLF."

**Another Splendid Tale of "The Circle of
Terror" coming soon.**

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 throw 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 warn 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. And that same day a fight takes place, but the treasure hunters are victorious.

While searching among the caverns for a boat which had, unavoidably, been abandoned by the chums, Dr. Campbell and his party are attacked by a gigantic octopus. (Now read on.)

Trapped!

SUDDENLY the axe swung down with tremendous force, driving exactly into a deep cut which a cutlass had inflicted a moment or so before. The axe bit clean through, and the severed portion fell to the bottom of the boat with Clive, round whom it was still clinging.

The boat righted with a sudden swing, and there was heard the sound of a great plunge as the great squid loosed its hold on the craft and disappeared beneath the water.

It was a welcome change indeed from the fierce fighting of the last few minutes when the launch ran free once more. Those in her felt themselves able to move about again without having the fear of another sudden visit from a writhing, slimy, snake-like enemy before their eyes.

"What an awful monster!" gasped Alec, as, panting from his efforts, he sank upon a seat. "Clive, old chap, did the thing hurt you?"

"I'm a bit scratched, and there are two or three ugly blisters where the horrible suckers touched me," Clive answered. "But I'm afraid there are others hurt more than I am. The doctor——"

"No, I'm all right," Dr. Campbell declared. "I feel the effects of the squeeze it gave me round the chest more than anything else. What about you, Grove?"

"It's the same wi' me, sir," Ben responded. "It seemed t' squeeze the breath out o' me body. I was as helpless as a child."

"Do you think the brute will come back, sir?" Alec asked the doctor, who was now examining the injuries each one had received.

The doctor shook his head.

"No, I do not think it is likely to," he declared. "It has been pretty badly cut about, to say nothing of the bullets fired into it—which are bound to take effect, sooner or later. My impression is that it knows it's beaten, and it has crept off to its den, where it will probably die."

"Let's hope it will," Alec muttered with much feeling. "But——" A thought struck him. "It might have a mate! Suppose it has, and the one we've knocked out goes home and sends her along, to avenge its wounded honour! Jupiter! I don't feel like wanting to fight another of 'em—just yet, at all events."

Dr. Campbell smiled.

"There is the possibility of that happening, of course," he said. "But I think the chance is rather remote. And now to attend to what brought us here."

"Well, sir, the boat was the chief thing, of course," said Clive; "but it seems to have vanished into empty air. It's a puzzle what has become of it."

"Let us go and see if we can find any trace of it in the sand," the scientist suggested.

"And there's the big serpent," Alec reminded him. "We thought you would be so pleased to have the skin as a trophy—and now that's vanished too!"

Read had slowed down the speed of the launch as soon as the fight had been finished, and then, at a sign from his leader, stopped the engine altogether.

Now the doctor bade him make for some place on the further side, where they could easily land; and a little later the launch ran alongside a shelf of rock jutting out into the water, which made a sort of natural quay.

"'Ere's a capital landin'-place ready made for us, sir," Read pointed out, with a touch of pride at having discovered it. "Ye'll find it easy t' get ashore 'ere."

"So it is, Read, so it is," the doctor agreed. "It's just what we wanted. We're going ashore for a little while—keep a sharp look-out while we're away. There may be other bogeys about, you know, in a place like this. Don't let one catch you napping," he advised with a laugh.

"No fear, sir," Read declared very emphatically. "Not after what's 'appened a'ready."

Dr. Campbell went ashore, taking his two young friends and Ben Grove, who, as an interested party, was very anxious to see with his own eyes the place where the apes had thrown gold-covered pebbles at the travellers.

They went first to the place where the boat had been left, and searched about for traces. As a matter of fact, the marks did not want much looking for; the searchers came upon them at once. There, easily to be seen in the sand, were the marks of where the craft had rested, and also—where she had been launched by being pushed into the water!

Alec and Clive stared at one another, and then looked at the other two. But no one could suggest a solution of the puzzle—or at least no one offered one.

"Well, that beats me!" Alec muttered. "Now let's see what has become of the snake."

"Ah, that's an easier matter," said Dr. Campbell, when they had led him to the place where they had left it. "You can see for yourselves who the robber has been here. It is the octopus. It found the dead body

of your snake, and ate it up, neck and crop—skin, bones and all, or very nearly. You can see a few bones lying about. Then, finding the place was visited by apes, it took up its abode here for a while, and lay in wait for them."

While talking they had walked on towards the foot of the rocks, where the creature had been clinging when they had first seen it.

"See," the doctor went on, "here are more traces of its presence in the sand, and more bones—bones of apes there."

"Yes," Alec put in, holding his nose, "and more traces still in the shape of stinks and smells! Pheugh! What an awful stench! I can't stand this—I'm off! Go on if you like, you others, and find more traces still. I'll wait for you in the launch."

But the others did not go further. They, too, had had enough of the awful, nauseating odour which still hung round the place, and which became worse as they proceeded.

So they returned to the launch, and set off to explore the other side.

It was then that, as they were going through the water at a slow speed, there came a sudden shock. Something had struck against the boat.

Everyone started in a way which showed that their nerves had got, as Alec afterwards expressed it, into "rather a jumpy condition."

The mate looked over the side—rather cautiously at first, then curiously, and finally boldly.

"Why, sir," he exclaimed, turning to the doctor, "if it ain't our boat a-floatin' about upside down!"

They all looked at the boat in surprise and interest. The doctor in particular regarded it with close scrutiny. He fancied even from where he stood he could see some marks upon the upturned keel which suggested a theory to his mind.

"I wonder how it came here?" Alec exclaimed. "It must have met with some sort of an adventure. What a pity it can't tell us its story."

"We must see if we can't make it tell it to us," remarked the doctor. "Read, go back to where we landed—that will be a good place for our purpose—and bring the boat with us. Then we'll get her ashore and see what we can make of it."

The craft was floating, as Read had said, upside down, and so low in the water that the keel was scarcely visible above the surface. Yet it had not sunk; it had, as Grove remarked, managed to keep near the top somehow.

The launch was turned round, and run alongside it the other way; then a rope was passed round it, and with the aid of this and the boat-hook the derelict was towed to the shore.

There it was pulled high up on to the strand, and after the doctor had examined the keel and sides it was turned over.

Then there came a surprise. They found a mast and sail intact, with a lot of cordage and other items, and entangled amid all there was the dead body of an ape.

"Ah," cried the doctor, "I'm not surprised! I already suspected it after seeing the marks left in the sand. They seemed to me to show that the boat was launched by the apes."

"Great Scott!" cried Clive. "I never thought of that!"

"I remember your telling me," their leader went on, "that you landed and pulled the boat up more than once."

"Yes, doctor, we did."

(Continued overleaf.)

"Just so. And the apes were watching you all the time."

"Must have been, because they threw the pebbles at us."

"Quite so. Now this is how I read it. After you had gone they came back, and, seeing the boat there by itself, and remembering how you had pushed it off and got into it, they, without, of course, having any idea of what they were doing, imitated you and did the same."

"You mean they went for a sail!" exclaimed Alec. "Jupiter! How I wish I'd been here to see 'em. What a lark it must have been! And then I suppose, not knowing how to manage the boat—being merely clumsy landlubbers instead of accomplished sailors—they went and upset her, and got drowned."

"No," said the scientist gravely, "they did not upset her. Though how they would have got ashore again except by drifting there accidentally or by swimming I'm sure I don't know. I don't suppose they had watched you so closely as to have been able to row or paddle her."

The doctor said this half humorously; but he was looking at the boat—which he had now turned bottom upwards again—very closely.

He bent down, and taking hold of something that was sticking in the wood, pulled it with a wrench.

"No," he said again slowly, "they did not upset the boat. They are not to be blamed for that. Something else upset it for them. Something—"

"I know!" cried Clive, drawing a deep breath. "It was the octopus!"

"Ha! You've guessed it now," said the doctor, glancing at him.

"The octopus?" Alec repeated, not less moved than his chum had showed himself.

"Yes; there is no doubt about it," the doctor declared, with the same grave air. "See!" he opened his hand, and showed them what he had wrenched out of the wood. "Here is one of the hooks; it was forced so deep into the wood it was torn off from what is usually called the creature's arm. Further, if you notice, you can see the marks of the arm right round the boat, especially on the keel and on each gunwale. You can actually see marks where it has dented the boat by the strength with which it seized it."

At a sign from the scientist the sailors looked at the boat over again, and there, sure enough, were impressions or dents on the gunwale on each side.

"Yes, you can see that plain enough, sir!" Alec assented in a low tone.

"I noticed the dent in the keel," continued the doctor, "directly I saw it in the water over yonder. And I had previously seen the marks of the apes' feet in the sands where the boat had been launched. I guessed then that they must have pushed it into the water, but I could not think what had become of it. When I saw the dents, however, on the upturned keel they told me the whole story. It did not need the dead body of the ape which we afterwards found to make me understand what had happened."

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