

No. 98. DETECTIVE TALES FOR EVERYONE. 1^D.

Week ending
April 21, 1917.

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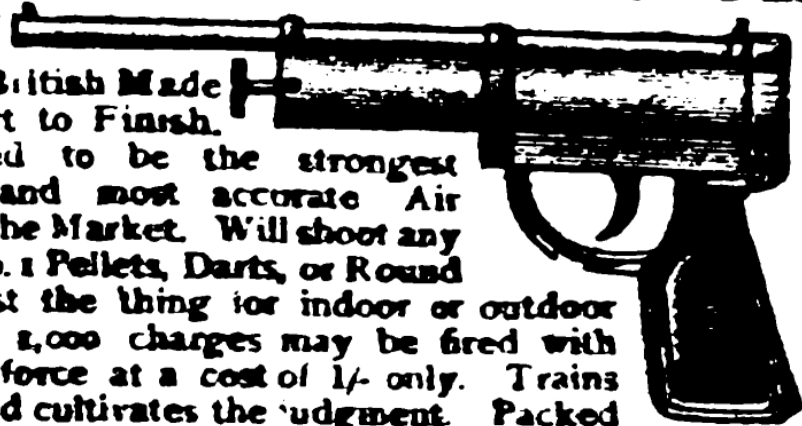
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CHAPTER I.

NELSON LEE DEMONSTRATES A NEW
INVENTION.

MR. NELSON LEE, the celebrated criminologist, straightened his back and uttered a little sigh of satisfaction.

He was standing before a bench in his laboratory, and the spring sun was shining gloriously in at the window. It was afternoon, and the detective had not been out of doors during the whole day.

So engrossed had he been in his task, in fact, that he was not even aware that the day was fine and sunny. But now, having finished, he instinctively felt in his pocket and produced his cigar case. Having lit up, he strolled to the window and gazed out.

"H'm! Quite a brilliant day," he murmured absently. "Very different from the miserable rain of yesterday. Almost seems a pity to remain indoors, but I've used my time to good advantage, I believe. Hallo! I think my eyes detect the lithe form of Master Nipper crossing the road."

Lee turned away, and a moment later Nipper's presence in the house was made obvious by the fact that the front door slammed, a tramp of feet sounded on the stairs, and a somewhat shrill but not unmusical whistle came to Nelson Lee's ears.

The door of the laboratory opened, and Nipper himself strode in.

"Still immersed in that queer little contraption of yours, gov'nor?" was

the lad's cheery greeting. "What is it, anyhow? You've been jolly secretive about the thing; wouldn't tell me a blessed detail this morning, before I went out, and snapped me up like one o'clock when I asked a few questions."

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"My good Nipper, the fault is your own," he said smoothly. "You put your questions to me at a wrong time. I can't be bothered when I am deeply engaged on a mechanical subject of an intricate nature. You may ask questions now, however, and I think your curiosity will be satisfied."

Well, to begin with, it's half-past two," said Nipper.

"That's not a question, young 'un."

"Give me a giddy chance, sir," replied Nipper. "Have you had your dinner? I'll bet you haven't, though. You've been stewed up in this lab., buried in your thoughts, and haven't even considered your tummy."

Lee chuckled again.

Nipper crossed over to the bench, and picked up the small object with which his master had been engaged. It was no larger than a tobacco pipe, and something of the same shape. There was a kind of brass tube with a pin-hole nozzle at the end. In the portion which corresponded to the pipe bowl, Nipper saw several intricate screws and levers. The whole thing was made of polished brass.

"What the dickens is it?" asked Nipper, in wondering tones.

"Well, I haven't given it a name, as yet," replied Nelson Lee. "but I think

the instrument can be aptly described as a steel eater."

"A which?" asked Nipper, staring.

"A steel eater."

"That's a queer name, at any rate," commented the lad. "How the thunder can it eat steel, gov'nor? Looks more like a patent water pistol, or something of that sort. Do you mean to say that you've been two whole days over this?"

"And two days excellently spent, my dear lad, I assure you," was Lee's reply. "But two weeks would be nearer the mark, I think. Yesterday and to-day have been devoted to the actual manufacture of the thing. Professional burglars would be willing to pay a very large sum for the possession of this little piece of mechanism.

"What does it do?"

"My best answer to that question is to demonstrate to you forthwith," replied the detective briskly. "To tell you the honest truth, I am very gratified with the result of my labours. Now, young 'un, watch!"

"I'm all eyes," declared Nipper. "Steel eater! That's a rummy name for it, gov'nor! Sounds like something bloodthirsty."

Lee walked to the other end of the bench and picked up a metal rod, about twelve inches long. It looked like a portion of a poker, and was highly polished. One end was curiously jagged and uneven.

"You see what that is, don't you, Nipper?" Lee asked.

"Not exactly," replied Nipper. "An iron rod, isn't it?"

"A steel rod, to be more correct. It is made of highly tempered steel, and is practically impregnable to the assaults of an ordinary file. By ordinary means it would be a long job to part this rod into two portions."

"And this thing of yours—this steel eater contraption—will do the trick inside ten minutes, I suppose?"

"You will see," said the detective smilingly.

He placed one end of the steel rod into the mouth of a small but servicable vice, and secured it tightly. Then he picked up the polished brass instrument, and made some little adjustment.

Nipper watched with great interest. Nelson Lee held the tiny nozzle of the thing within an inch of the rod, just about three inches from the vice itself. Nipper heard a click, and then a slight hissing sound.

Bending closer, the lad observed some-

thing issuing from the nozzle—a kind of spray. And to Nipper's amazement, the steel commenced withering away like a twig before the flame of a plumber's blow-lamp.

"Great Scott!" the lad gasped.

Nelson Lee manipulated the "steel eater" round the rod, and after a few seconds grasped the end and gave it a sudden wrench. Snap! The rod broke like a carrot, leaving three inches in the vice. The stump was discoloured, and seemed to steam a little.

"You said ten minutes, Nipper," observed Lee. "I think you would have been nearer the mark if you had said ten seconds. I'll warrant the whole operation was completed within fifteen, at all events."

Nipper stared in blank astonishment.

"Oh, rot, gov'nor!" he burst out. "You're kidding me! That rod's made of soft iron."

"My dear boy, test it with a file if you are sceptical."

Nipper watched fascinatedly as Lee next fixed in the vice a sheet of stout steel plate. Again the little instrument hissed, and again the metal withered. Almost in no time a circular piece of the plate was clattering to the floor—completely eaten out.

"How—how the dickens is it done, gov'nor?" asked Nipper amazedly.

"Well, the secret mainly lies in the instrument itself," was his master's reply. "I discovered a method whereby an acid would be projected forth from a tiny nozzle with tremendous force. The liquid undergoes a complete transformation during the process of ejection, and emerges in the form of an almost invisible spray. One touch on your hand, let me add, would cause a terribly deep burn."

"Is it liquid fire, then?"

"No; merely a highly corrosive acid," replied Nelson Lee. "By exhaustive chemical experiments I have succeeded in concentrating this acid to a strength hitherto unattainable. The result is what you have seen. This corrosive acid, striking the bare steel in the form of a fierce spray, eats the metal away with extraordinary rapidity."

"Well, I'm jiggered!"

"Common iron or brass, or any soft metal, simply vanishes before the assaults of this little instrument," continued Lee. "I'll warrant I could break into any commonplace safe sooner than any man equipped with the highest-powered oxy-acetylene apparatus. Yet the thing can

be carried in the waistcoat-pocket. Rather neat?"

"Neat!" cried Nipper. "It's—it's wonderful!"

"Of course, when it comes to big jobs the invention is of little use," went on Lee. "For instance, I could not hope to sever a two-inch steel bar; the power of the spray would not be sufficient to eat through the metal."

"I'll bet you could do it if you took your time."

"Well, I suppose it would be possible to sever a six-inch bar, provided time was no object," replied Nelson Lee. "But I schemed out this little instrument, Nipper, mainly for the purpose of dealing with comparatively light tasks. It will come in wonderfully handy if ever I find it necessary to break open a strong box or a small safe. Indeed, there are countless ways in which the little 'steel eater' can be utilised."

"I can quite believe that, gov'nor," said Nipper. "But you'd better become an 'eater' yourself, and get some grub. You'll go and starve yourself, if I don't look after you."

Nelson Lee smiled, and in a short time he was busily engaged in consuming the excellent meal which Mrs. Jones the housekeeper laid before him.

Having finished, Lee retired to the consulting-room, and sat before the fire. Nipper was busy with some letter-files, and the lad looked at Lee rather curiously. The detective was certainly very deeply in thought.

"Penny for 'em, gov'nor?" said Nipper suddenly.

Lee looked up and smiled.

"You shall have them free, gratis, and for nothing, my boy," he replied. "I was thinking of our campaign against the Circle of Terror. I was thinking that it is about time we made another move in the game."

Nipper came across the room, and squatted down on the corner of the table. He had suddenly become quite serious and thoughtful.

"Yes, gov'nor, if we don't make a move the Circle will," he remarked. "They don't seem to have been very active this last week or so, so we'd better look out for a fresh attack in some new quarter."

"Let me just review the situation as it now stands," said Lee, neatly dropping the ash from his cigar into the fireplace. "To begin with, the Circle of Terror first made its presence known in our midst by a colossal scheme of advertising. Gilt-

edged cards, each bearing a purple circle, were strewn broadcast over London and the principal cities of the provinces. Fireworks were discharged, and a mysterious aeroplane appeared over London and dropped more gilt-edged cards. While the public's interest and curiosity was at fever-heat, the Southern Counties Railway Company received a curt demand for the immediate payment of twenty thousand pounds."

"That was the beginning of it all, sir?"

"Exactly. That was the initial step," agreed the detective. "At first we were all rather inclined to laugh at the thing; it seemed too preposterous for serious consideration. Sir Roger Hudson, the chairman of the railway company, positively refused to pay over the demanded sum. As a result, two railway trains were wrecked, and a valuable bridge blown to smithereens. Sir Roger then realised that the powers against him were too strong, and he gave in."

"And the police couldn't do anything?" said Nipper. "Scotland Yard was as helpless as a nursery full of babies."

"That remark applies also to ourselves, young 'un," said Lee quietly. "We did precious little to defeat the Circle of Terror in that first affair. But we knew that we were fighting a vast organisation, a great criminal concern, which was utterly ruthless and determined."

"The next affair was with the insurance company, wasn't it?"

"Yes, the Grand Imperial Assurance Company received a similar demand for money," replied Lee. "And, in spite of our efforts, the Circle of Terror succeeded in obtaining a further thirty thousand pounds. It was galling, no doubt, but when one considers the almost appalling odds we had to contend against, I think we acquitted ourselves commendably. In that second affair, at least, we succeeded in laying by the heels one of the Circle's most powerful members."

"You mean Edmund Cross?"

"Exactly. Mr. Edmund Cross was found guilty by the magistrates—found guilty of conspiracy and attempted fraud—and committed for trial," said Nelson Lee. "I believe Cross is now at Bow Street, awaiting trial. So, in a measure, we were successful. But it was in the Circle's third effort that we gained the upper hand in a most decided fashion. You will see, Nipper, that we have been progressing on the upward grade quite steadily. If all goes well, I have an idea that we shall

defeat our enemies in the long run. It's open warfare now, and we must be on our guard constantly. In the insurance company case, I had the privilege of meeting the High Lord of the Circle of Terror face to face. But he wore a yellow mask which completely concealed his own features, and I was totally unaware of his real identity."

"The rotters tried to kill you that time, gov'nor," remarked Nipper seriously. "If it hadn't been for a little slip, you would have been blown to nothingness. I reckon this Circle of Terror business is about the most perilous we have ever struck."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Not since we fought and defeated the League of the Green Triangle have we been subjected to such grave perils," he replied. "But we thrive on dangers and risks, my lad; it gives an added zest to our work which is not altogether distasteful. One day, perhaps, we may be struck down, but I never allow such a thought to bother me. Our work is necessarily dangerous, and we are therefore constantly prepared. That makes all the difference in the world, for, being on our guard, we are all the better able to cope with the dangers as they arise. Some people would say, perhaps, that the hairbreadth escapes we experience were positively astounding; but, when one considers every point, they are only natural consequences of our constant alertness."

"Oh, we'll prove to the Circle of Terror that we're their masters," said Nipper confidently. "We thought the Green Triangle was a pretty stiff handful, but that campaign was only a side-show compared to this."

"I am not exactly prepared to agree with you there, my dear Nipper," said Lee. "The Green Triangle was a very formidable organisation, and the Circle of Terror is merely an improvement upon it—a ruthless, determined master-criminal controlling the movements of countless underlings. For, behind every undertaking of the Circle there always looms the sinister personality of that most amazing criminal, Professor Cyrus Zingrave."

"I could hardly believe it when you first told me, gov'nor," declared Nipper. "Zingrave! To think that Professor Zingrave is the High Lord of the Circle of Terror! He used to be the Chief of the Green Triangle, and so we are really fighting an old enemy."

"That is so," assented Lee. "But now

Zingrave is a hundred-fold more determined and dangerous. He is unscrupulous to a degree, and will stick at nothing. He organised the Circle of Terror with the sole object of personal gain; he has entered upon a campaign of terrorism and brutality which is unrivalled in the world's history. But during our last encounter I think I may claim to have beaten the professor all along the line."

"I did a bit, gov'nor!" said Nipper hesitatingly.

"My dear lad, you were instrumental in saving the whole situation," Lee hastened to add. "If it hadn't been for your promptitude and smartness I should have been beneath the ground by this time. Of that there is not the slightest doubt. The Circle of Terror set out to rob Lord Mount-Bevon of the famous Mount-Bevon jewels. They were successful, but we stepped in and restored the priceless heirlooms to his lordship. Undoubtedly, we scored a triumph there, Nipper. I wonder what the next move will be?"

Lee puffed at his cigar for a moment and leaned comfortably back in his chair.

"There is no telling," he went on musingly. "But we have many advantages over the enemy. It is Professor Zingrave we are fighting—a man of astounding intellect, and almost uncanny power. Zingrave can force men to obey his will, even though they are disinclined to perform the task; Zingrave has a baleful influence upon all who come in contact with him. I am convinced that many men are now the tools of the Circle who have hitherto led decent, respectable lives. They have been drawn into a life of crime; and, having taken to that sordid road, they find it almost impossible to retrace their steps. Zingrave is the fountain-head of all the mischief. If we can only strike him down, the Circle of Terror will cease to exist. We must use all our energy and resources in the task of hounding the professor down."

"It's a tall order, gov'nor," said Nipper sagely. "We don't know where the professor is, or how many underlings there are in his employ. The Circle's headquarters are absolutely unknown to a soul, except Zingrave and one or two close associates. Why, even the ordinary members of the Circle don't know anything."

"They know something, Nipper," corrected Lee. "They are all fully acquainted with the secret type of short-

hand—a kind of scrollwork—which Zingrave invented, and they receive their orders in this shorthand by visiting a small picture theatre, which is situated in Fulham Road. We have discovered those facts at least.”

“And we’ve learned to write the shorthand, too!”

“Exactly.”

“And jolly useful it has proved into the bargain,” said Nipper. “I was able to save you from certain death, gov’nor. That picture theatre, of course, is the rendezvous of the Circle’s members.”

“Obviously,” commented Lee.

“I don’t suppose they know anything beyond that; they don’t even know that it is Zingrave who is controlling them, sir.”

“Why should they?” was Lee’s query. “They are probably very well paid for what they do, and prefer to remain in ignorance of their chief’s identity. And they know, moreover, that instant death would follow the slightest sign of treachery. It is a stiff business, Nipper, and we must never make the fatal mistake of underestimating the strength of our enemies.”

“I don’t think we shall do that, sir,” said Nipper. “We’ve had a few evidences of the Circle’s relentlessness already. They tried to put an end to my life, too, when I was shoved into that old boiler by the riverside. My hat! We’re having some excitement, anyhow!”

“And very little to show for it!” said Lee grimly. “That is the worst aspect of the business, Nipper. If we could only strike a severe blow at the heart of the organisation we should cripple it. And, by striking at the heart, I mean aiming at Zingrave himself.”

“What about that house at Eltham, gov’nor?”

Lee shook his head.

“I had the doubtful pleasure of talking with Zingrave somewhere in the neighbourhood of Eltham,” said the detective. “It was then that I discovered the identity of the High Lord. Zingrave, however, is still in ignorance of the fact. He does not know that I am aware of his secret.”

“But couldn’t we find that house, sir?” asked Nipper shrewdly.

“The police have already searched Eltham from end to end,” said Nelson Lee. “Every suspicious house has been entered and examined. But all the efforts have been fruitless. I have concluded that the house is the property of one of the Circle’s chief members—a man of the

same standing as Edmund Cross, probably—and there is naturally nothing of an incriminating nature to be discovered. For all we know there may be baronets in the inner committee of the Circle.”

“Oh, that’s a bit too thick, gov’nor——”

“Don’t forget the League of the Green Triangle,” interrupted Lee smoothly. “There were men of singularly high standing in that criminal concern. In all probability Zingrave has collected round him some of his former associates; that supposition is no idle one, and I——”

Nipper looked towards the door, and Lee paused.

There was the sound of a footfall on the stairs. The next moment the door opened, and the square figure of Detective-Inspector Lennard was framed in the doorway. Lennard was a Scotland Yard official of great intelligence, and he and Nelson Lee had been closely acquainted in many exciting adventures.

“Hullo! Taking it easy?” was his query. “Mrs. Jones told me you were both in, so I walked straight up.”

“How are you, Lennard?” exclaimed Lee, extending his hand. “Sit down—help yourself to a cigar. You are looking somewhat concerned, I perceive. Anything particularly wrong?”

The inspector lit a cigar, and then stuck one thumb in the armhole of his waistcoat.

“First of all I am disturbing you?” he asked. “You seem to have been holding a confab, and I don’t want to butt in when I’m not wanted——”

“My good Lennard, if you were in the way I should not hesitate to tell you so,” interjected Lee, with a smile. “To tell you the truth, Nipper and I were merely discussing our little differences of opinion with the Circle of Terror.”

Detective-Inspector Lennard slapped the table.

“Why, that’s rather queer!” he declared. “It happens that I have come round on a matter concerning those infernal rogues. By George, Lee, things seem to be getting worse and worse!”

The detective raised his eyebrows.

“Why, has the Circle broken out afresh?” he inquired languidly.

“Let’s hear the yarn, inspector,” put in Nipper, with some eagerness.

“Well, there’s not much to tell,” said Lennard, with a grim note in his voice. “But this time the Circle of Terror has absolutely gone the limit!”

CHAPTER II.

THE CIRCLE'S BOLD DEMAND IS REFUSED,
AND THEN COMPLIED WITH.

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR LENNARD looked from Nelson Lee to Nipper steadily.

"Yes," he repeated, "the Circle of Terror has gone the limit this trip. It's about the most amazing piece of cool cheek I have ever heard of. And I think you'll agree with me, Lee."

"Let me hear what the Circle has done," said Lee smoothly.

"They've done nothing so far," was the inspector's reply. "But they've demanded a certain thing which fairly took my breath away when I first heard of it. And, to be frank, Lee, I'm uneasy. I'm deucedly uneasy."

"You're a long while getting to the point!" growled Nipper.

"You have met Sir Donald Lyle, of course?"

"On several occasions," replied Nelson Lee at once. "Sir Donald Lyle is the Chief Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, and, of course, the head of Scotland Yard. Well, Lennard, what of him?"

The inspector leaned forward.

"Sir Donald has received a curt demand from the Circle of Terror for the immediate release of Edmund Cross from Bow Street Police Station," he exclaimed steadily. "That's the exact truth, Lee. What do you think of it?"

Nelson Lee blew out a small cloud of fragrant smoke.

"I'm not surprised in the least," he commented.

"Not surprised!" ejaculated Lennard. "Not surprised! Why, man alive, did you ever hear of such an astounding piece of impudence? The chief of Scotland Yard is ordered to release a man who is now awaiting his trial! The chief of Scotland Yard is instructed to give Edmund Cross his freedom."

"Phew!" whistled Nipper. "It's a bit tall, anyhow!"

"Don't you believe me, you young rascal," began Lennard hotly.

"Keep your hair on, inspector!" was Nipper's polite injunction. "Of course I believe you. I meant it was a tall order for Sir Donald. The Circle of Terror is getting terrifically cheeky!"

"Mr. Edmund Cross must be a valuable man," said Lee. "Well, I don't see what Sir Donald can do, exactly. He is in an awkward position. Was there any threat contained in the Circle's communication?"

"No, none."

"H'm! It strikes me that trouble will follow unless Sir Donald gives Edmund Cross his freedom," went on the detective thoughtfully. "Yet it is impossible for Scotland Yard to knuckle under. It is a totally different case from those which have so far occurred."

Lennard nodded gloomily.

"It will be an abject admission of weakness if the chief obeys the order," he said with a long face. "Of course, Lee, this information is quite unofficial, you know. Not a word must be allowed to leak out."

"Perhaps the Circle will attend to that detail!" suggested Lee grimly. "The Circle rather likes publicity, my dear inspector. Well, it will be rather a pity to lose Edmund Cross; I was in hopes of learning a few interesting details at his trial."

"But we're not going to release him," declared Lennard.

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I have an idea you will be forced to," he replied. "When does the ultimatum expire?"

"At seven o'clock this evening. The Circle's order merely says that Cross must be released from Bow Street at seven precisely. There is no threat—no hint of trouble if the demand is not complied with. Sir Donald, of course, is furious."

"Apparently, the Yard is in for some exciting times," remarked Lee. "The Circle will undoubtedly act drastically, and I should advise you to be well on your guard, Lennard."

"Oh, we're taking every precaution," said the inspector. "But I'm infernally uneasy, Lee. The situation is absolutely unprecedented. When it comes to ordering the Yard about I reckon it's time we put our foot down."

"The difficulty is, you don't know where to strike," was Lee's reply. "That is the stumbling-block. Sooner or later, no doubt, the Circle of Terror will be demolished, but there is no sense in denying that the scoundrels have everything their own way at present. I only wish I could find an opening for a direct attack. I should not hesitate to strike."

Detective-Inspector Lennard rose to his feet.

"Well, that's the position, Lee," he said. "Rotten, isn't it? We shall be on tenterhooks for the next day or two—for every man in the Yard believes that the Circle will act drastically. It's galling to suffer these indignities, but what on earth can we do?"

The inspector spoke almost plaintively. "You can only wait and watch," replied Lee. "Are you going, Lennard? I may possibly run round and have a chat with Sir Donald during the evening—or, at least, to-morrow. Let me know if there are further developments, won't you?"

The inspector promised to do so, and very soon afterwards he left. In a way, Lennard was not directly concerned with this fresh evidence of the Circle's activity. But he naturally felt that the prestige of Scotland Yard was in the balance. Unless something firm and definite was done the police themselves would be the butt of the Circle of Terror's ruthlessness.

The situation was certainly novel.

For a professed society of criminals to demand the release of an apprehended comrade was something new. It was not like the Circle's previous efforts, when they had demanded large sums of money.

Previously, too, the Circle's villainies had been directed against private companies and individuals. To give a peremptory order to the Chief Commissioner of Police was about the utmost limit in audacity.

And, naturally enough, Sir Donald Lyle scouted the idea.

He knew very well that in previous cases defiance of the Circle resulted in drastic consequences. But to release a man from prison was altogether out of the question. If the Circle of Terror revealed their teeth it was more than likely that the Criminal Investigation Department would be provided with an opportunity to get on the track.

Consequently, the hour of seven p.m. was allowed to come and go, and Edmund Cross still remained a prisoner.

It had been anticipated that something startling would follow, and the police were well on their guard. But the night passed seemingly without any untoward event. Sir Donald made a point of being at the Yard early the following morning. But it was not until about ten o'clock that anything definite was known.

No report had come in that anything of a violent character had taken place. Two police inspectors and a detective sergeant had not arrived as usual for duty, however, but there was nothing particularly startling in this.

The chief commissioner received a letter a few minutes after ten; it had been brought by a district messenger boy. Sir Donald compressed his lips angrily as he read through the message.

"The dastardly rogues!" he muttered.

"By James! When shall we rid the country of this curse? They seem to be having everything their own way, and we are helpless—positively helpless!"

For the letter was from the Circle of Terror. At the top of the sheet was a neatly printed purple circle, and the communication itself was printed after the usual style of the grim society's messages.

The letter ran as follows:

"Headquarters,

"Date as Postmark.

"Sir Donald Lyle,—We fully anticipated defiance of our orders. But you, similar to others, will be brought to reason. We had made all preparations for action, and we now inform you that three of your most capable officers are in our hands.

"These men are in no way harmed, and they will be set free one hour after Mr. Edmund Cross is released. We make no other demands. Failure to comply with this order will result in very drastic consequences. Mr. Cross must be given his liberty at seven o'clock this evening. If not, we shall not hold ourselves responsible for what happens to the three men in our power. Their fate rests entirely upon your decision. THE CIRCLE OF TERROR."

"Confound it! I half expected something of this sort," muttered Sir Donald concernedly. "I wonder if the rogues are bluffing? I strangely suspect they are. In any case, their precious demands will not be met."

He called in one of his subordinates, and the other pulled rather a long face when he perused the message.

"This is serious, sir," he said gravely.

"Very serious indeed, Reynolds," assented Sir Donald. "But you will quite understand that it is impossible to release the man Cross."

"But what of Shelley and Martin and——"

"They must take their chance," declared the commissioner gravely. "It is part of their duty. I do not for a moment believe that these hidden scoundrels will act as they hint. It is all bluff, Reynolds—sheer bluff. But they will find that we are not to be hoodwinked by their threats."

Very shortly afterwards Sir Donald Lyle received a visitor. This was Nelson Lee, and the great detective was at once shown the Circle's second letter. Lee was very friendly with Sir Donald, for the latter fully appreciated his unofficial colleague's excellent qualities.

Sir Donald was rather a stern-looking man, tall, stiff, and with a military air. He was a most capable man in every way,

and in spite of his seeming sternness was, in reality, kind-hearted and considerate.

"Much as I anticipated, Sir Donald," remarked Lee. "I was told of this affair yesterday, and I was not altogether surprised. The Circle of Terror has apparently no limit to its audacity. I'm afraid your three men are in a tight corner."

The commissioner nodded.

"If we could only find out what has become of them we might defeat this infernal Circle," he said. "Ten of my best men are at work this very minute. It seems that Shelley and Martin and Ratley were abducted from their own homes simultaneously. Tricked away, no doubt."

"I am afraid there will be no trace left," said Nelson Lee gravely. "I have no wish to appear curious, Sir Donald, but may I ask what your intentions are?"

"Why, Cross will not be released!"

"You intend to ignore this demand?"

"Would you have me comply?" demanded the other half angrily. "My dear Lee, it is merely an attempt at bluff. What will the Circle gain by killing Shelley and the others? Nothing at all. They won't come to any harm."

Nelson Lee shook his head dubiously.

"I am not quite so certain of that point, Sir Donald," he said. "This Circle of Terror has already shown us what it can do in the way of wanton and ruthless destruction. To be frank, if you do not give Cross his freedom, I would not offer a fig for the lives of your three subordinates."

"It's a deucedly awkward position," said Lyle worriedly.

"Terribly so. And I have come to you, Sir Donald, to tender you my advice, if you do not consider that too presumptuous," went on the great criminologist. "My opinion is that if you ignore this second letter, Shelley and Martin and Ratley will be delivered at Scotland Yard—dead!"

"They won't go to those lengths, Lee," declared the commissioner uneasily. "Heaven forbid I should be the cause of those three officers giving up their lives. But what is the alternative? I cannot consent to such an indignity. Why, the prestige of the police would be lowered to such an extent that we should be the laughing stock of the whole country. You may be sure that the Circle of Terror would advertise their success far and wide."

Nelson Lee leaned back in his chair.

"Nevertheless, I strongly advise you to give Cross his freedom at seven o'clock this evening," he exclaimed quietly. "I know full well that this affair is totally

different from any which has previously occurred. It is not a question of money. You have the public to consider—that I fully understand. And it would never do to give the Press the chance of holding up Scotland Yard to ridicule. All the same, I urge you to release Edmund Cross."

Sir Donald Lyle set his lips in a straight line.

"No!" he exclaimed firmly. "It won't do, Lee—it won't do! At the risk of——"

"Please let me finish, Sir Donald," Lee interjected smoothly. "I have an idea that you will see eye to eye with me in this matter. Taking everything into consideration, it will be far better if you give way."

For a full half-hour the pair talked seriously and earnestly. Then, as Nelson Lee rose to his feet to take his leave, the chief commissioner abstractedly tapped the end of a pencil upon his desk.

"I don't quite like it, Lee," he said. "Upon the whole, however, your suggestion is an excellent one, and I will take your advice."

"I am sure that you will not regret doing so," said Nelson Lee quietly. "As I said before, Sir Donald, it is far better that Edmund Cross should be given his liberty. It may lead to discoveries which are now beyond our reach, and it will certainly ensure the release of your three subordinates."

And at seven o'clock precisely that evening Edmund Cross was released from custody.

For some little time Cross had been at Bow Street, awaiting trial. The case against him was not particularly strong, but it was certain he would receive a fair term of imprisonment. The police had plenty of evidence that Cross was a member of the Circle of Terror; and that fact implicated him in several crimes.

And now he was a free man!

It was dusk as Edmund Cross unobtrusively left the police-station and walked with brisk footsteps down Bow Street. There was a look of wonder and astonishment in his eyes; it was, indeed, an amazing turn of events that he would have been quietly given his freedom in this singular fashion.

A man with a twisted foot—an old man unkempt and ragged—hobbled along the pavement, and as he was close against Edmund Cross, he appeared to slip. The next second the released man felt something in his hand.

"Why, what——"

Cross paused in surprise. The unkempt old man had passed on with a growling

word of abuse. Several other pedestrians were passing at the moment, and there was nothing whatever in the incident to excite the slightest curiosity.

But in Cross's hand he found a tiny grey envelope. With a quick suspicion he continued his walk, and after a while placed his thumb beneath the flap of the envelope.

Quickly glancing inside he saw a sheet of notepaper covered with some curious scroll-like markings. And there was also a pound currency note visible.

"A shorthand message!" murmured Cross exultantly. "By Jove, the Circle are taking a hand! This is highly satisfactory!"

For Edmund Cross knew that the scroll was in reality a message written in the secret shorthand of the Circle of Terror.

CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH ASTONISHING EVENTS TAKE PLACE.

FIVE minutes later Edmund Cross was seated in a quiet corner seat of a popular restaurant. He was in the smoking-room, and had chosen this particular seat because it was quiet and secluded. He was in full view of the whole room, of course, but quite to himself.

Having ordered several dishes from the menu, he lit a cigar—which he had just purchased—and removed the contents of the small grey envelope. The pound currency note he had changed already, but he was now eager and anxious to peruse the message.

It was with this object in view that he had entered the restaurant; he would be able to read the letter comfortably. For, of course, he was well acquainted with the secret system of phonography.

"What can it mean?" Cross murmured, his eyes gleaming. "I never dreamed of anything like this happening. By Jove! This message is from the High Lord himself!"

Cross had been a successful financier before his arrest. Naturally enough, his affairs were now all at sixes and sevens, and he would never be able to appear publicly in the City again.

He deciphered the shorthand quickly and eagerly.

"You have been released because I feel that you can be of more use to the Circle than to the police authorities,"

the message ran. "It is my intention to grant you a personal interview immediately. Be at the north end of Marshdale Avenue, Hampstead, at 8.30 precisely. Wait there beneath the fifth lamp-post from the end of the street. You will be conveyed at once into my presence; although, for obvious reasons, the locality of your destination will be kept from your knowledge.

"THE HIGH LORD."

Edmund Cross took a deep breath.

"Splendid!" he told himself. "This will mean something of exceptional importance. I am to be taken before the High Lord himself! What can his plans be, I wonder? What does he intend to do with me?"

The next minute the waitress arrived with his food, and he tackled it with a will. But while his teeth were busy, his brain was busy, too. He had much to think about.

The message said that for "obvious reasons" the locality of Cross's destination was to be kept from him. Before his arrest the financier had been a member of the Circle's inner committee. This committee was a body of powerful men who attended to the organisation's many "business" affairs.

But not a single member of that committee knew the whereabouts of the High Lord's headquarters. Only three other men besides the High Lord knew the latter's real identity and his place of abode.

This trio were absolutely in Professor Zingrave's confidence, and they were termed "The Council of Three." They held sway over the inner committee—just as the inner committee held sway over the Circle's less prominent members.

Edmund Cross did not know where the High Lord's headquarters were situated, and he did not know who the High Lord really was. He did not want to know. He received a high commission for all he did, and by remaining in ignorance of certain facts Zingrave's position was rendered safer, and Cross's own position was more secure.

The Circle of Terror was organised with wonderful forethought and care. Professor Zingrave, the master-brain of the whole concern, directed his underlings from a secret retreat, safe and secure from all. He did not even trust his own workers. Only three men were in his full confidence. Who they were was as yet unknown.

Zingrave had had all the ground.

work completed when he formed the Circle of Terror. The professor's experience with the League of the Green Triangle had taught him many lessons, and this great criminal society was far more formidable—far more superior in its organisation—that the Green Triangle had been.

Edmund Cross eagerly re-read the shorthand message as he devoured his food. He was feeling in high good humour, and looked forward to his interview with the High Lord. He was certain that good would come of that interview.

When he had finished eating he glanced at the clock which hung upon the wall at the other end of the long smoking-room. The time was just twenty minutes to eight. He had time to have a wash and brush up before hastening to Hampstead.

Taking out his cigar-case he selected a weed, and placed it in his mouth. Cross did not appear to notice one very important thing. As he withdrew his hand from his pocket something slipped down to his knee, hovered there for a moment, and then slid noiselessly down to the floor.

Cross rose to his feet and walked down the room.

He left his hat and overcoat on the pegs against his table; for he intended to return within a few minutes. The lavatory, where it was possible to have a wash and brush up, was only just off the smoking-room.

And the "something" lay unheeded upon the floor, close against the table.

It was the Circle's shorthand letter of instruction.

Apparently nobody had seen it, for the other diners went on with their meals as before. Even the trio of youths at the nearest table had not seen the little incident.

Then a short, thick-set man with a bushy moustache rose from the table in the centre of the room and strolled towards Cross's corner. He appeared to be looking for something, and quickened his pace when he observed that the corner table was empty.

The stranger reached forward and possessed himself of the mustard-pot.

As he bent slightly over the table his pincenez slipped from his nose, and fell to the floor. He stooped down and picked them up. Then he retraced his steps to the centre-table and continued his meal.

Curiously enough, however, he had no

occasion to use the mustard, for he was merely drinking a cup of coffee. And the grey envelope, containing the shorthand message was no longer on the floor.

"Ripping!" murmured the thick-set man. "What have we here, I wonder?"

Glancing down the long room, he saw that nobody was taking any notice of him. And Edmund Cross was still absent. The stranger pulled the letter from the envelope, and then pursed his lips as he saw the quaint scrollwork.

"The Circle's shorthand!" he muttered. "By Jupiter!"

Very rapidly—almost as rapidly as Cross himself—the thick-set man deciphered the message. When he had finished, his eyes were glittering with excitement, and he stuffed the letter into his pocket.

"O.K.!" the stranger murmured into his coffee-cup. "Nipper, my son, you're in for a night of adventure, I believe. This is where the fun starts!"

Nipper!

How could this thick-set man, obviously forty-five years of age, be Nipper?

The thing seemed absurdly impossible.

Yet it was actual, absolute fact. The stranger was none other than Nipper, Nelson Lee's astute young assistant.

His disguise was masterly. Slightly padded, his figure seemed to be just that of a comfortable, middle-aged man of the upper working class. And his face, ruddy and healthy, showed not the slightest sign of make-up. His nose was broader and bigger than Nipper's, too.

This was explained by the fact that Nipper wore two small spring pads inside his nostrils. When first inserted they were by no means comfortable; but they were soon settled in their place, as it were. And their presence caused no pain and no injury. Yet, as a disguising agent, they were invaluable.

His mutton-chop whiskers, slightly grey, looked perfectly real. The lad had been "got up" by Nelson Lee himself. And the famous detective, being a past-master in the art of disguise, had performed his work with his customary skill.

And Nipper knew exactly what Edmund Cross's movements were to be!

"I'll stick to the trail," the young detective told himself. "Where he goes, I'll go. There's no telling where the chase will lead to. The High Lord's headquarters, I'll bet a quid! Phew! This is absolutely ripping! But if I get myself into Zingrave's delicate clutches—"

His attention was attracted by the

movements of Edmund Cross. The released prisoner was donning his hat and coat, and he at once ascended the stairs to the ground floor—for the smoking-room was in the basement.

It was dark when Cross emerged—with Nipper in close attendance. The night promised to be fine, though intensely dark. For there was no moon, and the sky was concealed by high, fine-weather clouds. Every star was obscured.

Cross at once chartered a taxi-cab, and Nipper was in no way perturbed. He knew that his quarry was bound for Marshdale Avenue, Hampstead, and that he would be there at eight-thirty. So there was no urgent necessity for Nipper to stick closely to Cross's trail. So long as he got to the rendezvous by half-past eight he would be all right.

As it happened, Nipper secured a taxi within a minute; and, although he did not see any sign of Cross's vehicle during the ride to Hampstead, he knew that the financier could not be far ahead.

Nipper dismissed his cab about a hundred yards from the arranged spot, and then turned into Marshdale Avenue. This was a long thoroughfare, and Nipper easily understood why the High Lord had specified the north end.

The neighbourhood was sparsely populated, and the few houses were well back from the road. The avenue itself was wide, and trees grew thickly on either side. Only one side of the road was illuminated, and Nipper counted the lamp-posts until he came to the fifth.

Under this was a figure, pacing to and fro.

Nipper grinned.

"Right as rain!" he told himself. "It's only just twenty past, so we're in jolly good time. It's up to the Circle merchants, now, to make the next move, I wonder what's going to happen?"

Scarcely a soul was about. After waiting five minutes a small party of people—evidently visitors—left one of the big houses and walked down the avenue, talking animatedly.

Nipper took advantage of the fact to follow close behind them. They were on the opposite pavement to Edmund Cross, and when Nipper drew opposite to the fifth lamp-post he nipped into a gateway. But for the presence of the lively party he might have been seen by Cross.

The half hour came, and passed.

And at twenty-seven minutes to nine a big motor-car turned into the avenue, and came straight towards the spot where

Cross was pacing. The financier pulled himself to a standstill and waited.

The car, he saw, was a limousine. It came to a jerky stop, the engine purring softly. The man at the wheel, evidently a gentleman, pulled his brake-lever over and looked towards the pavement. Edmund Cross stepped closer to the car.

"Oh, crumbs!" muttered Nipper, watching from across the road. "Where do I come in here? If I don't look out I shall be left behind! Once that car gets a move on, I shall be properly diddled!"

Taking advantage of the darkness the lad noiselessly crossed the road. He had an idea that he would be able to hang on to the back of the car; possibly there was a large luggage-grid there.

He reached the back of the limousine, and carefully felt his way to the rear side. Then he paused, listening. The driver had got down and had just unlocked the door; the latter was now swinging open.

"... few minutes late, I believe," the driver was saying. "Very glad to see you again, Cross. We're doing our best for you, and it's rather a risky business. However, there's no prospect of a hitch."

"Are you alone?" asked Edmund Cross.

"Yes, at present."

"Then I shall be in the car by myself?"

"For the first part of the journey," replied the other. "But you mustn't ask questions. You've been released from Bow Street, and it will be your own fault if you get yourself locked up again."

Nipper heard the two men move toward the front of the car. And the lad quickly felt for something which he could grip. The journey might be a long one—a swift one—and it was necessary for Nipper to secure a firm hold.

But there was nothing.

The rear of the car was smooth; there was not even a ledge upon which Nipper could wedge his foot.

"Oh, stars!" muttered the lad, in dismay. "I'm dished—I'm done!"

Then suddenly a daring thought came to him.

He peered round the body of the car, and saw that Edmund Cross and the other man were standing in front of the car, talking. The near-side door was wide open, and the interior was in darkness.

Risking all, Nipper stepped lightly forward and peered into the closed tonneau. A faint ray of light from the street lamp

was cast into the automobile, and Nipper's keen eyes took in everything at a glance.

The limousine was slightly different from the usual run of motors. There was a big space beneath the wide, luxurious seat, and it was quite empty. There was no time for hesitation or indecision.

With a quick intake of breath Nipper slipped into the car, and wormed his way beneath the seat.

It was a tight squeeze. In fact, the lad almost despaired of concealing himself. But, with a herculean effort, he shoved his shoulders back, and lay still, panting rather heavily.

He was only just in time, for Cross and his companion approached the door. The stranger was speaking.

"My dear fellow, I can't stop to answer any questions now," he was saying in a low voice. "You will know everything in good time. You quite understand that the door will have to be locked, don't you? It is the better way."

"Oh, yes; I understand," said Edmund Cross.

He stepped into the car and took his seat. The door closed, and Nipper heard the lock snap. A moment later the limousine started forward with a slight jerk, and was soon running smoothly and swiftly along the quiet road.

The situation was rather thrilling—for Nipper.

He was alone with Edmund Cross. The doors were locked, and escape was impossible. They were bound for an unknown destination, and every window in the car was of heavily-frosted glass: the door-windows, and little square patch of glass at the back, and the partition which separated the rear portion of the car from the driving-seat. It was even impossible to see the driver. Cross, as well as Nipper, was unable to see where he was going.

Three minutes passed, and the only sound was that of the driving gear beneath the floor of the car. This was somewhat noisy, and all other sounds were completely drowned.

Then Nipper made a movement.

He suddenly wriggled his head and shoulders out into the open space in front of the seat, and raised himself upon his elbows. He looked straight at Edmund Cross, and the latter returned the look.

"I say, guv'nor!" whispered Nipper hoarsely, "can we jaw for a bit?"

"Yes, if we speak in murmurs!" replied Cross, bending forward. "Well done,

young 'un! You have been smart! No, don't venture out further."

There was something familiar in Cross's voice now—something totally different from what one would have expected. And the financier was smiling curiously. He tapped Nipper's shoulder approvingly.

What could it mean?

What was this amazing revelation?

To be quite frank, *Edmund Cross was none other than Nelson Lee himself!*

CHAPTER IV.

NIPPER EXPERIENCES A GOOD DEAL OF EXCITEMENT AND PERIL.

NELSON LEE chuckled very softly. "We have tricked the enemy splendidly, Nipper," he murmured. "But we must not spoil everything by being rash. If we talk we must do so in the merest whispers."

Edmund Cross was Nelson Lee!

It seemed like some nightmare—some phantasy. The man who had been released from Bow Street; the man who had received the Circle of Terror's shorthand message; the man who had talked easily and familiarly with the driver of the motor-car—the man was Nelson Lee!

Where, then, was the real Mr. Edmund Cross?

At Bow Street—still in the hands of the police!

In plain truth the famous detective was playing one of the biggest games of bluff he had ever attempted. The Circle of Terror was being tricked all along the line. Nelson Lee was proving himself to be amazingly astute.

His disguise was astonishing in its completeness. He was Edmund Cross to the life. Cross's greatest friend would have greeted him warmly, and would never have detected the fraud.

Nelson Lee's game was a deep one.

He had known full well that Sir Donald Lyle would not release Edmund Cross from custody. Such a thing was not to be thought of—was not to be considered seriously for a second. Scotland Yard could never admit defeat in that meek way, even though the lives of three men were in the balance.

And so Nelson Lee, after urging Sir Donald to release Cross, had offered a further suggestion: he had stated his real reason for visiting the chief commissioner. He had suggested a bold trick—

nothing more nor less than impersonating Edmund Cross himself!

At first Lyle had been sceptical. But he had finally appreciated the astuteness of Lee's scheme. Cross himself would remain in custody, as already settled, but the Circle of Terror would believe that their demand had been obeyed! That was just the subtleness of the plan.

For Lee to impersonate Cross was not a difficult matter. The prisoner was helpless, and Lee had been able to take his time over the make-up. With Cross before him, Nelson Lee had disguised himself with amazing secrecy and cleverness. And when he left Bow Street Cross's greatest friend would have accepted him as the genuine article, so to speak.

But Nelson Lee had another plan in mind.

This game of bluff would cut two ways. It would ensure the release of the three Scotland Yard officials—by this time, indeed, they were probably free men. And it would enable Lee to get straight on the track.

The detective had been positive that the Circle would make some move as soon as they saw that Sir Donald had obeyed their command. But Lee had hardly expected such prompt action as that shorthand note. A Circle emissary, of course, had been waiting outside the police-station, waiting for Cross.

Lee hoped to discover things. And that shorthand communication—which he had been easily able to read—had filled him with exultation. He was to be taken to the High Lord's headquarters! He was to be taken to Professor Zingrave's secret retreat!

Surely he would be able to learn much? With ordinary luck he believed that he would achieve un-hoped-for success. The game was risky in the extreme; indeed, Lee did not care to count the hazards. But he was eager to drag the Circle's secrets from the sinister darkness into full daylight.

Nipper was in the affair, too.

The lad had been instructed to shadow Edmund Cross—otherwise Nelson Lee—and be ready for any emergency. Lee, of course, had been fully aware of his young assistant's presence, and had acted accordingly.

It had appeared, in the restaurant, as though Nelson Lee had carelessly dropped the shorthand note upon the floor. As a matter of fact, the detective had already seen Nipper at another table; and Lee had dropped the note for the especial purpose

of letting Nipper pick it up. Lee had known that Nipper would not allow the note to fall into anybody else's hands. And even if it had done, a stranger would have been able to make nothing of it.

Nipper had read the note, and had been highly elated. His master was allowing him to be "in" this affair. Nipper's elation was even greater when the motor-car turned up at Marshdale Avenue. For the lad had known at once that Lee had deliberately kept the driver talking in front of the car so that he—Nipper—could secure a hiding-place on the vehicle.

Nothing had happened by pure chance; it had all been deliberately planned. Nelson Lee had "worked" things beautifully. And now both Lee and Nipper were off to the High Lord's lair.

Such a chance for discovering the Circle's secrets had never before occurred.

And the situation, in spite of its perilous nature, possessed many elements of humour. This limousine, belonging to the Circle of Terror, was conveying the Circle's bitterest enemies to the very spot they wished to discover. It was really a delicious position.

Nipper was simply bubbling over with enthusiasm.

"You worked the thing spiffingly, gov'nor!" he chuckled breathlessly. "The chap who's driving this car would catch a fright if he knew who you really were. Who is he, anyhow?"

"I don't know," was Lee's cautious reply. "But he is somebody high up in the Circle's administration. Possibly one of Zingrave's confidants; a man higher than Cross himself. We must be very, very careful."

"What's going to happen next, sir?" breathed Nipper eagerly.

"My dear lad, it is useless asking me conundrums," said Nelson Lee. "I am not uneasy regarding myself. My thoughts are for your safety. I am wondering if it was a wise move on your part to enter this car."

Nipper chuckled.

"Don't you worry yourself about me, gov'nor," he said. "I'll look after myself all right. Why, my presence here may be the very saving of the situation. Didn't I hear this chap say that you'd have the car to yourself?"

"Yes—for the first part of the journey. Evidently, a change is to come about before so very long," was Lee's reply. "We don't know which direction we are taking, and we have no idea of the length of our journey. The window-glass is

frosted, Nipper, and the doors locked. The die is cast now, with a vengeance."

Nipper edged a little further out.

"Why mustn't you know where you're going, sir?" he asked curiously. "You're Edmund Cross now—one of the members of the Circle's Inner Committee."

"But those gentry know nothing of Zingrave's headquarters," interjected Lee. "At least, I have reason to believe so. My treatment to-night proves that the High Lord does not mean me to know too much. And that is why I am rather disappointed. I entered upon this adventure in the hope of learning facts; but if I am secretly taken to Zingrave, and secretly conveyed back to London—provided I carry off the bluff successfully—I shall have discovered practically nothing. I am beginning to fear that our work will be for nothing."

"Ah, that's where I come in, guv'nor!" declared Nipper. "When you get out you'll be packed straight into some house or other, perhaps, without having a chance of spotting where you are. But I shall be able to nip out and make a thorough examination of the locality. Then we shall know a thing or two, eh? Of course, I shall go cautiously, and get straight back to London."

Nelson Lee pressed Nipper's fingers.

"I hope everything turns out all right, lad," he said quietly.

"It's a bit risky, I know," said Nipper, "but that makes it all the more interesting. I wish I knew where we were going, sir. Out into the country somewhere, at any rate. Couldn't we manage to——"

"Hush! Get back, young 'un—quickly!" hissed Nelson Lee.

But Nipper needed no urging. Quite abruptly the limousine had commenced slowing down, and it came to a sudden halt. Nipper crouched beneath the seat, wondering what the cause of the stoppage could be. Surely the journey's end was not reached? Perhaps there was traffic——

The door opened, and Nelson Lee saw a dim figure, with blackness beyond.

"Good evening, Cross," said a strange voice—not the voice of the driver. "Glad to see you again, old man. Infernally bad luck, your getting nabbed. We sha'n't let the police catch hold of you again, though."

The voice was cordial and friendly.

"Confound it, man, what does this mysterious travelling about mean?" asked Lee, in Edmund Cross's voice, and

affecting to be impatient. "I don't care for this absurd foolery."

The stranger laughed lightly.

"Base ingratitude!" he declared, with a chuckle. "We obtain your release, and you can do nothing but grumble! Hop out, old man. I'll explain things to you in the other car. Now then, Todd, you know your orders."

The other car.

Nipper felt a curious thrill run down his spine. Nelson Lee was being transferred to another automobile. This altered matters, indeed! The Circle of Terror was being thorough in its undertaking, at all events.

But there was no time for conjecture.

Nelson Lee alighted, and without a word another man entered—the man named Todd, presumably. The door slammed, and the car jerked forward. Within a minute it was running smoothly.

Nipper's position was now critical in the extreme.

And the lad realised, with a sudden intake of breath, that discovery was practically inevitable. This change made all the difference in the world; the difference between safety and exposure.

Lee had been taken out of the car, and a stranger was now in his place.

It had all occurred within the space of a minute, and Nipper was hardly able to grasp the full significance of it. But he did so after the car had been running for a short distance.

Nipper had entered the car—had squeezed himself in that space beneath the seat—because he knew that the occupant was Nelson Lee. The lad would never have risked the thing if a genuine Circle man had been the limousine's passenger. For he was hopeless—utterly hopeless.

Having known that his master would enter the car, Nipper had not hesitated to take the bold step. But what of his position now? One kick would tell the stranger that a human being was beneath the seat. And then——!

"Oh, stars!" thought Nipper, with dismay. "Here's a giddy pickle!"

His fears proved to be only too well-founded.

For discovery followed at once.

Exactly how the Circle man learned of the lad's presence, Nipper never knew. But discovery had been certain, sooner or later. Nipper heard a sudden exclamation, then a smothered oath.

The next second he was grasped fiercely and dragged out upon the mat. Before

the lad could even prepare himself for a "scrap," a neckerchief was twisted round his wrists and drawn tight.

Nipper had had no chance whatever of putting up a fight.

He was a prisoner before he could gain his feet; while he was floundering on his back, indeed. In this confined space all the odds had been against him. Panting with fury, but quite fearless, Nipper found himself with bound wrists and at a complete disadvantage.

"By George!" gasped Todd. "Who the thunder are you? A boy, eh? What were you doing under——"

The man had flashed a light upon Nipper, and the lad knew that he was recognised.

"Nipper—Lee's brat!" exclaimed the man. "Good heavens!"

"You had me at a disadvantage," said Nipper in an even voice. "I'd have shown you something if I'd had half a chance, you rotter. But your precious Circle of Terror's not so jolly smart as you thought——"

"You young cub, how did you get in here?" snarled Todd.

"Walked in!"

"When? Tell me when you entered the car!"

Nipper appeared to consider.

"When I got in, of course!" he replied profoundly.

"You cheeky hound——"

"That's queer—I was a cub just now," said Nipper. "Can't be two animals, you know. Strikes me you're getting excited, my buck. I'm not. I'm collared all right, but I'm quite cool about it. What are you going to do with me?"

The man burst into a harsh laugh.

"You've got plenty of nerve, kid!" he exclaimed. "You've run your head into a noose this journey, though. As sure as my name's Montague Todd, you'll wish you'd never set eyes on this car by the time I've done with you. But you won't be capable of wishing anything, then!" he added darkly.

"Sounds melodramatic, Mr. Todd," said Nipper.

In the dimness he could just see his companion. The man was about forty years of age, slim and wiry looking. He was clean-shaven and well dressed. And, so it seemed to Nipper, there was a worried, troubled expression on his face.

Truth to tell, Mr. Montague Todd was very worried indeed.

He surmised that Nipper had entered the car with the object of shadowing

Edmund Cross, and this unexpected change had upset the lad's calculations. Never for a moment did Todd suspect that Nipper had not been working alone.

But this was not what troubled him.

An order had been issued by the High Lord, an order to the effect that neither Nelson Lee nor Nipper were to be allowed to live if once they got into the Circle clutches.

If Todd had been alone he would, perhaps, have hesitated. But there was the car driver, and he had been changed, too. The man who had been originally driving was now on the other automobile with "Edmund Cross." This driver was merely a common member of the Circle.

But he was bound to know of the prisoner, and if Todd did not carry out his work thoroughly the man would inform. Montague Todd almost cringed at the thought of violence—for, in honest truth, he was not a murderer. He had no personal enmity against Nipper, and it had never occurred to him before that he might be suddenly called upon to carry out the High Lord's terrible decree.

Todd knew, however, that defiance of the High Lord's order was fatal. If he allowed Nipper to go he would be called upon to account for his action, and terrible trouble would follow.

"I shall have to settle the brat," thought Todd harshly. "After all, he and Lee have been working against us ever since the campaign started. Sooner or later they'll cause a crash, unless they are rendered harmless. For my own safety, I must steel my heart and act decisively."

He argued with himself, keeping a wary eye upon Nipper meanwhile. And Todd's scruples were cast aside, and he prepared himself for the work to come. After all, it would be simple, he told himself. Already a plan suggested itself to him.

Far down, beneath the man's upper surface of crime, there was good in him; there was something which irritated him and told him that he was living a wrong life. But Todd harshly smothered the inward voice, he blotted it out completely, and called himself a fool.

Not so very long before he had been a decent citizen—a commercial traveller by profession. And he had listened to the words of a friend, he had allowed himself to be drawn deeper and deeper into the morass of crime.

Now it was too late to turn back.

And Montague Todd told himself that he did not want to turn back. He was earn-

ing four times as much money now, and his work was easy and safe. The Circle of Terror was generous to those who served it, and gave them no cause for discontent.

For the first time Todd felt the real enormity of his position. He was face to face with a difficulty. Nipper was in his power, and the High Lord had decreed that Nipper should die if he ever fell into the Circle's hands.

To hand the lad over to others to deal with was impossible. The position had been thrust upon Todd, and he would have to "see it through." The man set his teeth firmly and came to a decision.

Tapping on the glass against the driver's head, he attracted the latter's attention, and the motor-car came to a standstill. Todd alighted and locked the door, leaving Nipper within.

The lad wondered what was in the wind.

He gazed down at his wrists, and wrenched at the tightly bound neckerchief. It gave somewhat, and he was able to move his hands slightly. But within a minute the door opened again, and Todd entered.

The car sped onwards once more.

"I must be ruthless," the man told himself. "It is the Circle's motto, and I must have no scruples. It will soon be over, and I shall receive a large reward after I have made my report."

Nipper wondered what was going to be done with him. He had been in the Circle's clutches once before, and he knew, at least, that he could expect no mercy. But his position now, although serious, was not desperate.

He had a wild notion of opening the off-side door—it was unlocked—and making a jump for it. But the car was travelling fast, and that course would have been foolhardy and dangerous.

No, the only thing to do was to await events, and seize his opportunity when it occurred. Nipper could see that Todd was in no way pleased with the situation, but a certain grim expression about the man's eyes told Nipper that he had come to a definite decision.

"What's the game?" asked Nipper suddenly.

"You had better hold your tongue, boy!" snapped the other curtly. "You will hear nothing from me. And I may as well warn you that any attempt on your part to escape will be quickly nipped in the bud. If you are wise you will remain submissive."

"That all depends," replied Nipper

cheerfully. "You don't look a bad sort on the whole, and there's no reason why we should be enemies——"

"Hold your noise!"

Almost immediately afterwards the limousine again came to a standstill. It seemed to Nipper as though the car had just mounted a steep slope. He found this actually was the case, for the vehicle had come to a stop upon the summit of a somewhat narrow bridge—one of those old-fashioned bridges which form a kind of hump in the road. Below a swift river was running.

Nipper could hear the water beneath, and felt by instinct, rather than saw, that he was upon a bridge. The lad was bundled out of the car, and stood there in the darkness with Todd's hand grasping his coat-collar in such a way that escape was impossible. The man's fingers dug deeply into the back of his neck, and any violent movement on Nipper's part caused him great pain.

"You know what to do," said Todd to the driver, in a low voice. "Drive on for about half a mile, and then wait for me."

The limousine at once started on again, and its red rear-light disappeared round a slight bend.

Nipper, watching that light, formed a quick theory as to what Todd's game was to be. Why had the car stopped upon this bridge? The question was not a difficult one to answer.

The subdued roar of waters told Nipper that the river beneath was rapid, and probably treacherous. The spot was utterly deserted and lonely, and not a light showed in any direction. Nipper had not the slightest inkling as to his exact locality. He might be fifteen miles from London, or he might be fifty; he did not know.

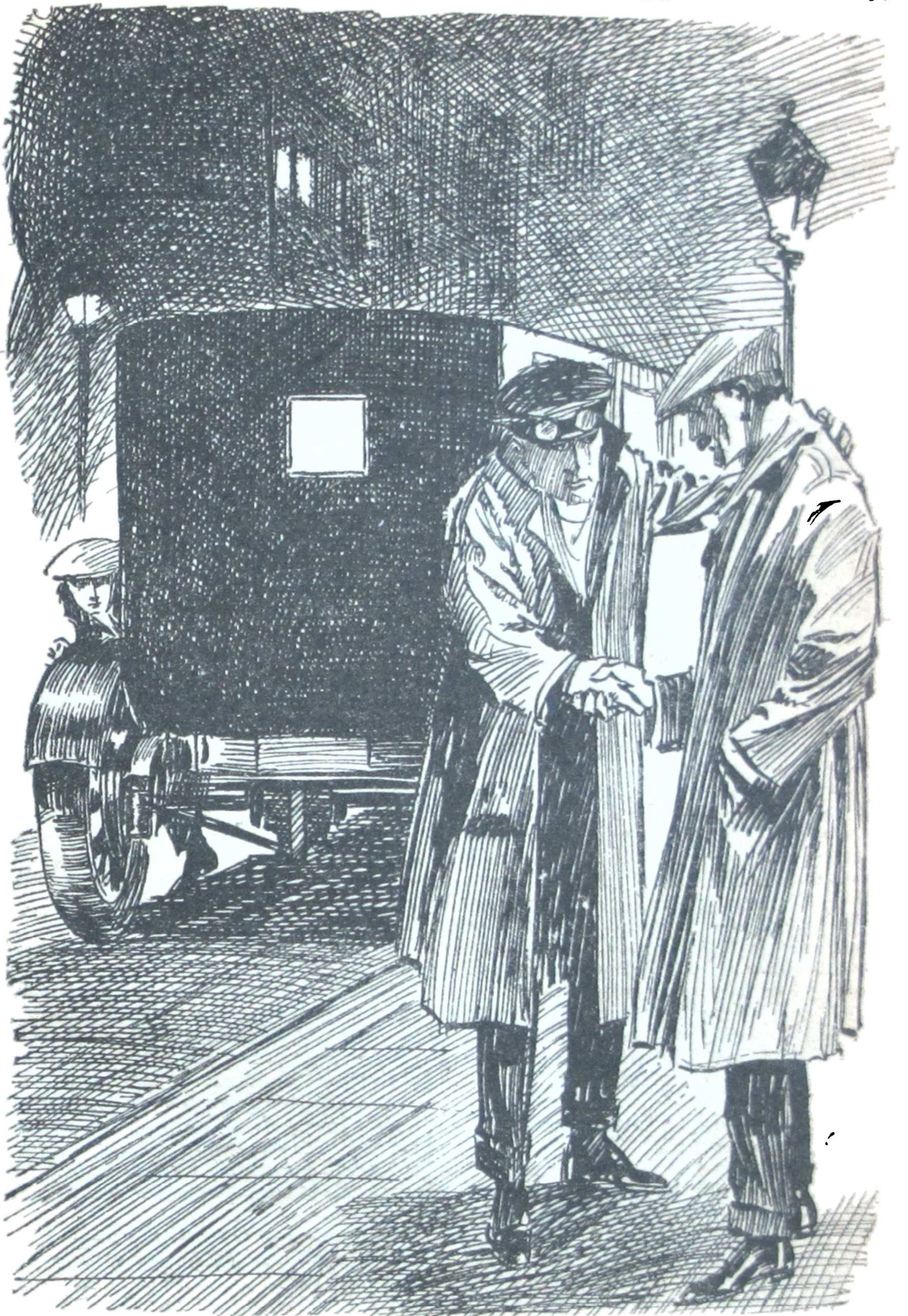
At all events, it was certain that no help would come from any direction.

The lad believed that Todd intended hurling him down into the river, bound hand and foot. If this actually happened the lad would have little chance of surviving, expert swimmer though he was. Indeed, it was more than probable that the Circle man would knock him on the head first.

The lad was desperate—and he acted on the spur of the moment.

But the result of his action was absolutely astounding. Even Nipper himself had never anticipated such a singular happening as that which followed.

It was Todd, however, who received the greater surprise.



Nipper peered round the car and saw the "Edmund Cross" and the other man were talking.—(See p. 12.)

The man was even at that moment steeling himself for the grim work to come. As Nipper had imagined, Todd's plan was to render the lad insensible, and he was feeling for his revolver so that he would be able to use the butt upon Nipper's head.

To do the man justice he loathed his task, and he was driven by fear more than anything else to accomplish it swiftly. Personally, he had no animosity towards Nipper, but if he failed to deal effectively with his prisoner he would suffer himself; he would suffer to a terrible extent. For the High Lord, while being generous to his workers, was harsh and ruthless to those who bungled. In some ways, the members of the Circle were in constant dread of the dictator—as Zingrave sometimes styled himself.

Accordingly, Montague Todd was committing this crime to ensure the safety of his own skin. The thing had been thrust upon him, and he was bound to deal with it. Once he had rendered Nipper insensible the rest was easy.

But Todd had made one mistake: he should have rendered Nipper helpless while the pair were still in the car. But Todd was no murderer at heart, and had put off the dread action until the last moment. He had not been cold-blooded enough to attack Nipper within the speeding motor-car. And, indeed, he found it necessary to pluck up every ounce of his courage to perform his task now.

Nipper was as keen as a needle, and he knew full well that this man was not cut out for the work. Todd was breathing heavily—forcibly—and Nipper could feel that he was trembling as though with ague. Curiously enough, Nipper almost felt sympathy for the man. Instinctively the lad knew that Todd was not such a scoundrel as he appeared to be.

And the young detective had no desire to injure his captor; he only wanted his freedom. The lad had purposely appeared to be meek and terrorised, in order to deceive the other.

And then, with a sudden wrench, he tried to free himself.

Todd's knuckles dug into his neck, and then Nipper ducked. This action twisted the man's fingers violently, and Todd gasped with sudden agony.

"You young hound!" he grated hoarsely.

Nipper did not trouble to reply—he was far too busily engaged. Like an eel he wriggled out of the other's grip, and prepared to race away. And it was then that the surprise came.

Todd reached out with a low curse and just succeeded in gripping the lad's coat-tail. Nipper knew that a fight would be fatal—for him. With his wrists bound it was impossible for him to hope for success. His only safety lay in flight.

"You haven't got me yet!" panted the lad huskily.

He twisted round and then tried another dodge. He flung himself upon Todd with all his strength—he literally charged the man. And Todd was not prepared for the move. Nipper's body struck him and he staggered back, practically off his balance.

With a cry of alarm Todd hit the bridge parapet violently. This was low and the brick-work was old. Evidently a few of the upper bricks were loose, for they crumbled away—and Todd was unable to regain his balance!

It all happened in a breath.

With a wild cry the man plunged over the parapet and disappeared into the darkness below.

The order of things were reversed—for it was Montague Todd who had plunged to his death! He had met the fate he had outlined for Nipper.

"Great Scott!" gasped the lad amazedly.

He heard a dull splash below, and in the dim gloom he saw Todd's pale face rise to the surface.

"Help—help!" came a strangled, terrorised cry.

The man could not swim!

In less than one second Nipper came to a startling decision. His would-be assassin was in grave peril. And the lad, without hesitation, leapt to the parapet and took a clean, swift dive downwards.

It was an act of unbounded courage and generosity.

Bound as he was, Nipper had plunged to the rescue of the scoundrel who had desired his death. Nothing could have been more praiseworthy, for Nipper was under no obligation whatever to perform this act.

But the lad could not see Todd drowned before his eyes. Almost before he knew it he was in the water, lunging out with powerful strokes. Ahead of him, borne upon the strong current, was the drowning man.

Nipper's swift strokes carried him forward rapidly. His hands were bound, but he was able to make excellent progress in spite of this great drawback. For Nipper was like a fish in the water.

He had forgotten all else except that a man was in danger of losing his life. A scoundrel, no doubt, but a human being.

Nipper instinctively plunged to the rescue, and he had done so all the more rapidly because he knew that he was, indirectly, the cause of Todd's perilous position.

The river was swift and swollen, the current being treacherous. But Nipper was swiftly overtaking the drowning man, and at last he succeeded in gripping Todd's hair. As he did so the handkerchief, worked loose by the violent exertion, slipped down over Nipper's hands. A jerk freed him completely.

"That's a good thing, anyhow!" thought the lad. "Hold up, Toddy!" he added aloud, in a panting voice. "You're all right—although you jolly well don't deserve to be yanked out!"

Nipper commenced striking for the nearest bank. Todd, conscious but semi-dazed, did not struggle. He allowed Nipper to haul him through the water. And at last the river-bank was reached.

The young detective staggered out, and lent the rescued man a hand. Then, for perhaps a minute, the pair sat upon the grass, dripping and shivering, recovering their breath. Todd had been almost overcome.

Quite abruptly, he rose to his feet, and stood swaying.

"I—I was going to—to kill you!" he croaked hoarsely.

"Yes, I know," panted Nipper. "You nearly did yourself in instead."

"By thunder! I must have been mad! I must be dreaming!" muttered Todd weakly. "You—you have saved my life. And I tried to kill you a moment before! Heaven help me, I am only fit to die, Nipper! I did not deserve such treatment from you!"

"You didn't!" agreed Nipper heartily. "You deserve gaol!"

"You saved my life!" Todd repeated, as though fascinated by the knowledge. "By Heaven! And I—I—— Nipper, will you take this?"

The man held out his hand shakily.

For a moment Nipper gazed at the other's wet and quivering palm. Then the lad extended his own hand, and the two silently clasped. There was something pathetic in Todd's manner, and Nipper could not refuse the husky request.

Todd did not speak further. He turned away with a kind of sob, and staggered off into the darkness. He was greatly affected, and Nipper knew that he had nothing to fear from the man.

Perhaps—who knew?—good would come of this singular episode.

CHAPTER V.

WITHIN THE HIGH LORD'S LAIR.

MEANWHILE, Nelson Lee was having an experience beside which Nipper's adventure paled into insignificance. A broad statement, perhaps, but one fully justified by the events which took place.

Upon emerging from the limousine he saw another motor-car, facing the opposite direction, close by. And the limousine immediately started off, carrying Nipper with it, in addition to the unknown Todd.

Nelson Lee was gravely uneasy.

But he was not allowed to think much of Nipper's position. He saw that the driver of the limousine had alighted, too, and was now apparently going to take charge of this second car.

The other man—the man who had already spoken to Lee—was attired in evening dress and silk hat, but a light overcoat was upon his shoulders. The spot was quiet and deserted, and was apparently situated in a quiet country lane. Away to the right a few lights gleamed, denoting houses, but it was impossible for Lee to determine the locality.

"Come along, Cross," said the man in evening dress cordially. "This seems rather mysterious, no doubt, but you mustn't be impatient."

"My dear Hampson," put in the driver. "Cross is decidedly curious to-night. I can't quite make him out; he knows perfectly well that the chief doesn't allow any member of the committee to know the whereabouts of the——"

"Yes, of course I know," interjected Lee. "I'm sorry, Hampson. I'm a bit flustered, you know. All this business has taken me by surprise. A couple of hours ago I was at Bow Street, without a hope in the world. I'm stupefied for the time being. You'll have to excuse me."

Hampson laughed.

"The chief's showing you special consideration, Cross," he said, moving towards the car. "He's going to have a personal interview with you, and give you careful instructions. You are a valuable man, and your services are of use to us. Jump in—we must be off!"

Nelson Lee entered the car, and Hampson followed. A moment later the vehicle was moving swiftly forward. Lee noted that this car was almost precisely similar to the first, only newer and more up-to-date. The glass was frosted, however, and nothing could be seen through it.

After a few moments Hampson switched

on a small overhead electric light. Then he turned to Lee with a smile, and handed him his cigar case. The detective selected a weed with a word of thanks.

Just at that moment Lee was thinking of Nipper, and worrying inwardly. He felt sure that he, himself, was comparatively safe. He did not anticipate exposure. His disguise was a masterpiece, and he had faith enough in his own acting to be comfortable. But what of Nipper?

"How did you get on?" asked the other man pleasantly. "Got the message all right, of course? Any trouble?"

"No, none," replied Lee. "To my amazement I was released from custody; I was told that I was a free man. I simply read the message and went to Hampstead. Nothing happened—I was not shadowed by a soul.

Hampson chuckled.

"We are getting on, Cross—we are getting on!" he said softly. "Upon my soul, the chief is audacious! Even Scotland Yard is afraid to defy the High Lord's orders! It is just as well, for the three prisoners would have met a sad fate if you had not been set free."

"The three prisoners?" repeated Lee cautiously.

"Of course, you don't know, do you?" went on the other. "We collared three Yard officials, and held them as hostages. Unless you were released the trio of official gentlemen would die—that was what the thing amounted to. Well, Sir Donald Lyle was sensible. He released you."

Inwardly Nelson Lee chuckled. This man, Hampson, would have been astonished if he had known the actual truth. Sir Donald Lyle had not released Edmund Cross at all, but the Circle of Terror was being hoodwinked all along the line.

"What of the Yard men?" asked Lee.

"Oh, by this time I expect they have reported," said Hampson easily. "They won't be able to report much, however. You may rest assured we did not leave them any clues."

The detective was pleased. One result had been achieved, at all events. The three kidnapped men had been given their freedom. But, somehow, Lee was rather pessimistic as to the rest of his programme.

Would he learn any of the Circle of Terror's secrets?

He was rather doubtful.

For a full hour the motor-car sped swiftly along the smooth roads, Hampson and "Cross" conversing occasionally on

general topics. Just when Lee was wondering when the journey would end, Hampson glanced at his watch.

"Nearly there, Cross," he said, with a smile. "Sorry for this secrecy, but you fully realise the position, don't you? We trust you right through—but it is impossible to be too careful. The chief has organised everything to the last detail, and we stick to the set rules."

Nelson Lee nodded. He had refrained from asking questions, for he did not want Hampson to become suspicious. His daring "bluff" had worked wonderfully so far, and it would be disastrous to court exposure now.

"You won't mind being blindfolded, will you?" went on Hampson.

"Blindfolded?"

"Yes; just while you enter headquarters."

"My dear man, do just as you like," laughed Lee.

But the famous detective was deeply disappointed. Nipper was—where? Far from this spot, at all events. The lad would be unable to carry out the plan he had outlined to his master.

And Lee himself might just as well have stopped at home, for all the good he would do. He had no idea as to the direction the car had taken, and when he arrived at Zingrave's lair he was to be blindfolded!

He might be in Kent or Surrey or Sussex or Hertfordshire—he did not know. Although Edmund Cross was a member of the Circle's Inner Committee, he was not allowed to know too much. Only the "Council of Three" were in Zingrave's complete confidence. Cross did not even know the High Lord's identity; therefore Lee had been very careful in his reference to the High Lord.

The "Council of Three," he knew, were Zingrave's intimate advisers. Hampson was evidently one of them, and the driver of this car another. Zingrave was going to considerable trouble over Cross, and Lee realised that the "nabbed" man must be a valuable member of the Circle.

But, valuable though he was, he was to be left in ignorance of the whereabouts of the High Lord's headquarters. And so Nelson Lee would learn practically nothing. It was galling in the extreme.

But there might be a chance yet—time would show.

The journey ended at last, and Hampson turned to his companion. There was a large black silk scarf in Hampson's hands.

"Ready?" he asked lightly.

"It is really necessary, I suppose?"

"My dear man, don't be absurd!" protested the other.

He raised his hands, and Lee allowed him to tightly bind the black silk over his face. Hampson tied the scarf thoroughly, for Lee found it impossible to see even a glimmer. And there was no hope of edging the silk away from his eyes, for it only covered his face from his hair to his chin.

"Just hang on to me, Cross, I'll guide you all right," said Hampson's voice. "Only a few paces, after all. Once you are inside, I'll let you see again."

Nelson Lee's senses were all on the alert now.

He could, at least, use his ears; and there might possibly be some sound which would serve to identify the spot. Such a thing was improbable, of course, but Lee was eager to seize any chance.

After stepping to the ground he paused for a second. Except for the scraping of other men's feet upon rough gravel, there was no sound. The night was still, and the place was apparently far from other habitation. A puff of wind struck Lee's face, and he then heard the soft rustle of leaves close by. There were trees about, at all events.

"This way, Cross."

Lee felt a hand upon his arm, and he was slowly led along the gravel. From the echo, the detective judged that he was traversing a narrow pathway. Probably it was lined with trees. At one spot his right foot landed upon a metal grating of some sort, but gravel followed.

Then there was a short pause, and Hampson advised him to be careful. Lee gingerly descended some narrow stone steps. There were ten altogether, and they were singularly narrow. Lee memorised this fact.

But what a situation!

He was actually within Professor Cyrus Zingrave's secret retreat, and yet he could see nothing. Nelson Lee felt that all his trouble had been for nothing. And his peril had scarcely commenced. The greatest ordeal of all had yet to come.

For a few paces it seemed to him as though he proceeded through a tunnel, for his steps echoed loudly. Then a key turned almost noiselessly in a lock, and he felt a wave of warm air enveloping him.

"All right now, Cross," said Hampson.

The black scarf was suddenly removed, and Nelson Lee found himself standing in a wide passage. The door through which he had passed was now closed and locked. There were no windows visible.

Overhead, in the ceiling, there were tiny

subdued electric lights at intervals. This establishment was somewhat extensive, at all events, for it was apparently supplied with its own electric light. That was another point worth remembering.

Lee followed his guide along the passage, and within a minute a stout oaken door was reached. Hampson opened this, and a flood of brilliant light streamed out into the passage.

"The High Lord will interview you at once," said Hampson gravely.

He stood aside, and Lee entered. Then the door closed softly, and the detective found himself alone in a strange room. Hampson had gone. Nelson Lee drew a deep breath.

How was this adventure to end?

At all events, it was interesting, and he had the keen satisfaction of knowing that he was bluffing his enemies in the most amazing manner.

The apartment he was in was fairly large, and perfectly square. All the walls were hung with rich tapestry, and the carpet was of heavy pile. The furniture of the room was of the most expensive order, and there were six high candle-powered electric lamps hanging from the ceiling.

As Lee stepped forward the tapestry parted on the other side of the room, and a figure appeared—a slight figure, attired in a shimmering robe of some purple material.

It was the High Lord of the Circle of Terror.

Nelson Lee was face to face with Professor Zingrave.

But, as before, the High Lord was an object of horror and loathing. His face and hands were yellow—bright yellow. And there was a blank, hideous expression about the face which almost inspired fear.

The High Lord was wearing his yellow mask, the mask which concealed his own features, and which gave him such an appearance of dread. Nelson Lee felt a thrill run through him as he saw the professor.

Zingrave's mask was sufficient proof that Edmund Cross did not know the High Lord's identity. Valuable though Cross was, it was not thought advisable to let him into too many secrets.

"I am pleased to see you, Cross," exclaimed a silky voice. "Sit down, my friend, make yourself quite at home. I have caused you to be released from police custody because I have work for you to do."

Nelson Lee pretended to be rather awed.

"I am grateful," he exclaimed quietly.

"I did not expect that I should be rescued, and my delight knew no bounds when I found myself a free man. I am ready and willing to do everything that is required of me, everything that is within my power."

"Splendid, Cross, splendid!" exclaimed the High Lord, moving closer. "You fully understand, of course, why so much secrecy has been maintained during your journey from London. I trust you, Cross, but it is necessary to be very cautious. I have been to a great amount of trouble over this affair, and I shall expect you to fall in with my suggestions without heistation."

Lee knew very well what this was, to all intents and purposes, a command. Zingrave meant to imply that his orders would have to be obeyed at all cost. The High Lord had accepted Lee without a suspicion, he did not doubt for a second that he was conversing with Edmund Cross in the flesh.

Lee had noticed that the luxurious apartment was quite devoid of windows. There was nothing which would give the detective the slightest clue to the exterior of the building.

And, after this interview was over, Lee would be led back to the car, and driven to London once more. The detective's thoughts were rather bitter. All his work would have been for nothing, all the risks he had undergone, all the chances he had taken—all would be for nothing!

And Nipper?

What of Nipper? It seemed certain to Lee that the lad was in hot water of some description. The game of bluff did not seem to be such a success as he would have liked. He was anxious to break away from this place and discover its precise locality. For, without a doubt, the mysterious country house was the High Lord's secret lair.

While Zingrave was talking, Nelson Lee was watching for an opening.

"Yes, Cross, I have work for you," went on the High Lord. "It is, as you will no doubt realise, impossible for you to remain in England. I have therefore made all the necessary arrangements for you to journey to the United States immediately."

Edmund Cross—No. 2—opened his eyes wider.

"To America!" he exclaimed. "Perhaps it will be safer, chief. I sincerely hope that you will have duties for me to perform across the water; for I am anxious to serve the Circle in every possible way."

Zingrave nodded approvingly.

"You have the right spirit, Cross," he

said in soft tones. "Your headquarters will be New York, and you will represent the Circle of Terror in America. In short, you are to become the Circle's New York agent. You will be well paid, and your work will be comparatively light."

"I shall assume, no doubt, a new name?"

"Of course. Everything has been prepared for your reception," replied Zingrave. "Once you arrive in New York, you will adopt a new personality—you will become another man altogether."

Lee inwardly chuckled. The High Lord would have been somewhat surprised could he have known that Cross was another man already! There was something piquant in this interview; these two men were bitter enemies, and only one was in possession of the truth. The High Lord was the one who had the disadvantage.

And it was then, at that point, that something happened which was destined to alter everything. It was a trivial incident, and one which Lee could not have foreseen.

"Of course, we shall go into this matter very thoroughly," went on Zingrave. "I expect we shall be talking, Cross, for fully two hours. I have much to discuss with you, and many instructions to give. When you leave here you must be in full possession of the new plan. Oh, by the way, how is your arm?"

Lee was rather surprised at the question. Instinctively, he knew that the High Lord was referring to something which had occurred previously—something of which Lee had no knowledge. The situation was becoming somewhat dangerous.

"My arm is quite all right, thank you," he replied quietly.

"That is excellent," said Zingrave. "I feared, perhaps, that you would not have full use of your arm for some little time. When you were arrested, I remember, I thought of your injury, and concluded that it was well even then."

"Oh, it was—quite well," said Lee, who had no recollection of Cross being injured.

"I merely asked because the doctor had said that blood poisoning might set in," went on the High Lord, through his uncanny-looking mask. "It was a curious accident, Cross, and you were lucky to escape so slightly. That chemical explosive of mine is deadly, and you might even have been killed. Let me see how the place has healed. A bad scar, probably."

Lee set his teeth and felt his heart

heating at a faster rate. He had certainly not anticipated anything of this nature. He did not even know which arm was supposed to be injured. Well, it was all a matter of chance, and the detective knew that he was on terribly thin ice.

He thrust out his right arm and pulled up the sleeve.

Zingrave's expression was totally hidden by the mask, and he took the detective's arm and gazed upon the soft skin closely. For several moments he was intent upon the examination.

Then, with a sudden movement he jerked something from the pocket of his robe. Nelson Lee found himself staring into the unwavering barrel of a curiously designed pistol. The great detective did not flinch in the slightest degree.

"Why this?" he asked coolly, nodding towards the weapon.

"I don't know who you are, my friend, but you are certainly not Mr. Edmund Cross," replied Professor Zingrave, smoothly. "One minute ago I fully believed that you were the man you appeared to be. But now I am enlightened."

"I really fail to understand," exclaimed Lee with affected amazement.

"And I am prepared against any desperate act on your part," continued the professor. "This weapon of mine is of my own invention, and it is deadly. No report—no bullet—simply death. Take off your disguise."

The last words were uttered in tones of sharp command.

"My disguise!" replied Lee blankly. "Is this a test for me, chief? I am wearing no disguise—"

"You have bluffed me successfully so far, but your bluff will be of no further use to you," interjected the High Lord grimly. "I little imagined that I should learn the truth merely through a sympathetic inquiry regarding a slight injury. By chance you held out to me your right arm—the arm which Cross injured. But one glance told me that you were not Cross."

"You are mad! The wound healed up—"

"Tut, tut! Your flesh was burned deeply by a powerful and poisonous chemical explosive—at least, Edmund Cross was burned," interrupted Zingrave. "Such a burn could not fail to leave a very distinct scar—a disfigurement for life. Your skin is as smooth as a girl's."

"Now that you have explained the situation, I may as well be frank and open,"

exclaimed Lee composedly. "It is hard luck, but you only bowled me out by a mere stroke of chance. The situation promises to be somewhat interesting."

Without further ado Lee removed his wig and a portion of his disguise. He knew quite well that if he didn't do so himself he would probably be roughly handled. The game was up now, and he was the first to realize that the position was not only "interesting," but deadly serious.

A curious gasp came from the High Lord.

"Nelson Lee!" he exclaimed through his hideous mask. "By heaven, I—I—" He pulled himself up abruptly, and then continued in tones that were even more silky than ever. "You are clever, Lee—as clever as I, myself—and that is saying much. You nearly succeeded in your gigantic bluff. Smart—very smart!"

"Rather a pity you mentioned that burn," said Lee calmly.

"For you—yes. It was most unfortunate, my dear Nelson Lee," replied the High Lord. "I can easily guess what has occurred. Cross was not released from Bow Street at all—you have been impersonating him all the while. Well, there is no harm done, as it happens. You will never return to London."

For a few seconds the two men stared at one another silently. The air seemed to be tense. Lee was rapidly turning over in his mind the chances of escape. And he saw no light. He was within the Circle's lair, and enemies surrounded him.

The detective half-expected Zingrave to shoot him then and there. Or, perhaps, he was talk first—jeer at his helpless prisoner in triumph. Yet Zingrave had done nothing to boast of. He had been hoodwinked all along, and it was through a mere accident that he had learned the truth.

Although disaster had come, the honours were certainly with Nelson Lee.

The detective had carried his project through with absolute success.

But fate had decided against him.

Possibly the High Lord was bluffing—perhaps that weapon of his was harmless. But Lee did not intend to put the matter to the test. One touch of the trigger would mean swift death at that deadly range.

For the time being at least Lee resolved to obey any orders which his companion might utter. Lee was as keen as any man on earth to seize a chance when it came along; but he knew when to be cautious.

"I have a special apartment in perfect

readiness for your reception, my dear Lee," went on Zingrave, silkily. "It was constructed to my designs, and will, I believe, interest you."

"Some new devilry, I assume?" suggested Lee.

"Exactly—exactly!" Zingrave rubbed his gloved hands together with obvious satisfaction. "You will now be shown how ruthless the Circle of Terror can be. I have borrowed certain schemes from the Spanish Inquisitors of old. Oh, yes, you will certainly be interested!"

The High Lord waved his hand invitingly.

"You will step to the wall on your left," he ordered smoothly. "Yes, that is it. Now part the tapestries. Good! You see a door before you, Mr. Lee. Open that door, and enter."

For one second Nelson Lee hesitated.

Would he drop into a death trap when he stepped through the doorway? Would he plunge into a pit? In any case, there was no alternative, for Zingrave's voice, in spite of its smoothness, was as cold as ice. And his weapon was still directed towards the prisoner's head. Resistance on Lee's part would be fatal, so what were the odds?

Lee turned the handle of the door and strode boldly forward. Rather to his surprise, he walked upon a hard, metallic floor. The door, too, had seemed to be of metal, for it was heavy and solid.

The very instant the detective had passed through he found himself in utter darkness. The door had closed silently after him. And there was stillness—utter, absolute stillness. Every sound was cut off completely.

Lee was frankly astonished.

He was still in possession of his revolver, of his pocket-book, of his electric-torch. Why had he not been searched? During the first second he felt elated, but then his spirits drooped. There was an excellent reason for Zingrave's seeming carelessness. His revolver, no doubt, would be of no use to him.

He switched on his torch, and then Lee's astonishment changed to amazement and horror. He was in a square apartment, small and absolutely bare. The walls and floor were dull, and he saw that they were made of steel. The door, too, by which he had entered was also of steel. The flooring was slightly different, for it was covered with dozens of small sockets, about three inches deep. These sockets were clean and glittering, in sharp contrast to the dullness of the other metal.

Flashing his light upwards, Lee beheld the ceiling. It was about three feet above his head, and was also made of solid steel. And from it projected dozens of glittering steel fangs, each nearly two feet long. He could reach them easily by raising his hand. Their points and edges were as keen as that of a sword.

"Great Heaven above!" panted Lee.

The sockets!

He realised the ghastly truth. The ceiling was movable, and was capable of descending like a gigantic press. The spikes, of course, fitted into the sockets. And any living thing which happened to be within that room during the ceiling's descent was doomed to a horrible death!

There would be no escaping the fangs; they would descend relentlessly, and would pierce his body in half a dozen different places. It was a fiendish contrivance, and Professor Zingrave had spoken truly when he said that he borrowed his ideas from the Inquisitors of Spain.

And, even as Lee watched, the ceiling slowly commenced its descent!

CHAPTER VI.

NELSON LEE'S THRILLING ESCAPE—CONCLUSION.

NELSON LEE was rather taken aback. He had fully expected the ceiling to descend with dramatic swiftness. He now saw, however, that his death was not to be so swift and merciful. This was refined torture.

Escape was impossible, for the walls would have withstood an earthquake. Lee told himself that he was doomed, and did not for one second attempt to think of a way out. What was the use?

"The fiend!" he muttered angrily. "These spikes will descend and transfix me to the floor. They are only a few inches apart, and to dodge them is impossible. This is the end of all things—so far as I am concerned."

The ceiling was descending very slowly, and Lee could see that he would be pierced by five or six of the razor-like blades, no matter where he stood. He would be forced down, until he lay full length upon the floor. And then—

The detective did not care to think of what would happen then. There was only one way possible in which he could live through the frightful ordeal. And that was by snapping off a sufficient number of the spikes so as to provide a

clear space. The other spikes, of course, would prevent the metal work of the ceiling from crushing Lee to death.

But, even as he thought of the idea, he knew that it was impracticable.

He grasped one of the fangs, and tried to shift it, but the thing was as firm and solid as though it were treble the thickness. No human being, however strong, could shift those spikes.

Already they were level with the top of his head.

At this rate of descent, Lee judged that he still had about fifteen minutes' grace. After that the spikes would perform their deadly work.

A trap more complete, more certain, Nelson Lee had never encountered.

But even during those tense moments, Lee was perfectly cool. He extracted a cigar from his case, and then felt for his automatic lighter. At least he would prove to Zingrave that he died composedly.

A thrill seemed to run right through the detective's frame.

The cigar dropped from his fingers, and he took a deep, deep breath.

"By Heaven!" he muttered tensely. "A chance—a chance!"

For his fingers had encountered in his vest pocket the little brass instrument which he had demonstrated to Nipper only a day or two ago. The steel-eater! Lee remembered how rapidly the corrosive spray had eaten through the steel which he had provided for the purpose.

Those metal bars had been thicker than these spikes, and it was therefore permissible to suppose that the spikes would snap off sooner than the stouter bars. The steel, he knew, would wither away with extraordinary rapidity. And it would not even be necessary to eat completely through each spike with the deadly acid. For the leverage would enable him to snap them off cleanly once they had been sufficiently weakened at the setting.

Would he be able to clear a space?

It was a matter of seconds, he knew, and he did not intend to lose one. Leaving his torch switched on he placed it upon the floor. There was quite sufficient light shed upwards for him to see what he was doing.

Rapidly adjusting the brass instrument he commenced his work. By this time the ceiling was fully six inches lower, and was descending relentlessly.

There was a slight hiss, and the powerful acid-spray bit into the steel. After a few

seconds Lee felt the spike weakening—for he was grasping the point of it with his other hand.

Snap!

The first fang had been demolished!

As Lee worked he cast his eye upon the other spikes, and mentally decided how many would have to be removed to ensure his safety. He would clear a space just over six feet long and two feet broad. Outside this area the spikes could remain in position. For, when they descended into their sockets, Lee would be left lying in a clear space—safe and unharmed.

Very soon the perspiration was streaming from him. He was working with tremendous pressure, and he achieved far greater success than he had hoped for. One by one the sword-like fangs were snapped off. The powerful acid ate through the steel as a knife goes through cheese.

Lee was soon forced to his knees. In this position he continued his frantic work. His left hand was cut and grazed in a dozen places, but he did not even know it. His very life depended upon the next few moments.

The ceiling descended noiselessly and with an overpowering sense of deadly weight. And at last Lee was forced to lay full length upon his back, reaching upwards. All except the space over his head was cleared—his body and legs were safe. Snap. Another had gone.

Two more only and he would be in no danger!

And the seconds were becoming precious now. When he was at work upon the last spike the thing was descending fully upon his neck. It was impossible to shift sideways, so as to dodge it, for he would only have laid beneath other spikes.

Unless he could remove this particular one—

The point touched his skin, and he attempted to flatten himself while he worked. At the same time he exerted every ounce of strength in one huge effort; he had not been able to use the steel-eater for the requisite length of time.

There was a sudden metallic report, and the steel spike went clattering across the floor. Completely exhausted, Lee lay back.

His efforts had been rewarded—he was safe!

For a full three minutes he lay quite still, regaining his breath. Then he heard a soft grating noise. Raising his head, Lee saw that the ceiling had descended to

its lowest limit. The spikes were in their sockets.

But the detective, lying within the cleared space, was untouched. He was even able to move about slightly; and as he watched the coiling commenced its ascent. If he had not adopted the daring expedient he would have been killed now—he would have been stabbed in a dozen different parts of the body.

Lee knew only too well, however, that he was by no means out of the wood. He rapidly considered his position. Zingrave would open the door shortly, he believed. And, once again in the High Lord's clutches, Lee would be provided with no second chance!

There was only one way—and that was doubtful.

As soon as the door opened he must make a dash for it. He was amidst enemies, and the position was too desperate for defiant measures. Lee's only chance was to flee—to dash away before Zingrave recovered from his shock.

And, as he had suspected, the time for action came at once.

The ceiling ascended fairly rapidly, and Nelson Lee was enabled to rise to his feet. He extinguished his torch, and then stood waiting. He was grim and desperate. He was resolved to act with decision and swiftness. Everything would depend upon the shaping of events.

The surprise, no doubt, would help him materially. Zingrave, of course, would be staggered to find his victim alive. And the professor would be taken completely off his guard. In this way Lee would have a powerful advantage.

While he was still musing the door swung silently open. A shaft of bright light streamed in, and Nelson Lee saw the slight figure of Professor Zingrave standing in the doorway.

Before the High Lord could speak—before he could even see what had happened—Lee's fist shot out. His knuckles caught Zingrave upon the jaw, and the professor crashed back upon the floor.

Nelson Lee jumped clean over the fallen man, dashed straight towards a small door which stood half-open. So far, no alarm had been given. Lee's revolver was in his hand, and he was fully determined to use the weapon if necessary.

Zingrave was knocked out for the time being, but it was certain that he would recover within a minute. Lee's blow had been forceful, but not serious. If only the detective could reach the open air he

knew that he would stand an excellent chance of gaining liberty.

Once through the doorway he found himself in a narrow passage—not the passage by which he had entered. As he sped down it a man came from one of the rooms. Before he could utter a cry, Lee was upon him. The detective did not pause one second in his stride. The man—Lee believed it was Hampson—went flying. But he bellowed with pain and fury and set up a general alarm.

Nelson Lee turned the end of the passage and saw before him several steps leading upwards. One way was as good as another, and so he mounted the steps three at a time and was confronted by a closed door. He flung it open, burst through, and then uttered an exclamation.

He was in a kind of conservatory—through the glass he could see the dim outlines of trees against the night sky. There was a door, glass topped, and this proved to be locked. There was no time for ceremony, and Lee lifted his foot and crashed his heel upon the door with all his strength.

A splintering of glass, a sudden snap, and the door burst open.

Free!

At least, he was clear of the house and under the open sky. Surely he would be able to reach the public highway. Speeding along the gravel-path, Lee presently came to a spot where the trees grew thickly. He had been unable to see the house itself, or any of the grounds. He only knew that he was in a kind of wilderness. Certainly, the garden was not in the least cultivated. Trees grew everywhere, and the weeds were rank in their profusion.

Lee dashed on, smashing his way through the undergrowth by sheer force. There was nothing ignominious in this flight of Lee's; he was acting in the only way possible under the circumstances. Recapture would mean death—positive, certain death.

And then he received a shock.

Behind him, on the still night air, he heard the deep baying of a savage dog.

Zingrave had set a hound upon the fugitive's trail.

Nelson Lee was convinced that the animal would prove to be a savage beast of the worst description. He pressed on, and then, before him, he dimly saw a high barbed wire fence.

The detective was about to grasp the wires, in order to wrench them apart, when he heard a smashing of the under-

growth in his rear. Panting heavily, the detective twisted round, gripping his revolver more tightly. But he had no chance of using the weapon. Even as he turned he saw a huge dog in the act of springing.

The animal was foaming at the mouth, and was evidently madly savage. There was not even time to pull the trigger. Instinctively, Lee ducked, and he felt the dog's bulk graze his head as it swept over him.

The next minute a fearful scream arose. Turning with his heart almost in his mouth, Lee beheld the hound—dead! It was lying at the foot of the barbed wire fence, quivering but lifeless.

Nelson Lee realised the truth on the instant.

The barbed wire was charged with electricity! Only a moment before Lee himself had been about to grasp the wire, and he knew that he had escaped electrocution only by a hairbreadth!

The dog, at all events, was killed—had been killed by accident more than anything else. The Circle of Terror's stronghold was revealing some astonishing features. Lee knew that pursuit was certain—and he was hemmed in.

In desperation the detective looked round him. In that second he almost gave himself up for lost a second time. Within a minute the pursuers would be upon him. Then, lying among the weeds, he saw a long straight pole.

For one flash his memory sped back to a jaunt he had once made in the Fen district of Lincolnshire. He remembered how the Fen men adroitly leaped the broad dykes by means of long poles. Lee himself had practised the art to some little extent.

Could he clear the electrified wire?

He resolved to make the attempt—he resolved to risk all.

There was a clear space just here, and Lee, after stowing his revolver away, grasped the pole, and then took a short,

clean run. His fingers gripped the pole, and he dug the end of it into the earth.

Up he rose—up and over, his legs raised high. By a bare fraction of an inch he cleared the topmost wire; indeed, he felt his coat-tail catch upon one of the spikes and tear. His vault had been successful. Down he plunged on the other side of the fence—down—down—

Nelson Lee was able to give no clear account of that which followed afterwards. He knew, however, that he had received an amazing surprise. For, instead of finding solid ground upon the other side of the electrified fence he had plunged down for fully twenty feet! The wire, therefore, was obviously set upon the summit of a short cliff.

And below a swift river ran—a river of treacherous currents and eddies. Lee, as well as Nipper, had a taste of cold water that night. After recovering from his surprise he battled with the current, but was carried down as helplessly as a scrap of paper in a street gutter during a rain storm. It was pitch dark, and he could see nothing.

And lower down, while he was fighting to reach the shore, he entered upon some rapids—at least, so it seemed to him. His head struck upon a rock, and from that point he remembered nothing definitely.

He had, at least, managed to scramble to safety. But he was dazed and fuddled, and wandered away into the darkness. For miles he walked aimlessly, not knowing where he was going or what had occurred to him. And in the dawn Nelson Lee had been found staggering drunkenly along the main road. A gentleman was driving to London by car, and he picked the detective up and conveyed him to Gray's Inn Road—learning Lee's address when near London.

For, by that time, the detective had partially recovered. During that day Lee was still slightly muddled in his

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head, and it was not until night-time that he regained complete control of his brain.

And, owing to the blow he had received and the subsequent condition of dazedness, he had not the faintest idea where Zingrave's secret stronghold was situated. He could only be certain of one thing. The Circle of Terror's headquarters were in Surrey, somewhere below Guildford.

But Nelson Lee had escaped, and he and Nipper compared notes. So far, so good. Much more had been accomplished—much more learned. Lee was hopeful of being able to locate the High Lord's lair.

received a short note from—Montague Todd. The man declared that he would serve Nelson Lee and Nipper a good turn when the opportunity came. He was grateful, and wished to be Nipper's friend. Lee had been very pleased to hear his young assistant's adventure.

Upon the whole, everything was satisfactory. It seemed as though a new friend had been made. Gradually, the Circle of Terror's secrets were becoming known to Nelson Lee. The famous detective's danger was no doubt increased, but he was by no means daunted by this fact.

Before long he would be able to fight Professor Zingrave on equal terms.

And the very next morning Nipper

THE END.

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THE ISLAND OF GOLD

A Story of Treasure Hunting in the South Sea Islands

By **FENTON ASH**

Conclusion.

CAPTAIN BARRON avowed himself in a difficulty. His men, he told the doctor, were so badly bitten with the fever that he feared they would mutiny if he ordered them to start so long as there seemed any opportunity of adding to their gains. They had all been admitted to a sort of co-partnership, under a scheme suggested by the doctor, and they were restlessly anxious to make their shares as large as possible.

On the other side were Storbin and his royal master, Oltra, both imbued with similar feelings. Even where the natives were getting frightened and were anxious to leave, their king insisted on their still working and slaving to fill his canoes with more and yet more of the curious mixture of rock and gold.

This same mixture was now being stowed away on both the yacht and the Hawk as ballast, the ballast already in the hold being thrown into the sea to make room for it.

Far away from this scene of frenzied activity the remnants of Diego's band were also suffering from an attack of gold hunger. But with them it was a hunger which could not be satisfied. They were reduced to looking on whilst their enemies enriched themselves.

"Looking on" was indeed their part, both figuratively and literally. For they passed much of their time on hills and heights from which, through their glasses, they could watch the proceedings of the gold miners, doubtless biting their nails and grinding their teeth at them in impotent fury, yet not daring to risk a hostile movement so long as the native allies of the white men remained.

By degrees, finding that the miners were too much engrossed in their work to trouble about scouting, or even watchmen, the filibusters grew bolder and drew nearer. They even, at last, concealed themselves amongst the shadows near where parties were at work, and crept out and hastily grabbed armfuls from some heap of the golden refuse that had been discarded, taking their chance of being shot at if discovered.

Like everybody else on the island, they knew now that it would be wiser to sail away from the place while there was yet time. But the lure of the gold held them with its potent spell, and they tarried in the vague hope that some unexpected turn of the wheel might enable them to get a big share of the gold they saw being shipped under their very eyes.

The explosions became more violent, and, in addition, there were times when the earth trembled. Then something began to creep down the exterior of the crater in thin, winding wisps, which at night glowed like fiery serpents. These were streams of lava, white-hot up above, turning to a glowing red below as they became cooler.

By this time the whole of the gallery which led up to the golden temple had been practically stripped of its store of precious metal. And the doctor

allowed the great images to be pulled down and broken up in like manner. They were so huge and heavy that it was impossible to carry away even any portions as antiquarian relics.

Then the leader put his foot down and decided that it was time to leave.

"We have enough and to spare," he said to the captain. "Let us leave the wonderful, ancient temple untouched, save as regards its idols, which we have already pulled down and broken in pieces. Let us pack up now and get away while we still have the chance."

The order went forth accordingly, and preparations began for departure. It was arranged that if the "packing up" could be done in time they would sail next day; if not, then the day after.

"And a good thing, too," was Alec's comment to Clive. "We ought to have cleared out before this. I think the doctor's been too good-natured, and has run risks just to save a little trouble with the sailors. After all, who is the safest judge in such matters, who is likely to know best—Dr. Campbell or the crowd in the fore-castle?"

Clive agreed. Neither he nor Alec had been victims to the gold fever to any extent—nor, for that matter, had honest Ben Grove. They had felt an honest, manly satisfaction at the success of their enterprise. They had taken their share of hard work with the rest, and now they felt particularly pleased that their faithful follower, who had started them on the quest, would be so well rewarded.

Now, somehow or other, a rumour went round among the natives that the white men were going to leave that night, and at once a scare set in. They were seized with a sudden fear that the white men were going to desert them, and a great horror came upon them of being left alone to battle with "the demons of the burning mountain." That was how it appeared to them; and the consequence was that group after group of them secretly determined to be the first away. They crept into their canoes and silently paddled away. In the morning there were only a few canoes left. Oltra and his "general," Storbin, found themselves deserted by nearly all their followers, who had gone off carrying with them quantities of gold; and, in great rage, they forthwith set off in pursuit of the thieves, as they called them.

Meantime, the departure of the canoes had been seen by those members of Diego's band who had been prowling about near the camp, and they carried the news to their chief, who promptly decided to risk a surprise attack on the white men.

He had intended to wait till they had gone, and then help himself to what was left; but who could tell, in the present threatening state of the volcano, if he would be allowed the chance? Here were stores of gold, ready harvested, waiting to be taken. A surprise attack, a desperate fight, and all this rich booty might be theirs at once!

The secret departure of the natives had been all the easier because the yacht's party were engaged in carrying their tents and other belongings on board the yacht, and preparing that vessel and the Hawk for sailing early on the morrow. And Storbin and his master had been interested in watching the operations and securing for themselves many "unconsidered trifles" which the departing travellers threw away.

Before nightfall the work had been finished. The boiler fires had been lighted and were to be kept going, and both vessels were ready to start in the morning. Then the tired workers turned in, weary and sleepy, to snatch a few hours' rest.

It was just getting near dawn when Alec was awake in his bunk by Menga, who made him understand, partly by words, but more by signs, that something serious was amiss.

He started out of his berth and rushed on deck, where he found Kulma and a sailor who was supposed to have been on watch, but who had, instead, fallen asleep.

Kulma pointed across the water at the shore, towards the east—that is, the opposite direction from where the friendly natives had kept their canoes—and whispered:

“Canoes—ship! Bad men come 'gain to shoot and kill!”

That was as far as his English would take him; but Alec understood, and he promptly rushed below again and awoke the captain and Dr. Campbell.

Ever ready and alert in emergencies, the two leaders were not only on deck themselves within a minute or two, but they had turned out the crew and told them to arm themselves.

A boat was silently lowered, and a man sent to warn those on the Hawk, and then the two leaders held a short conference.

Meantime, the fires were being stirred up, and word came from the engineer that he was ready to start the engines.

As a result of the consultation between the captain and the doctor the cables were shipped, and both vessels got under way.

They had not gone far when they suddenly found themselves in the midst of a number of canoes, and just then a dark shadow swept up from one side and came straight for the Valda.

Captain Barron rushed to the helm, and the yacht swung suddenly round. There were two or three moments of breathless suspense, then a shock as the yacht's bow crushed into something ahead.

It was a large sailing vessel of lugger rig, and it carried Diego and a number of his men. He had intended to run alongside the yacht, throw grappling irons on board, and try to board her. But Barron's prompt manœuvre had forestalled him, and the yacht had run into the pirate vessel instead.

Now she backed away, amid a chorus of yells and shrieks, and then crashed on through the canoes which tried to close round her. A few half-hearted attacks were made by some of the more desperate of the gang to get on board, but they were easily beaten off, and then the yacht sailed away free.

The Hawk, meanwhile, had, obeying orders sent to her, made for the open sea more to the west, and so avoided the hostile crowd.

Neither vessel had, so far, been carrying lights. Now the yacht hung hers out, and the Hawk followed suit, and bore round to keep her closer company. And thus the two vessels left the island and went their way.

Dawn was just breaking in the east when there came the sound of an awful explosion. It seemed as though the very ocean trembled with the shock. All eyes were turned towards the island, and the horrified spectators saw the whole upper part of the burning mountain fly apart and come sliding towards the sea. Then the whole scene was hidden in clouds of steam and black, rolling vapours, amid which could be seen tongues of forked lightning playing about and darting from one side to the other.

Then followed great waves which threatened to destroy both the vessels, and though they fortunately weathered them they were, for a time, in such danger that many on board gave themselves up for lost.

It is needless to say that had they been at anchor, as would have been the case had the pirates not come to attack them, they must have inevitably been overwhelmed. Thus, once again, the reckless, cut-throat gang did them a good turn without intending to.

Later on, after the sea had gone down, and, indeed, for nearly the whole of the day that followed, the two vessels cruised about looking for possible survivors of Diego's band—but they could not find one!

Nor could they find the island! It had once more sunk beneath the waves, this time completely, carrying with it the wonderful golden temple of Atlantis!

Following out the programme which had been arranged, the successful treasure seekers visited King Oltra at his island home. He and most of his people had reached it before the catastrophe took place, and had escaped unharmed.

Dr. Campbell and his party stayed with their native friends for a couple of months, and had a rattling good time of it with the hospitable chief and his swaggering, but warm-hearted, "Prime Minister."

Before they left they made the worthy Storbin's heart happy by presenting him with the Hawk, in addition to his share of the treasure obtained from the vanished Eldorado Island!

THE END.

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