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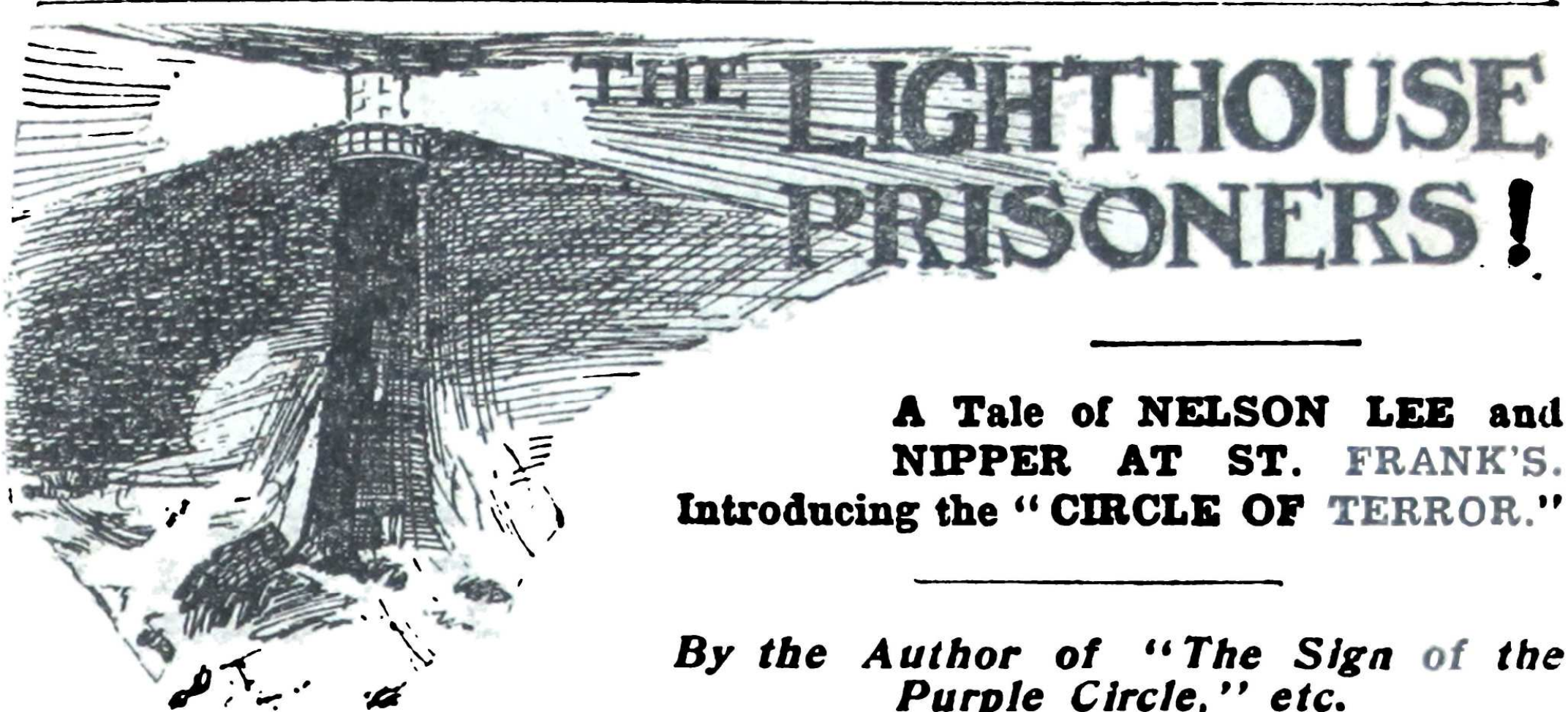
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**A Tale of NELSON LEE and
NIPPER AT ST. FRANK'S.
Introducing the "CIRCLE OF TERROR."**

*By the Author of "The Sign of the
Purple Circle," etc.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE.

Nelson Lee and Nipper are at St. Frank's College, to escape the attentions of the murderous Chinese Secret Society, the Fu Chang Tong, whose hatred they have incurred. Although living in the school in the characters of master and pupil, Nelson Lee and Nipper, nevertheless, find many opportunities to utilise their unique detective ability in various mysterious and adventurous cases.

CHAPTER I.

THE CASE OF STANLEY LEIGHTON—THE CIRCLE OF TERROR STRIKES A BLOW.

SIR LANCELOT MONTGOMERY TREGELLIS-WEST sighed rather breathlessly.

"Bicycles are splendid things, you know," he exclaimed, trying to set his collar straight, "but they're so shockin'ly flimsy. If a fellow has a bit of a fall his jigger suffers frightfully, begad!"

"A bit of a fall!" growled Nipper. "To judge by the appearance of these bikes, you must have come a fearful cropper, Montie."

Nelson Lee intervened.

"Montie wasn't to blame," he said quietly. "It was I who had the fall, Nipper. Montie merely crashed into me. We must be very thankful that no serious harm was done—bodily harm, I mean."

The little party was standing in the gloom upon the Caistowe Road, a mile or two out of Bellton, and something like three miles from St. Frank's. It was evening—a bright, calm, mild evening—and the time was between half-past six and seven.

Nelson Lee and Nipper ("Mr. Alvington" and "Dick Bennett," of St. Frank's) were not in the best of tempers. Their companions were Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson, of the Remove.

An accident had just happened. It wasn't a serious one in itself, but Nelson Lee clearly understood that the after-consequences might be extremely grave. For a very great deal depended upon the events of that evening.

Tommy Watson was by far the most concerned of all.

"It was my fault, sir—all my fault!" he said huskily. "Oh, what a silly idiot I was to shove my foot on the grid of that motor-car! That was the cause of the whole trouble. I—I thought I was going to be killed!"

"Tell me exactly what happened, Watson," said Nelson Lee quietly. "But, come, we may as well be walking on meanwhile. These crooked machines can be left in the hedge for the time being."

The bicycles, which were considerably damaged, were pushed into the ditch, and left there. At any ordinary time Nelson Lee would have carried them, with the boys' help; but now he had other things—urgent things—to think about.

Truth to tell, there had been some exciting events at St. Frank's that evening. In brief, Nelson Lee and Nipper were on the threshold of another grim tussle with their old enemies—the Circle of Terror. Already the first brush had taken place.

The case of Stanley Leighton was an interesting one in many ways.

Stanley Leighton was a schoolboy—not a denizen of St. Frank's, but one of the scholars of Dr. Hogge's Select Academy, known as the River House School—a new establishment in the vicinity of Bellton.

And Nelson Lee had received an appeal from Major-General Leighton, D.S.O., to protect him from the Circle of Terror. The general was a friend of Sir Rupert Manderley, one of the St. Frank's governors. Thus

It had been possible for him to approach Nelson Lee.

The party trudged along in the direction of Bellton. Tommy Watson limped perceptibly, and Nipper gave him his arm.

"I'm blessed if I know what happened yet," Nipper remarked. "The whole game's messed up—there's no doubt about that. And how is it you came after us so quickly, guv'nor?"

Nelson Lee threw a match away after lighting a cigar.

"We will just consider all the facts in this interesting affair, Nipper," he said thoughtfully. "I may speak freely before Watson and Tregellis-West, of course, since they are acquainted with the whole case."

Nipper's staunch chums were completely "in the know"; neither Nelson Lee nor Nipper had any secrets from the two youngsters.

"How do you mean, guv'nor—go over the facts?" asked Nipper.

"I mean what I say, young 'un," replied Lee. "Things have got into a muddle seemingly, and it would be just as well to straighten them out now. We know that General Leighton received an insolent communication from the Circle of Terror, instructing him to meet one of the Circle's representatives at a given spot, for the purpose of undertaking a special mission."

"And the general, of course, refused to go?" observed Nipper. "I don't blame him for that, sir. But the Circle were expecting that attitude on General Leighton's part—and they prepared for it, too."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Exactly," he said. "They sent our old friend, Mr. Montague Todd, down to Bellton—and you boys became aware of that fact. It was extremely fortunate that Todd should have been chosen for this task—for we were enabled to gain a glimpse into the Circle's scheme of action."

Todd, it may as well be explained, was an old friend of Nelson Lee's—a staunch supporter in every way. He was a Special Agent of the Circle, but he loathed his work, and would have given a limb willingly to be free of the hateful bondage. But the only exit from the Circle of Terror was death. Todd, therefore, was helpless; but occasionally he was able to supply useful information to Nelson Lee. And the man felt that this was some slight consolation for the degrading nature of his position.

"Yes, guv'nor, Toddy was a brick," said Nipper enthusiastically. "He told me that young Leighton was to be collared by a trick, and taken to some Home. And we concocted the idea of diddling the Circle. If I could only have gone to that Home in Leighton's place, as we intended, everything would have been O.K. Why, we might even have captured old Zingrave himself—the High Lord of the Circle."

"It is really useless to discuss what might have been, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "We must confine ourselves to stern realities. You took your departure from St. Frank's—in

Leighton's place—with excellent success. The Chief Agent of the Circle, who was entrusted with the task of tricking Leighton away, believed that he had been completely successful. And there is no doubt that you would have been taken to this Home had everything gone as we had anticipated. But a slight mishap to Watson upset all our calculations."

Tommy Watson almost groaned.

"Don't rub it in, sir!" he said, with a little choke in his voice. "It was my fault right from the start. Oh, I was an idiot—I was absolutely dotty! And to think I've messed up the whole plan—"

"I don't blame you, my lad—you mustn't think that," interjected the schoolmaster-detective gently. "You may have been rash, but your action was quite unintentional. It would be cruel of me to scold you now. We must accept the situation, and make the best of it."

"But I was really dotty, sir," declared Watson, with fierce self-condemnation. "You see, Montie and I knew that Benny was going on a dangerous mission, and we were anxious to see him start off. So, when the car came for Leighton, and Benny went in place of the River House chap—as you'd planned—we wanted to see the last of him."

"Didn't you expect to ever see me again, you ass?" grunted Nipper.

"The last of you for the time being, I mean," explained Watson. "Montie and I hopped out of the window, and slipped round behind the car—where we couldn't be seen in the darkness. We heard you jawing, Benny. My word, you acted the part terrifically. We hardly knew it was you."

Nipper tried to smile, but couldn't.

"All my huge efforts wasted!" he growled. "That chap Grant, the Circle rotter—he called himself Grant, anyhow—hadn't the slightest suspicion until you called me 'Bennett.'"

Tommy Watson stopped dead in his tracks.

"I didn't!" he declared indignantly.

"You go on with your jawing!" said Nipper. "I'll take up the yarn when you've finished. The guv'nor doesn't know what happened yet."

"There ain't much to tell," said Watson gloomily. "Montie and I were behind the car, and I, like an ass, shoved my foot on the luggage grid. It got caught somehow, and when the car started I was yanked along with it."

"Begad, it was simply shockin'!" said Sir Montie. "I was in a frightful state, Tommy, boy—I was really! How you managed to hang on is amazin'!"

"When I found I couldn't get my foot free I grabbed hold of the mudguard," went on Watson. "And I was carried along like that until we'd got to the bottom of this hill. I simply couldn't stick it a moment longer. I wanted to get off while the car was climbing up a rise—so that I shouldn't be seen by the Circle chap. But it couldn't be done, and at last I had to yell for help. I should have been killed if I'd held out another five minutes."

"You did quite right to call for assistance, Watson," said Nelson Lee. "Under the circumstances you could do nothing else."

"Of course my foot came free as soon as the car stopped," went on Tommy Watson bitterly. "I don't remember exactly what happened after that—until I found Benny talking to that Grant chap."

"You were dazed, Tommy—half fainting, in fact," said Nipper. "And the first thing you did was to look up and call me Bennett. I don't suppose you remember it, but you did."

"Oh, my goodness!" muttered Watson miserably.

"My dear lad, you must not worry yourself," said Nelson Lee kindly. "If you were half fainting, as Nipper describes, you cannot be condemned for giving the Circle agent such a vital tip. Well, Nipper, and what then?"

"Why, Grant started asking me a lot of awkward questions," said Nipper warmly. "I couldn't answer all of them, and he tumbled to the truth. And while we were having a fight with Grant and the chauffeur, you came along. Lucky you did, too, or we should have been collared."

Nelson Lee nodded slowly.

"I have very little to tell you, Nipper," he said. "Montie came rushing in after you had left the school. He informed me of Watson's predicament, and we at once hurried away on our bicycles. But when we were approaching the car Grant fired his revolver at me—as, of course, you know. By an unfortunate chance the bullet punctured my front tyre, and I crashed down."

"And I ran into your jigger, sir!" said Sir Montie. "Begad, it's a wonder we weren't smashed all up!"

"We saw that," remarked Nipper; "the smash, I mean. Grant saw it, too, and he knew that the vicinity wasn't quite secure. He dropped his attack on us, and hopped into the car. That's the last we saw of him, guv'nor. It's one consolation to know that the Circle's game is knocked on the head—for Leighton is safe enough, isn't he?"

"I hope so, Nipper—I sincerely hope so."

There was just a little doubt in Nelson Lee's tone, and Nipper turned his head quickly.

"You hope so, sir?" he repeated. "Isn't Leighton at St. Frank's? He won't be touched there, surely? And Miss Eileen is going to look after him, isn't she?"

"That's just it, young 'un," replied Nelson Lee. "I fear that grave trouble may arise. You see, Leighton was left in Dr. Stafford's care. I gave the Head instructions to hand the lad over to Miss Eileen Dare the very instant she arrived at the school—and I expected her at half-past six."

"Well, there's nothing to worry about, sir."

"Isn't there, Nipper?" said Lee gravely. "I differ from you. When I requested the Head to give Leighton into Eileen's charge,

I did not suspect that such an event as this would occur—I assumed that you would accomplish your mission successfully. But how does the matter stand now? The agents of the Circle of Terror who are engaged upon this work—and I believe there are several in the district—are now acquainted with the fact that Leighton was not taken away. The Circle is always thorough, and it will do its best to rectify the blunder at once. Don't you understand, Nipper? If Miss Eileen has started away from St. Frank's, she will be in a certain amount of peril. The watchful enemy will undoubtedly suspect her car now. Had things been otherwise, she would have attracted no attention whatever."

Nipper whistled.

"By jingo!" he muttered. "I hadn't thought of that, sir."

"But you must think of these things, my boy."

"There's Todd," went on Nipper. "He's friendly, guv'nor, and it'll be up to him to try any trickery. He told me that he wouldn't do anything unless matters went wrong. Well, they've gone wrong now, and Toddy will have to get busy. Don't you think he'll muddle things—purposely?"

"No, my boy, I don't think so."

"But he's a pal—"

Lee snapped his fingers impatiently.

"We must not rely upon Todd in the slightest degree, Nipper," he interrupted. "It would be madness to do so. He was able to give us some information, but there his usefulness ends. It would be more than his life is worth to attempt any trickery in our favour. If he is given certain orders he will have to carry them out—he will be forced to do so. We must regard Todd as an enemy—since he is the Circle's agent in charge of the matter. If we intervene and spoil his game, he will, no doubt, be extremely pleased. But we cannot expect him to do anything on his own account. It would not be fair to the man."

"No, I suppose not, sir," admitted Nipper thoughtfully. "But perhaps Miss Eileen hasn't arrived yet," he added, with a touch of hope. "And, anyhow, what are your plans, guv'nor?"

"I have no plans—at present," replied Lee. "We must make all haste to St. Frank's. It will be time enough to make plans when we have learned the exact position."

The quartette strode on in silence for a while. Tommy Watson's foot ached considerably, but he did not mention a word of his pain. As they were descending the hill into Bellton, however, he turned to Nipper.

"I say, Benny," he muttered, "I'm awfully sorry!"

"Sorry? What about?"

"Why, it was my fault that your little game was mucked up."

"Well, as a matter of fact, it was your fault," agreed Nipper candidly. "We don't want to jaw about that, though, you ass. It's

no good crying over spilt milk. And nobody blames you Tommy."

"But I ought to be blamed——"

"Rot! When you shoved your foot in that grid you didn't think you'd get it jammed, did you? It was a pure accident, and it was jolly decent of you to hang on for such a long while before yelling," said Nipper. "It would have been all right even then if you'd kept silent. But you were three parts dazed, and didn't know what you were saying."

"I—I feel like kicking myself!" muttered Watson miserably.

"Begad, that wouldn't do any good, old fellow!" remarked Sir Montie. "It would be better to say nothin' more about it, Tommy. Accidents are always liable to happen—as Penny knows as well as I do. I'll bet his plans have gone wrong many a time, owin' to some silly little bloomer."

"Montie's got heaps of sense, although you wouldn't think it to look at him," observed Nipper, giving Watson a cheerful dig. "That advice of his is first-rate, Tommy. Don't say anything more——"

"Look out, boys!"

Nelson Lee drew his young companions to the side of the road. A motor-car was approaching from the rear—from the direction of Caistowe. The little party paused, for the lane was very narrow, and they had no great liking for walking through the high, damp grass near the hedge.

Perhaps it was the particular throb of the engine which caused Nelson Lee to start; it sounded familiar. At the same moment Nipper gave a little gasp of excitement.

"My hat! It's—it's the Circle car again!" he muttered.

"I don't know, young 'un; but it is possible!" said Lee tensely.

In order to be on the safe side the detective pulled out his revolver and held it in readiness. It was most unlikely that Grant should return; but the Circle of Terror was daring enough for almost anything.

The car drew level, and then abruptly came to a stop. Lee and the boys no longer had any doubt, and instinctively they knew that this unexpected move was a sinister one.

Nelson Lee clicked his revolver; but at that very moment an extraordinary thing occurred. The detective, alert as he was, had no time to guard against the amazing attack.

Simultaneously two thudding reports sounded from the car. They were not ordinary pistol shots, but dull explosions. And as Nelson Lee was starting forward, he saw two billowing clouds of yellow vapour coming towards him.

The vapour amalgamated into one big cloud, and enveloped Nelson Lee and the boys in a second. Lee raised his revolver desperately, but the strength died out of his limbs, and his senses reeled.

He sank down senseless—and the three boys shared his fate at the same moment. The whole incident had not occupied ten seconds from first to last!

CHAPTER II.

CAPTURED—MAROONED FROM THE WORLD—A HOPELESS OUTLOOK.

CHUCKLING grimly, Mr. Grant surveyed the four insensible forms by the roadside. Then he turned sharply to his companion, the driver.

"In with them, man!" he said sharply.

"The lot, sir?"

"No, only the two boys we had originally," said Mr. Grant. "We shall be able to obtain all the information we need out of them. It would be a mistake to carry off this infernal schoolmaster."

Without wasting a moment, Nipper and Tommy Watson were picked up in turn, and bundled into the enclosed car. The Circle agent then entered, and the limousine backed for some distance until a gateway was reached. Here it turned round and sped off towards Caistowe.

Nelson Lee and Sir Montie were left insensible by the roadside.

The trick had been a simple one—and successful because of its simplicity. The very instant the car had stopped both Grant and his companion had discharged gas-pistols at the small party. Whilst free from the fumes themselves, the quartette had succumbed at once.

Nelson Lee, with all his astuteness, had not been prepared for such a move. He could scarcely be blamed for falling into the cunning trap.

And the object of the move?

This was fairly obvious. The Circle men could have only one reason for carrying Nipper and Tommy Watson away. They had laid all their plans for the trapping of Stanley Leighton, and had discovered, by a sheer accident, that a deception had been perpetrated. Momentarily nonplussed, the scoundrels had vanished into the darkness. But then they had realised the importance of the two boys.

It was quite clear that the youngsters must know the actual whereabouts of Stanley Leighton, since one of them had passed himself off as the River House boy. By taking the pair prisoners, therefore, the Circle men stood a chance of forcing the truth from their captives.

Above all else, they wished to capture Leighton that night; they had orders to do so; and they knew very well that punishment would fall upon them if they failed. The High Lord, having given instructions, expected them to be carried out.

By carrying off the "schoolmaster" and Sir Montie as well the position would be in no way improved. Grant, in fact, believed that Lee and Montie were in total ignorance of the plot—they had merely seen the predicament of Watson, and had gone in chase of the car, with the object of aiding him.

Nipper was the most important captive of all; but Watson would probably be able to give some details. Grant fondly imagined that it would be an easy matter to force the boys to talk. He didn't know with whom he was dealing!

The big car arrived in Calstowe very shortly, and the boys were still senseless. Outside the main hotel in the village the limousine pulled up. The hotel was out of all proportion to the size of the village itself—a huge, almost palatial establishment. During the winter months it was quiet, but in the season—from May to October—visitors were numerous. Calstowe was something of a sea-side resort.

Grant entered the hotel quickly, with a firm, brisk stride. He indulged in a whisky-and-soda, and then asked leave of the proprietor to use the telephone. This favour was granted at once, and the Chief Agent was soon at the instrument.

"Five double-one, Bannington," he exclaimed, in answer to the exchange operator's query. "Yes, five double-one." There was a minute's pause. "Hallo! Is that the George Tavern, Bellton?"

"Yes," came the reply.

"I wish to speak to Mr. Seaton," said Grant distinctly. "He is staying at your hotel, I believe? If he is about, please call him to the 'phone. Tell him that Mr. Grant wishes to speak to him."

There was another pause.

"That you, Seaton?" inquired Grant sharply.

"Yes, sir," came Todd's voice over the wires.

"Just a word, Seaton," proceeded the other. "There's been a hitch—quite a big one. The boy didn't arrive after all—do you understand me?"

"Quite, sir."

"Very well. Keep your eyes open, and do your very best," exclaimed Grant grimly. "It is quite possible that the lad is in your district. If so, you had better take charge of him as soon as possible. That's all."

Grant rang off, and turned away from the telephone. His little conversation with Todd had sounded innocent enough; but Todd fully understood that Leighton had not been captured, and that he—Todd—had been ordered to get busy.

Grant left the hotel, and re-entered the car. He had noticed that the time was just seven-thirty, so the whole night lay before him. He was savage and morose, for he had fondly imagined that his plans had matured with complete success. The discovery that his prisoner was another boy altogether had given him a shock. For it showed him that other wits were working as well as his own. There was opposition from an unknown quarter.

Unless Leighton could be kidnapped it would be impossible to wield an effective lever over his father, the general. It would have been unwise for Grant to return to Bellton after what had occurred; he was therefore leaving the matter in other hands.

A secure prison for Nipper and Watson had to be found—and Grant gave very precise instructions to the driver of his car. The vehicle then proceeded on its journey, hugging the coast for several miles.

At last, upon a bare stretch, the limousine turned towards the beach. The road here

ran within a stone's-throw of the sands. There were no cliffs; only a bare, bleak expanse of foreshore, with marshes in every direction.

Not far from the road a small, low-built shed stood upon the sands. It looked like a lifeboat-house, except for the fact that it was considerably smaller.

The car turned off the road, and came to a standstill with its tyres embedded in the sand. Grant jumped out, and looked towards the sea. A considerable distance out a bright beam of light was intermittently flashing in and out.

"It's fortunate the sea's calm," remarked Grant.

"Like a mill-pond, sir," agreed the driver. "Are the boys all right?"

"Oh, they won't come to their senses for another half-hour at least. Come and help me to get the boat into the water."

The pair approached the shed, Grant taking a key from his pocket. The door was fitted with a strong patent lock, and the shed itself was built with unusual stability.

The door swung back, and a small motor-boat was revealed. She was a nearly new craft, spick and span, and of the most modern design. Grant's companion bent over the engine for a few minutes, and then announced that all was ready for the start. The boat was resting upon a curious little carriage, and it was an extremely simple matter to push her down to the water.

Once afloat, the carriage was left upon the beach, and formed a miniature landing-stage, against which the boat rested.

"Now for those young brats!" said Grant sharply.

The pair paced up the beach in the gloom. At this lonely spot there was practically no fear of observation from any quarter. And, in any case, the darkness was a sufficient cloak for their movements.

Nipper and Tommy Watson were still unconscious. They were dragged down the beach without ceremony, and bundled into the motor-boat.

"Start up the engine," ordered Grant. "You will remain here until I return. I don't suppose I shall be longer than an hour—possibly less."

"Right, sir!"

The little engine hummed at the first turn, and Grant took his place behind the steering-wheel.

The boat made splendid speed, cutting through the water almost noiselessly. As Grant had remarked, the sea was unusually smooth, for hardly a breath of wind stirred. Grant set his course towards the flashing light out at sea.

The journey was accomplished without incident, and at last a tiny, rocky ledge loomed up. Upon this stood a great stone tower—a lighthouse. It was completely cut off from the mainland at all periods of the tide, and in rough weather could only be approached with peril. Indeed during a stormy spell it was impossible to take a boat to the isolated rock.

Now, however, with the sea in a good humour, the waves were lapping gently

against the black rocks. Grant was able to take his boat alongside the slippery stone steps which led up, in a direct line, to the door.

There were rings let into the stonework, and Grant tethered the boat securely. Then with great care he mounted the steps. They were steep and seaweed-covered almost until the last twenty were reached.

The door was an immense way up, but at length Grant reached it. He hammered upon it vigorously, and waited. The sea all around him was alternately lit up and plunged into deep gloom. The great light high above was working evenly, flashing out its warning to shipping out in the Channel.

Grant was still in an irritable humour. He disliked his plans to go wrong; and they had gone extremely wrong this evening. He regarded this visit to the lighthouse as a piece of unpleasant work, but it was not a waste of time. Upon this bare rock Nipper and Watson could be imprisoned until the Circle chose to allow them their freedom. It would be practically impossible for the police to trace the boys to such a bleak spot as this.

There were two keepers upon the lighthouse; they practically lived there, being relieved only occasionally while they spent a few days on the mainland. Both these men had been bought over by the Circle of Terror. It is said that every man has his price; but this may not be true in all cases.

The lighthouse-keepers had succumbed to temptation, and had been practically in the employ of the Circle for several months past. They knew by this time the nature of the fate which would befall them if they "blabbed." Something after the style of Montague Todd, they had realised too late the sinister power of the Circle of Terror. It was more than their lives were worth to raise objections now. Their only consolation was the extremely high rate of pay they were receiving. For the Circle of Terror always paid well for services rendered.

Grant turned round as the massive door opened. A big man stood before him, with a swinging lantern in his hand. He was the senior keeper, a bearded individual, with bluff, hearty manner.

"I want your help, Thurston," exclaimed Grant crisply.

"Why, I wasn't expectin' you to-night, sir——"

"Never mind that!" interjected the newcomer. "I have two boys here, and they are to be kept locked up in one of the store-rooms for three or four days. You and Rogers will see that they are well fed and looked after."

The lighthouse-keeper was rather taken aback.

"We've got no accommodation for any boys," he said half rebelliously. "An' what about rations, Mr. Grant?"

"You will have to make accommodation; and the matter of rations is a mere trifle," exclaimed Grant sharply. "I will bring a supply of food when I come next time, so that your own stores will not be depleted."

"Who are the boys, sir? An' what——"

"You will be sensible, Thurston, if you refrain from asking questions," interrupted the Chief Agent. "Indeed, you will only waste your breath, for I have no intention of satisfying your curiosity. Your orders are simple and concise. These two boys are to be kept prisoners until you receive further orders from me. There is no necessity to be harsh with them, but you must be strict."

The lighthouse-keeper nodded slowly.

"All right, sir," he said in a gruff manner. "I s'pose they're in the boat?" he added, peering down the steep steps. "I can't see nothin' of 'em."

"At the present moment the youngsters are insensible," replied Grant. "Oh, you needn't look scared. They have only been harmlessly gassed. Within a very short time they will recover themselves, and be none the worse. But come; help me to carry them up. Rogers is up in the lamp-room, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir; he can't leave his duty."

Grant nodded; and the pair descended the steps, Thurston still carrying the lantern. At intervals the jagged rock was illuminated by the reflected light from the beams above. One or two ugly spikes rose from the sea near by. In rough weather these rocks were a source of terrible danger to shipping, but the warning light kept all vessels well clear of the danger.

Nipper and Tommy Watson were showing slight signs of recovery. They were not conscious, but they moved slightly when touched. It was hard work carrying them up the steps, but it was accomplished at last.

And then another strenuous task had to be accomplished. The boys were conveyed right up into the upper part of the lighthouse, and finally deposited in a circular storeroom above the living apartment. Grant's temper was by no means improved. He was a "big pot" in the governing section of the Circle of Terror, and this menial work irritated him exceedingly. But circumstances had compelled him to undertake it. His views changed somewhat with his temper.

"You needn't be gentle with the young brats!" he exclaimed harshly. "They've caused me enough trouble, hang them! Just give them sufficient to live on, and nothing else."

"When will you be coming back, sir?" asked the lighthouse-keeper.

"I don't know—possibly later on this evening, or it may not be until to-morrow," replied the other. "If you go to the boys in about an hour from now, you will find them fully conscious—and extremely thirsty. The vapour they inhaled has that effect. Cold water will do for them!" he added viciously.

Thurston did not reply, but accompanied Grant down to the doorway. He watched while the Circle Chief Agent started the engine of the motor-boat, and cast off. Then he closed the solid door, and mounted the steep staircases until he arrived at the lamp-room.

Here he told his assistant, Rogers, all about

it. The two keepers were not exactly pleased with their task. Although rascals to a certain extent, they were by no means brutal. And Thurston determined to take the boys a square meal and some hot tea before an hour had elapsed.

Meanwhile, the two St. Frank's Removites were by themselves in the store-room. A more ideal prison could scarcely be imagined than this high edifice—which was known as the South Crag Lighthouse. The boys were completely marooned from the rest of the world. No boats would come near the place for any reason whatsoever—excepting those of the enemy.

Grant's estimate was slightly wrong. Probably the rough shaking helped to restore the prisoners' scattered wits. For, fifteen minutes after they had been cast into the storeroom, Nipper opened his eyes and sat up.

While he was doing so, sundry sounds from a near-by patch of blackness warned his confused brain that somebody else was in close proximity. He was quite dazed, and hadn't the slightest idea of what had happened or where he was.

The darkness was like something solid. He turned round slowly, and then became aware of a long, narrow patch of drabness. He couldn't make out what it was at first; but, as his wits returned to him, he jumped to the conclusion that the drab patch was a curiously shaped window.

And then a voice came to his ears.

"My only hat!" it said confusedly. "Where—where the dickens am I? Benny—Montie! Is there anybody there?"

"Is that you, Tommy?" asked Nipper, feeling about him, and suddenly discovering a leg. "Rouse up, you ass! Something's happened, but I'm blessed if I know what! Where's the guv'nor? Where's Montie?"

"No good asking me riddles!" came a growl from Watson. "Oh, lor'! I remember now—we're on the Calstowe Road, ain't we? Something happened when we were waiting for that car to pass— But it wasn't so black as this—"

"My dear chap, we're in a building of some kind," said Nipper. "We've been colared, my son—we're prisoners!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

Their senses were returning very rapidly. The effects of the strange gas wore off within a few minutes, and left the boys clear-headed and steady.

"I'm going to find out where I am!" declared Nipper, scrambling to his feet. "I suppose you haven't got a match on you? Oh, it's all right—my electric torch is in my pocket. We haven't been searched, anyhow."

"I'm gasping!" muttered Watson. "I'd give a month's pocket-money for a bottle of ginger-pop now! Ain't you thirsty, Benny?"

"Shockin'ly thirsty, as Montie would say," replied Nipper. "Montie! Where the dickens are you?"

As Nipper spoke he pulled his electric torch out and pressed the button. A brilliant beam of light shot out, and played upon bare stone walls. There were many wooden cases piled

round about; and in one corner a number of sacks and some odds and ends of rope.

The apartment, Nipper saw, was almost circular, one portion of it being flat. There was a heavy door set into this. Exactly opposite was the narrow window.

"We're alone, Tommy!" said Nipper, in a startled voice. "The guv'nor and Montie ain't here. And I'm blessed if I can make out where we are. Looks like a cellar—except for the window."

Tommy was on his feet by this time, and both he and Nipper made their way across to the window. The glass was immensely thick, and the frame solid and heavy. The fastening was of a curious design, but Nipper easily freed it.

Then he opened the window and gazed out. Both he and Tommy had been somewhat puzzled by occasional periods of half-light. But now the mystery was explained. Nipper caught his breath in with a gasp.

He found himself looking down upon the sea. It was far below, and the twinkling lights of two or three steamers could be seen upon the horizon. And from above came regular flashes of light, accompanied by the noise of machinery.

"Where are we, Benny?" asked Watson anxiously from behind.

Nipper turned round amazedly.

"Where are we?" he asked. "It—it must be a dream, Tommy! We're in a lighthouse—nearly at the top, with sea all round!"

"You silly fathead!" roared Watson.

"Look for yourself, then!"

Tommy Watson looked—and was convinced. With a face which expressed nothing but bewilderment he turned to Nipper.

"It—it can't be true!" he gasped.

"It is true, Tommy!" said Nipper quietly. "There's nothing queer about it, when you come to think of it. Don't you remember that cloud of rotten gas? We were bowled over by that, of course. And while insensible the brutes must have carried us here. But where's the guv'nor—where's Montie?"

"Perhaps they were left behind," said Watson hopefully. "Perhaps they'll come and rescue us—"

"Don't you make any mistake," interrupted Nipper grimly. "We sha'n't be rescued from this place, my son. If we get free it'll be by our own efforts. And I'm hanged if I can see how we're going to escape from this prison—much less reach the mainland!"

Nipper, as he realised the full nature of the position, almost became frantic. He wouldn't have worried half so much if Nelson Lee and Sir Montie had been with him. But the uncertainty of the whole situation was well-nigh unbearable.

"This is your fault, Tommy," growled Nipper unkindly. "If you hadn't been such a potty ass as to hang on behind that car this would never have happened!"

Tommy Watson groaned.

"Don't rub it in, for goodness' sake," he muttered miserably. "I know I'm to blame."

Benny. But it's rather rotten of you to keep jawing at me——"

"I'm sorry, Tommy," put in Nipper softly. "That was rather brutal of me, wasn't it? We shall have to make the best of things."

Watson was silent. He didn't feel much like conversation, for his thoughts were too busy. He knew only too well that the whole succession of mishaps had come about because of that one unfortunate incident.

What was to be the next move in the game?

CHAPTER III.

EILEEN DARE DEPARTS—WHAT HAPPENED TO NELSON LEE AND SIR MONTIE.

MISS EILEEN DARE nodded her pretty head thoughtfully.

"Yes, Dr. Stafford, I understand the position perfectly," she exclaimed. "It is ever such a pity that Mr. Lee cannot be with us; but I know that every minute is of value. I will hasten away at once."

"Mr. Lee urged me to impress upon you the necessity for speed," said the Head of St. Frank's gravely. "Your trust is rather a delicate one, my dear Miss Dare, and I hardly care to let you go."

"You don't think I can be trusted?" asked Eileen quietly.

"Oh, no, no!" protested the Head. "Pray don't imagine that, Miss Dare. Mr. Lee has given me many accounts of your former—er—exploits, shall we say? I have nothing but admiration for your wonderful determination and ability. And if Mr. Lee is content to leave Leighton in your charge, surely it is not for me to fear?"

Eileen Dare smiled. She and the Head were seated in the latter's study at St. Frank's. The former girl-detective had arrived only a short while before; and Dr. Stafford, in accordance with Nelson Lee's injunction, had at once acquainted her with all the facts of the case.

The worthy Head was somewhat worried; he keenly felt the responsibility of his position. Just when Lee was most wanted, he had hurried off with Sir Montie. They had been absent for fully an hour, and Dr. Stafford was beginning to fear that something really serious had happened to Watson, for he was aware of the fact that the unfortunate Removite had been carried off by the Circle's limousine.

The non-return of Nelson Lee and Tregheis-West seemed to point to the fact that Watson had been injured, or had been carried so far away that the pursuers had not been able to overtake him. Needless to say, the Head was totally unaware of the startling events which had been actually occurring.

Stanley Leighton was in the Head's study too. He was a weakly, nervous boy, and was rather frightened by all the untoward happenings of the evening. He had been gently informed by Dr. Stafford that he was to accompany Eileen Dare to London; the lad

knew that some danger threatened him, and that everything was being done for his benefit. And he was quite content to do as he was told.

Eileen Dare had received a letter from Nelson Lee only that morning, requesting her to lend her aid. And the girl-detective had promptly answered the call. She was extremely sorry to find Nelson Lee away, but knew that it would have been foolish to remain at St. Frank's a minute longer than was absolutely necessary.

"You see, Miss Dare, if you start at once these wretched Circle fellows will suspect nothing," said the Head. "By the time they find out that a trick has been perpetrated you will be safely in London. That is Mr. Lee's idea. I, of course, am a hopeless novice in such matters as these. I am quite bewildered."

Eileen Dare nodded feelingly.

"I can quite understand, Dr. Stafford," she said. "But I have great trust in Mr. Lee, and I know that his instructions need no questioning. I will start off with this young gentleman at once."

She smiled at Leighton, and the boy rose to his feet hesitatingly.

"Am—am I going to see my father?" he ventured.

"Later on, Stanley," replied Eileen, using the lad's Christian name in order to reassure him. "For a few days you are to stay with my aunt. Oh, she is a dear, and you will like her immensely. All this danger will soon be over, and then you will be able to come back to school."

Eileen, of course, did not understand the inner nature of the position; but she did understand that her task was to convey Leighton to London, and to protect him.

Five minutes later, therefore, she started out with the boy. He had been provided with a heavy overcoat of Nipper's, and was made snug and comfortable in the seat next to the driver's—which Eileen occupied herself. Her car was a powerful, sturdily built automobile. It had been made as a landaulette, but Eileen had changed the body for that of a two-seater. It was, consequently, capable of almost any rough work demanded of it.

As it glided out of the Triangle, watched by one or two curious juniors, Eileen Dare little knew that agents of the Circle of Terror were already upon the watch!

The hum of the engine died away upon the still night air, and the Triangle assumed a deserted aspect. The handful of juniors who had watched Eileen's departure had passed into their respective Houses. Voices were heard occasionally—particularly from the junior studies—but the exterior of the great school was quiet.

Twenty minutes elapsed, and then two figures walked briskly through the gateway into the Triangle.

"Begad, here we are, sir!" exclaimed one, with a sigh of relief.

"Come with me, Montie. I suppose you are anxious to learn what has happened during our absence?"

"Oh, rather, sir!"

Nelson Lee and Sir Montie Tregellis-West made their way straight to the headmaster's study. Entering, they found Dr. Stafford standing before the fire thoughtfully wiping his glasses with his silk handkerchief. Montie, from force of habit, removed his own, and followed the Head's example.

"Ah, I am glad to see you back, Mr. Alvington," said the Head, who could never remember to call Nelson Lee by his real name, even when in private. "But what of Watson? Dear me! Has the boy met with an accident——"

"I am afraid there has been a serious miscarriage of my plans, Dr. Stafford," interrupted Nelson Lee crisply. "I will explain everything in a few moments. But I am anxious regarding Leighton. Has Miss Eileen Dare arrived?"

The Head looked astonished.

"My dear sir, the young lady took her departure nearly half an hour ago," he replied.

"Begad!"

Nelson Lee snapped his fingers.

"I was expecting it," he said quietly. "It was foolish of me to hope that I could arrive in time to stop her departure. Well, we must do the best we can under the circumstances."

The Head was looking extremely anxious now.

"Has anything terrible happened?" he asked nervously. "Your attitude gives me great uneasiness, Mr. Alvington. It seems to indicate that disaster has befallen Watson. And what of Bennett?"

"They've gone, sir," said Tregellis-West dolefully.

"Gone! Good gracious, what does the boy mean?"

"If you will grant me just a few minutes, doctor, I will tell you all there is to be told," said Nelson Lee. "For the present, I wish to use your telephone, if I may."

"Certainly—certainly!"

Lee crossed over to the instrument, and spent a moment or two in consulting the directory. Then he picked up the receiver, and gave the number of the police-station at Horsham—through which town Eileen's car would pass.

Lee was soon speaking to the inspector in charge.

"I am speaking from St. Francis' College," he said. "I want you to keep a sharp lookout for a motor-car which will pass through Horsham very shortly. It contains a young lady and a boy."

Nelson Lee proceeded to give a few details regarding his reasons for having the car stopped. He made no mention of the Circle of Terror, but explained that Eileen was in danger, and it was almost essential that she should be detained, and taken into the care of the police for the time being.

Lee was quite sure that Eileen would understand—for the inspector would tell her that she had been stopped by request of "Mr. Alvington." The inspector, who seemed to

be a very sensible man, asked for further particulars concerning the car itself.

"You really cannot fail to recognise the vehicle," said Lee. "She is a twenty-five-horse-power Sunbeam, fitted with a two-seater body of a pale mauve hue. The mudguards, I believe, are rounded, and all the fittings are nickel-plated."

"I don't think my men will make any blunder," replied the inspector. "If the car passes through this town it will be stopped, Mr. Alvington—you may rely upon that."

"Thank you. And you will remember my request, won't you?"

"Of course—of course," came the reply over the wires. "I will bring Miss Dare to the 'phone the moment she enters the police-station."

"Excellent!"

A moment later Nelson Lee rang off, and then he turned to the Head.

"I have done all that is possible at the moment," he remarked. "Montie, you had better go and tidy yourself up—that fall didn't improve the appearance of your clothes at all."

"I was thinkin', sir——"

"What were you thinking, my lad?"

"Why, the fellows will be pesterin' me with questions, you know," said Sir Montie. "What shall I tell 'em, sir? They'll ask where Watson is—and Benny. Begad, I can't explain things, can I?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"No, you certainly cannot explain, Tregellis-West," he replied. "We don't want this matter talked of throughout the school. Neither can you tell any falsehoods. Your best course will be to tell the truth to a certain extent; explain to those boys who inquire that Bennett and Watson have left the school for a certain period. It may be one day, or it may be a week. You can truthfully say that you don't know when they will return. And as you are ignorant of their whereabouts, you can say, with equal truthfulness, that you don't know where they are. It will be rather difficult, my boy, but you must do your best."

Sir Montie looked miserable.

"I wonder what's happened to the dear fellows, sir?" he said, with a pained expression upon his face.

"It's no good wondering, Montie," was Nelson Lee's quiet reply. "I intend to go in search of them as soon as I have had a word with Miss Dare over the 'phone. Don't worry yourself, lad; your chums will turn up safely enough before long."

"I hope so, sir—I do, really!" declared Sir Montie earnestly.

He took his departure, and Nelson Lee turned to the Head.

"And now I will explain matters, doctor," he said, sitting down.

As briefly as possible the detective described how he and Tregellis-West had chased the motor-car on their bicycles; how they had sighted the car at the foot of the hill; and how Nipper and Watson had broken free.

"The Circle is now aware that Leighton

has not been captured," Lee went on. "My little scheme failed—owing to Watson's accident. It was not possible for me to foresee such an unlooked-for happening."

The Head was puzzled.

"You say that you all escaped," he remarked. "How is it, then, that Bennett and Watson did not return with you?"

"I have not yet finished my story," replied Nelson Lee.

He then described the incident of the gas-fumes, telling Dr. Stafford exactly how the Circle's limousine bore down upon them, and how the gas-pistols had been discharged into their faces.

"Good gracious me!" ejaculated the Head. "How—how very alarming!"

"The trick was a smart one, although by no means original," observed Lee. "The boys and myself could not guard against the sudden wave of vapour. We collapsed immediately."

"Upon my soul!"

"On many occasions I have been unfortunate enough to suffer from a similar trick—although, of course, under different circumstances," went on Lee. "I think I may safely say, however, that these fumes clouded my brain more swiftly than any I have previously experienced."

"I am quite startled, Mr. Alvington!"

"Well, perhaps the incident was somewhat startling," admitted Nelson Lee. "We simply fell to the ground, unconscious. I came to myself after the passage of about thirty-five minutes. Curiously enough, I felt no ill-effects, except, perhaps, for a burning thirst. I found Tregellis-West beside me—still senseless."

"And the others?"

"They had gone—they had been taken away, I concluded, by the infernal scoundrels who perpetrated the trick," replied Lee quietly. "I can only imagine that the Circle men are anxious to question the boys—with a view to obtaining information regarding Leighton's whereabouts."

The Head rose from his chair in a worried manner.

"Poor boys—poor boys!" he exclaimed huskily. "They're in the hands of this infamous society. How truly shocking! I am filled with apprehension, Mr. Alvington. I fear that disaster will befall them."

"You must not worry yourself unduly, doctor," said the detective. "Personally, I have no great fears. The Circle, although ruthless, would have no object in harming the boys—unless, perchance, Nipper's real identity became known. I don't think that will happen. Watson is safe, I am convinced."

"But where are they?" demanded Dr. Stafford. "Where have they been taken to? How are we going to find them? When do you think—"

"Please, please!" protested Lee smilingly. "I really cannot answer all those questions in a breath, doctor. Briefly, however, I intend to get to work just as soon as I have heard from Horsham. But, as I was saying, Tre-

gellis-West and I found ourselves upon the road. It was some little time before Montie came to himself; but when he did we hurried to the school with all speed. It is most unfortunate that Miss Dare had taken her departure."

"I was foolish to urge her——"

"No, no! You merely carried out my wishes," cut in the schoolmaster-detective. "When I left the school, doctor, I had no idea that things were going to turn out so disastrously. Fate has been rather cruel this evening; but no doubt our fortunes will turn."

"Do you seriously believe that an attempt will be made to stop Miss Dare's car?"

"I do," replied Lee grimly. "I am quite worried about that aspect of the case, and I shall continue to be worried until I receive word by telephone that all is right. I gave my promise to General Leighton that his son should be protected—and I intend to keep my word."

"I hope you will be able to do so—I do, indeed!" said Dr. Stafford earnestly.

"It is a matter of keen regret to me that St. Frank's should have been dragged into this affair," continued Nelson Lee. "The whole plot concerns Leighton—and he belongs to the River House School. It is solely owing to Watson's slight mishap that all this trouble has arisen. However, we must hope for the best."

For the moment there was nothing to do but wait—to wait for the message from Horsham.

CHAPTER IV.

EILEEN DARE'S ADVENTURE—THE CLOSED GATES—GOOD NEWS.

SPEEDING along smoothly, Eileen Dare's two-seater covered the miles regularly and steadily.

The girl was confident; but her confidence was born of a lack of understanding of the actual facts. She believed that Nipper had taken Stanley Leighton's place, and had sufficient reliance in Nipper's powers to be satisfied that the plan would work smoothly.

She did not know that the whole programme was already upset. Thus, although on the alert, she believed that her journey to London would be uneventful in every way.

It was unfortunate that she had been unable to see Nelson Lee himself, for she would have much preferred to hear the facts of the case from the detective's own lips. Dr. Stafford, although a very learned gentleman, was quite at sea when it came to tussles with the Circle of Terror. He had only given the girl a slight impression of the actual position.

The Sunbeam sped along easily. Eileen was a very expert motorist; she not only knew how to drive, but she was acquainted with the engine so fully that any ordinary road-

side mishap could quickly be repaired by her own dainty hands.

Now and again she turned to the boy by her side, and spoke to him. He was well wrapped up, and was quite enjoying the motor ride. His nervousness had gone somewhat, and he talked with quite a show of spirit. At St. Frank's Stanley Leighton would have been considered a booby, and, possibly, a funk. But boys are always apt to form hasty conclusions. Leighton was neither a booby nor a funk; but he was of an extremely timid disposition, and lacked bodily strength. He was a boy who was unfitted to take his place amongst other boys of his same age. But it would have been cruel to condemn him for this.

"Where are we going to?" he asked, after a short silence.

"To London, Stanley."

"Yes, but where?"

"Oh, to my little flat in Chelsea," said Eileen, turning her pretty head, and smiling at the boy. "We shall arrive just in time for a nice supper, and you'll meet my aunt. You'll like her, Stanley."

"I'm sure I will, Miss Dare," declared the boy. "I—I like you tremendously."

"That's very nice of you," smiled Eileen.

"You're not the same as other girls," continued Leighton, with boyish frankness. "You're so clever, I didn't know a girl could drive a car like this. And are you really going to protect me from those horrible men?"

"I shall try," said the girl gently. "You silly boy! You mustn't think of danger. We sha'n't be molested. And after a day or two you will be able to see your father, and then everything will come right."

There was another brief silence. Eileen's whole attention was occupied in negotiating a tricky double corner, where the road was narrow. The girl was looking prettier than ever in her motoring furs, and she handled the car with an ease and skill which evoked great admiration from her travelling companion.

"We shall be going through Horsham soon, Stanley," said Eileen presently.

"Is Horsham a big town?"

"Where's your geography, Stanley?" said Eileen, with mock severity. "My own is shocking, I believe; but I have an idea that Horsham is a market town in this county—Sussex—with a population of about ten or eleven thousand. And a little way from West Horsham is the famous Blue Coat School—Christ's Hospital."

The boy was frankly astonished.

"Oh, you do know a lot, don't you?" he said admiringly.

Eileen was about to reply, when she became aware of a low-toned blare from the rear. It was caused by an electric buzzer; and the girl knew that another car required to pass.

She gently swerved aside, and a big Rolls-Royce, with enclosed body, forged ahead until the two cars were running almost alongside. For some reason it remained in this posi-

tion, and Eileen glanced round rather impatiently. She was running with the near-side wheels of her car almost in the grass border of the road, and didn't care for this mode of travelling.

And as she looked round her pretty face seemed to harden, her lovely eyes gleamed with a keen, determined light. A man was standing at the door of the Rolls-Royce, and he held a revolver in his hand!

"Pull your car up, miss!" he shouted grimly.

"Oh! Oh!" gasped Leighton, staring round.

Eileen Dare made no attempt to slacken speed.

"Do you hear me?" roared the man in the other car. "I have given you fair warning, my fine young lady. Pull up, confound you!"

The two automobiles continued to travel side by side. The door of the Rolls-Royce was exactly opposite to Eileen now, and the revolver was within four feet of her head. She had been taken completely by surprise, and there seemed nothing else to do but to comply with the demand.

But Eileen knew that the man belonged to the Circle of Terror. To pull up would be the equivalent of handing Leighton over to the enemy. And the former girl-detective's wits were at their sharpest.

With a quick flash she noticed something just ahead—something on the other side of the road. And, careless of the threatening revolver, she opened the throttle sharply.

The Sunbeam responded nobly, and forged rapidly ahead. An angry oath came from the rear, and a roar of fury followed it. By this time the two-seater had reached a position a foot or two ahead of the other car. And Eileen deliberately swerved across the road.

It was a near thing—and a somewhat risky proceeding, withal. The Rolls-Royce was travelling faster, in response to a command to the driver. A serious smash seemed inevitable, for the Sunbeam had steered right across the "bows" of the enemy. What happened next was exactly that which the quick-witted Eileen had anticipated.

More by instinct than anything else, the driver of the enclosed car swung his wheel round, and just scraped past the rear mud-guard of the Sunbeam by a hair's-breadth. But this manoeuvre caused him to run his automobile off the road.

It was all over in a couple of seconds.

Eileen heard a terrific splash, and then several shouts of wild fury. She took a swift glance round, and saw the huge Rolls-Royce at a standstill beside the road. It was listing heavily for'ard, the front wheels completely submerged in mud and water.

"Oh, splendid—splendid!" said the girl joyfully.

The throttle was still open, and the Sunbeam was roaring along with a kind of song of triumph. The girl's trick had been successful. At the last moment, when all hope seemed gone, she had noticed a pond bordering the road, without any fence or hedge

protecting it. The sudden swerve, therefore, had carried the Circle's car into it before the driver became aware of his danger.

Such ponds are common enough along country roads, but it was extremely fortunate that one should have been so handy. Eileen turned a flushed face towards the schoolboy. He was looking excited.

"Wasn't it lovely, Stanley?" cried Eileen gaily. "Oh, wasn't it——"

And then she paused breathlessly in her speech. A corner had just been negotiated; and there, within twenty yards, a glaring red light barred the road. In a flash Eileen had jerked over the control, and had applied the brakes.

The gates of a level-crossing were closed against her!

And as the car came to a stop, palpitating impatiently, the low rumble of an approaching goods train could be heard. Just after such a splendid stroke of luck, this enforced stoppage was a sheer disaster. It was a cruel blow to the girl. She had been entirely successful, but Fate had intervened!

Even as she turned quickly in her seat, she heard rapidly running footfalls; and then three men rushed up out of the darkness and halted breathlessly before the car. One of them, at least, must have known of the level-crossing. It was only too obvious that they had relied upon the gates being closed.

"The boy! Take the boy!" rapped out one of the men harshly.

Stanley Leighton was seized at once. He was not exactly frightened, but the sudden attack had unnerved him. He offered no resistance, but climbed out of the car when he felt strong hands upon him.

"You will see after the girl, Todd!" went on the man who had spoken. "Don't let her give any warning to this gate-man, and accompany her for twenty or thirty miles. See that she steers along the bye-roads, and do not leave her until we have had sufficient time to get away."

"Right, sir!" answered one of the other men quietly.

Eileen sat helpless and angry. A fight with these men would have been utterly hopeless, and she was not foolish enough to attempt it. But the brave girl felt like crying as she saw her charge being forced swiftly along the road. He and his two guards were lost in the gloom, and Eileen turned.

The third man was seated in the next seat to her—the seat which had just been vacated by the boy. In his hand he held a revolver, and the muzzle of it was pointing steadily at Eileen's face.

"Please do not attempt any tricks, miss," he said quietly. "I shall not harm a hair of your head if you will only act sensibly. I should loathe myself if I caused you even a moment's pain."

Eileen did not reply, but stared straight before her. She knew full well that her position was completely hopeless. With this armed man sitting beside her she could do nothing but obey his every order. Her own revolver was tucked away beneath her furs,

and, even if she had had it handy, she would have been unable to use it.

As for appealing for help to the gate-keeper, the very idea was out of the question. Such a move would almost certainly lead to violence, and no end would be gained. Indeed, Eileen was quite convinced that the Circle man would not hesitate to ruthlessly shoot the gate-keeper down if he interfered.

The goods train lumbered through, and after a slight delay the gates were opened. Without a word Eileen slipped in the clutch, and the Sunbeam glided over the sunken metals. Then the journey was continued into the darkness.

"Round here, please," said the Circle man, when the first turning came into view.

Eileen obediently swerved into the side lane. Her thoughts were busy all this time; she was endeavouring to think of some scheme whereby she could get the better of this cool rascal.

"I am going to take the liberty of addressing you," went on the man, after a short distance had been covered. "Am I right in surmising that you are Miss Eileen Dare, and that you are now carrying out instructions of Mr. Nelson Lee's?"

Eileen looked round scornfully.

"You may put your questions to me, but I will not answer them," she said, with defiance in her tone. "I know that I am helpless—that I am compelled to obey your will. But you have not won the game yet!"

"My question was really unnecessary," said the other. "I am quite sure that my surmise was correct, Miss Dare. And I want you to believe me when I say that I am not an enemy of yours. Mr. Nelson Lee is as fine a gentleman as ever stepped the earth, and I respect him highly. I hope that I am acting in a gentlemanly way, for I should hate to do otherwise."

Eileen replied with a glance; but that was expressive of such scorn and contempt that the man almost shivered. The car was now running smoothly at a comparatively slow speed, and the lane was deserted and narrow.

"I can see that you do not believe me," continued the man. "I am a Special Agent of the Circle of Terror—yet I hate that villainous society as I hate poison. If this will convince you of my sincerity, I shall be gratified."

As he spoke he offered Eileen his revolver, holding it by the barrel.

"Why are you taunting me like this?" asked the girl coldly. "I do not suppose the weapon is loaded; I suspect that you have another revolver in your left hand——"

"See!"

He held his left hand out, and it was empty. In a state of wonder, Eileen took the proffered revolver, and found that it was fully loaded. She was greatly puzzled, and at once pulled the car to a standstill.

"Now, what do you mean by this?" she asked steadily. "It is in my power to force you out of this car, but I will not do so until you have explained. Why have you



"Just for a moment I caught a glimpse of a pale face at the window—and I knew that it belonged to Stanley Leighton."—(See page 23.)

given me the upper hand in this strange fashion?"

The man smiled quietly.

"Merely because I wished to convince you of my sincerity," he replied. "My name is Montague Todd, and I would give anything to put you upon the track of that youngster. But those men with me were my superiors, and I could do nothing but obey their orders. But now that we are alone I am speaking freely. No doubt you have heard Mr. Lee refer to me?"

Eileen was silent.

She was thinking rapidly. The girl was well acquainted with Nelson Lee's many tussles with the Circle of Terror, but all the details were by no means clear in her mind. She certainly had a recollection, however, of Nipper speaking with great enthusiasm of a man named Todd—a member of the Circle.

Nipper, she remembered, had saved Todd's life under circumstances which had greatly endangered his own. And Todd, who was a decent fellow at heart, had shown his gratitude in an unmistakable way; on more than one occasion he had assisted Nelson Lee and Nipper by giving them information of a vital nature.

In doing this Todd had run considerable risk, since an act of treachery was punishable by swift death. Both Lee and Nipper were positively satisfied that Todd would have given his life for them, if occasion demanded.

Eileen regarded her companion with renewed interest. His attitude was unmistakable, for he had deliberately placed himself in her hands. There was no trickery about this, she told herself.

"Yes," she replied at last, "I have heard Mr. Lee talk of a man named Todd. But if you wish me to believe that you are that man, why did you take any part in this attack upon me?"

"For the simple reason that I could not do otherwise," replied Todd quietly. "At first I believed that I was to have charge of the case; but then two of my Chiefs appeared, and took the affair out of my hands. I was compelled to do as they ordered. Refusal would only have brought about disaster for myself, and nothing of value for anybody else. I am aware that Mr. Lee is engaged upon this particular case, for Nipper told me so."

Eileen handed back Todd's revolver.

"I believe you," she said quietly.

The man flushed with pleasure.

"I am glad of that," he said quietly. "Do you know, I had an idea that you would suspect me of treachery. But that was foolish of me, for I have heard Nipper talk of you, Miss Dare. I should have known your character better. I am more sorry than I can say that this incident has occurred. If I could have averted the disaster I would have done so willingly. As it is, I may be able to offer just a little help. By George, I was delighted when I received that order to come along with you!"

"Tell me, do you know where the boy is being taken to?" asked Eileen eagerly.

"I do—and I don't," was the curious reply.

"I don't quite understand you."

"Please let me explain," said Todd earnestly. "Leighton is to be taken to a Home—a kind of sanatorium place, where people with affected minds are kept. But I am afraid that my information must end there."

"Do you mean that you will not tell me any more?"

"I cannot do so," said Todd. "As I told Nipper, this Home is a special sort of place, and I have only heard it mentioned. I don't know where it is, and my superiors would not have told me; I was to have been dropped at a small town higher up the road. I see that you don't believe me!" he added, with sudden concern.

Eileen regarded him squarely.

"I do believe you," she replied. "After what you have told me I should be very foolish to discredit your statements. But, oh, it is so unfortunate! The boy has been taken, and we cannot possibly go in chase of his captors."

Montague Todd nodded gloomily.

"It's more than unfortunate," he said. "I was hoping that Mr. Lee would defeat the Circle this time. But his plans went wrong, I believe; and now everything is upside-down. I'd give anything to help; but I can't—I daren't. My life wouldn't be worth a farthing if I interfered."

"What are we going to do now?" asked the girl.

"Well, I have orders to accompany you for thirty miles," replied Todd. "But if you wish me to go now, Miss Dare, I will do so at once. In any case, I leave it entirely with you."

The man's manner was so frank that Eileen instinctively trusted him; she could do nothing else. And he continued speaking before she could reply.

"And there is something else," he said almost eagerly. "I heard the Chiefs talking. I don't know for certain, but I believe that Nipper and another boy have fallen into our hands. And they're being kept prisoners on a lighthouse."

"Oh! Is this true?" asked Eileen, with a quick breath.

"I wish I could tell you for certain; but I only suspect," replied Todd. "I don't even know the lighthouse, but I suppose there is only one along that particular stretch of coast. It's the Crag Rock, isn't it? If the boys are anywhere, they will be on that lighthouse."

"I understand you perfectly, Mr. Todd," said Eileen quietly. "And I believe everything that you have told me. Oh, things may not be so bad after all! But what is the matter?"

Todd was looking very grave.

"I am afraid I have said more than I should have done," he exclaimed. "I am not afraid of getting into trouble, but if you knew the Circle of Terror as I do you would sympathise with me. One day I shall throw it all up—I sha'n't be able to stand it. It will mean death, of course, but the end is bound to come before long."

He spoke resignedly, and Eileen felt a great pity for this unfortunate man who was forced to do the Circle's bidding against his will. By revealing some of the grim organisation's secrets, however, he was doing good—he was serving his country well.

The journey continued shortly after, and another main road was presently encountered. By following this Eileen would be able to reach Bannington by another route. She determined to hurry back to St. Frank's as fast as the car would carry her.

Todd's behaviour was that of a gentleman the whole time he was with Eileen. He was very anxious to prove his sincerity—and succeeded. For fifteen miles he journeyed with the girl, and then requested her to stop.

He alighted, and stood for a moment beside the car.

"I hope you will succeed," he said, with his hat in his hand.

"Succeed in what?" asked Eileen.

"In defeating the Circle of Terror!" replied Todd. "Good-night, Miss Dare!"

He stood back, but Eileen impulsively thrust out her little hand to him.

"Good-night, Mr. Todd," she said softly, "and thank you ever so much!"

He took her hand eagerly, plainly showing her that he had not anticipated the honour. He gripped her delicate fingers almost reverently, and then backed away into the darkness. She caught a glimpse of him as he strode quickly and resolutely down the road.

Then with a little sigh Eileen slipped the clutch in, and sped towards St. Frank's at a speed which any self-respecting constable would have described as highly dangerous to the public safety.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE REMOVE DORMITORY—MONTIE'S RESOLVE —OFF INTO THE NIGHT.

"LOOK here, Tregellis-West, we ain't going to put up with any of your silly rot! Understand that? I'm about fed up!"

Edward Oswald Handforth, of the Remove, was airing his views with a great show of indignation. He attempted to look dignified, but signally failed. Perhaps the fact that he was in a state of considerable deshabille had something to do with it; a fellow can't exactly look dignified attired merely in a shirt and a pair of socks.

The Remove had retired for the night, but there was a considerable amount of talk going on in the Ancient House dormitory. The prefect hadn't yet come round to turn the lights out, for the juniors hadn't been upstairs for long.

"We ain't going to put up with any of your silly rot!" repeated Handforth warmly. "I'm talking to you, Tregellis-West!"

Sir Montie, who was already in bed, looked up sleepily.

"Dear fellows, do me a favour," he drawled, addressing the Remove generally.

"You might get a wet towel, or somethin', an' gag that howlin' ass!"

"You—you fathead!" roared Handforth, standing over Montie's bed. "Do you want me to yank all the clothes off you?"

"Handy, old boy, you wouldn't be so shockin'ly brutal!" said Tregellis-West reproachfully. "Such a gentle fellow as you——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The idea of Handforth being gentle struck the Removites as distinctly humorous.

"Say, leave him alone!" grinned Farman, the boy from California. "I guess he ain't feelin' good to-night, Handy. I'd hate myself to keep pesterin' a feller like you're doing. It's kinder foolish. I'd sure quit blowin' off that blamed hot air——"

"I didn't ask you to butt in, you silly fathead!" roared Handforth.

"Gee!" chuckled Farman. "Hold me, somebody! I'll sure be laid out if Handforth gits good an' goin'. He's some feller when he's riled!"

"Well, it's enough to make a saint wild!" retorted Handforth indignantly. "Why shouldn't we know what's been happenin'? Bennett and Watson have both disappeared, and this prize dummy knows all about it. Yet he won't say a word!"

"I'm too tired, old boy!" murmured Sir Montie, in excuse. "Wait till the mornin'!"

"Rats! I'm not going to wait!" declared Handforth. "I'll give you ten seconds, West! If you don't speak up then, I'll yank you out of bed and fight you till you yell for mercy!"

"Oh, begad!"

Sir Montie dived under the bedclothes and remained there. The other fellows were grinning, but they were quite in sympathy with Handforth. They were just as curious to know what had happened to Nipper and Tommy Watson as Edward Oswald was. But they were not so persistent as the redoubtable chief of Study D; they had attempted in vain to drag the truth from Montie.

"Time's up, ain't it?" grinned Owen major.

"Scuse my maindeck! Those seconds are long ones, Handy!" chuckled Tom Burton—known in the Remove as the Ro'sun. "Give it up, messmate. Tregellis-West's steerin' his course——"

"He'll be steerin' his course out of bed in half a tick!" growled Handforth grimly. "I'm not going to sleep until he's told me all he knows."

Sir Montie sat up suddenly.

"Good gracious! Is that all you're botherin' about?" he asked, with mild surprise. "I'll soon tell you all I know, Handforth, providin' you go to bed like a good boy."

Handforth looked triumphant.

"Thought I'd bring you out of your giddy shell!" he said with great satisfaction. "Now then, out with it, you ass! Where are those two chaps? Where have they buzzed off to?"

There was a hush in the dormitory, and then a chuckle from the far end.

"No need to ask questions," murmured

Ralph Leslie Fullwood. "The cads are havin' a night out, I expect. I'll bet they're down at the White Harp, the blessed hypocrites! I've suspected 'em for weeks past!"

"Hear, hear!" came in a chorus from the other Nuts.

"You dry up!" roared Handforth threateningly. "Bennett and Watson ain't trying your blackguardly games. Now, West, out with it!"

Sir Montie sighed.

"You want me to tell you all I know?" he asked resignedly.

"That's it."

"Well, dear fellow, I don't know anythin'. Good-night!"

And Montie snuggled down into bed again. Handforth simply glared at him as though he would like to eat him on the spot.

"You—you dummy!" he roared, grabbing Montie's hair. "Do you think I'm going to stand that rot? Where are Bennett and Watson?"

"Begad! Haven't I told you I don't know?"

"Haven't you the slightest idea where they've gone to?"

"Not the slightest," replied Montie truthfully.

"I—I don't believe you."

"It's awfully hard to be set down as a shockin' liar," said Tregellis-West mournfully. "It's a frightful character to give me, Handy. I don't know where Benny and Tommy are, an' I don't know when they'll be back. But if you'll be just a little patient, it'll be all right. I daresay they'll turn up to-morrow, safe an' sound. I hope so—I do really."

Sir Montie lay back again, and Handforth gave it up as a bad job. He donned his pyjamas and got into bed. Nobody else bothered Tregellis-West, but there was a considerable amount of speculative talk regarding the mysterious movements of Nipper and Tommy Watson.

In twos and threes, however, the juniors dropped off to sleep. And twenty minutes after lights-out practically every fellow was in the land of dreams. Sir Montie was wide-awake, however. His mind was filled with thoughts, and slumber would not come to him. He lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, thinking deeply.

Ten o'clock boomed out, and as the quivering sounds died away on the still air, Sir Montie came to a sudden resolution.

He rose quickly from his bed and dressed himself completely. Then, with his lips set, he tiptoed out of the dormitory and went downstairs. With a steady stride he made straight for Nelson Lee's study. Arriving, he tapped upon the door gently.

"Come in!"

Sir Montie entered, and found Nelson Lee upon the hearthrug, his hands behind his back, a cigarette between his lips. The detective raised his eyebrows as the elegant Removite entered and closed the door.

"Well, Montie, what is the meaning of this?"

Lee's voice was stern, but he could not prevent a faint twinkle entering his eyes.

"I've come down, sir," said Sir Montie respectfully. "I couldn't sleep, you know—I couldn't, really! You're goin' out to look for Benny and Tommy, ain't you? I want to go with you, sir—I'm dyin' to go!"

"Come here, my boy," said Nelson Lee kindly.

Montie went over to the hearthrug, and Lee placed a gentle hand upon his shoulder.

"I shall be starting off upon my somewhat doubtful expedition almost at once, Montie," he said. "I should have gone before, only I have been awaiting a telephone message from Horsham. If it does not come within the next five minutes, I shall ring up myself."

"An' then, sir?"

"Then, if the answer is as I am beginning to fear, I shall start out at once."

"Begad! Can I go with you, sir?"

"My dear lad, you will be far better in bed," said the schoolmaster-detective gently. "I would like you with me, but it wouldn't be right, Montie. I shouldn't feel comfortable—"

"But I'm simply dyin' to go with you, sir," pleaded Sir Montie earnestly. "I can't sleep a wink—I want to know what's happened to poor old Benny and Tommy. If you won't let me come, sir, I shall simply lie in bed worryin' myself to death. An' in the mornin' you'll find me simply ravin' with brain-fever!"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"Nonsense!" he declared. "You are worrying yourself too much, young 'un. However, since you have dressed yourself, and have left the dormitory, I cannot find it in my heart to send you back. I'll let you come with me!"

"You're a brick, sir!" exclaimed Montie warmly. "Begad, you're a top-holer!"

Nelson Lee merely smiled. He could see that Montie was upset, and feared that the lad would only fret if he remained behind. And, while Nelson Lee gave the lad's arm a gentle pressure, the telephone-bell rang.

The detective picked up the receiver quickly.

"Yes? Who is that?" he asked. "Ah, Inspector Davis? Have you— Not a sign of it? Dear me! That is most extraordinary— You are quite sure— No, I don't suppose so— Thank you, inspector. I am sorry you have been put to this trouble— Yes—good-bye!"

Nelson Lee replaced the receiver, and Montie saw that his expression was unusually grim.

"Is—is anythin' the matter, sir?" ventured Tregellis-West.

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders.

"I hardly know what to think, my lad," he said, with infinite worry in his tone. "But I fear that matters have gone terribly wrong. Miss Dare's car has not passed through Horsham—the police are positive of that. We can only arrive at one conclusion."

"The Circle, sir?"

"Yes, Montie, the Circle!" said Lee, clenching his fists. "There has been some devilry going on— By James! What's that? Listen—listen!"

They both stood rigid. And upon the still air throbbed the sound of a motor-car engine. Then abruptly it ceased. Nelson Lee and Sir Montie gazed at one another tensely.

"Begad!" whispered Tregellis-West. "Do—do you think that's—"

He paused, scarcely hoping that the thought which had entered his head could be true.

"I don't know, Montie," said Nelson Lee quickly. "You were thinking of Miss Dare, eh? I could swear that throb was caused by her Sunbeam car. But why has she come back to St. Frank's? It seems extraordinary, lad."

Without wasting further time, Lee grabbed his cap and led the way out of the study. They emerged upon the Triangle by the side-door, and saw the lights of a motor-car through the massive wrought ironwork of the big gates. These were locked, of course, but Lee led the way through the small masters' gate.

As he and Montie hurried through they saw a slight, girlish figure running lightly towards them. Nelson Lee had no doubt now; and he caught his breath in with mingled concern and relief. Something had happened—something unexpected; but Eileen, at all events, was safe.

"Oh, Mr. Lee, I am so glad you are here!" exclaimed the girl thankfully. "Oh, but I—"

She paused in confused alarm, having just caught sight of Tregellis-West. But Lee shook his head smilingly as he took the girl's hand.

"You needn't be afraid of talking freely, Miss Eileen," he said. "This lad is a close friend of Nipper's—and of mine—and he knows all about my little secret. He is to be trusted implicitly."

"Begad, I—I hope so, sir!" murmured Sir Montie.

"Why, of course!" exclaimed Eileen quickly. "I remember clearly. He is Sir Montie, isn't he? Didn't we meet at Tregellis Castle during the Christmas holidays? How silly of me!"

She took Montie's hand, and pressed it warmly.

"To tell the truth, my mind is busy with other matters," said Nelson Lee. "We are all old friends—eh? But I am afraid that something grave has happened, Miss Eileen. I am more glad than I can say to see that you are safe and sound. I did my utmost to reach St. Frank's before you took your departure, for I feared that your car would be held up by Circle agents."

"Oh, I have had such an adventure!" said Eileen breathlessly. "But things may not be so very serious, after all. I've had a talk with Mr. Todd—"

"Todd! By James, then matters are, indeed, better than I thought!" said Lee quickly. "I have every reason to believe

that Todd is a firm friend, a staunch supporter."

Eileen Dare nodded.

"He is a real gentleman, Mr. Lee," she replied. "But please listen! I will tell you exactly what occurred."

"Won't you come indoors—"

"No, no, please!" interrupted the girl, laying a hand upon Lee's arm restrainingly. "There is no time to waste, and I can speak to you just as well here. I—I feel that I have failed, Mr. Lee. But, oh, I did my best—indeed, I did!"

"I can quite believe that," agreed Lee quietly.

As quickly as possible the girl related what had occurred. She described how her car had been stopped, and how she had attempted to frustrate the designs of the enemy. She told how fate had been against her in the shape of the closed level-crossing gates, and then related her interview with Todd.

"Why, Miss Eileen, you have done wonderfully—wonderfully!" declared Nelson Lee with enthusiasm. "But for that stroke of ill-luck you would have defeated the Circle altogether. Perhaps, upon the whole, it is better that you did not do so."

"Oh, why?" asked Eileen in wonder.

"Well, I do not think for a moment that Leighton is in any danger," replied Lee. "Nipper and Watson, on the other hand, occupy a different position. I believe that their peril is great, and our first concern must be for them. Owing to Todd's loyalty, we now know, with a fair amount of accuracy, where the boys are. After we have acted upon Todd's information we can then think of Leighton. But Nipper and Watson come first."

"You are right, Mr. Lee," said Eileen. "It is just as well that I got caught, isn't it? For if I had succeeded in getting away I should never have learned about the lighthouse. Oh, I do hope we shall be able to rescue those poor boys! But I have been wondering if Todd misinformed me—"

"Todd wouldn't do that," interrupted Lee promptly. "In all my dealings with the man he has been absolutely faithful and trustworthy. I have perfect confidence in him, and regard him as a true friend. Some day, perhaps, he will be freed from the hateful bonds which hold him, and then his friendship will be open, and not concealed, as at present."

Lee, in fact, mentally blessed the absent Montague Todd. He had done his best—and no man could do more than that.

"Shall we start at once?" asked Eileen.

Lee hesitated.

"It is just after ten-thirty," he said slowly. "Don't you think it would be too much for you, Miss Eileen? We may be out for hours—we may encounter many perils; and I hardly care to—"

"Oh, but I want to come; I do, indeed!" said Eileen earnestly.

"Then I will say no more," was Lee's brisk reply. "Come, Montie, jump in!"

"Begad, am I goin', too, sir?"

"My dear boy, didn't you ask me if you may——"

"Yes, sir; but I didn't think you'd take me on this trip," said Montie joyfully. "I'm dyin' to go—to help poor old Benny an' Tommy. Oh, it's rippin' of you, sir—simply rippin'!"

Tregellis-West was full of enthusiasm. His admiration for Eileen Dare knew no bounds. And within a minute the faithful Sunbeam was speeding away into the night—speeding away towards the South Crag Lighthouse!

CHAPTER VI.

(Related by Nipper.)

IN WHICH TOMMY AND I ARE IN THE LAST STAGES OF FRIGHT: AND, INCIDENTALLY, WE PERFORM SEVERAL USEFUL PIECES OF WORK.

Poor old Tommy Watson wasn't himself at all. I'd seen him glum occasionally, but he was now simply morbid with misery and self-condemnation. For the last ten minutes he had been calling himself every disparaging name he could lay his tongue to; and he had only lapsed into silence because he couldn't think of anything further.

"You haven't finished, have you?" I asked, with a chuckle.

A groan came out of the darkness.

"Blessed if I can understand you, Benny!" said Tommy dolefully.

"What can't you understand?"

"Why, you seem to be as cheerful as anything," replied Watson. "Here we are, marooned on this lighthouse, prisoners in the hands of the Circle of Terror, without the slightest hope of getting free, and you're talking just the same as usual! You're as cheerful as—as—— Oh, I don't know!"

"My dear fathead, what's the good of being miserable?" I asked. "If you'd been in as many tight corners as I've been in, you wouldn't worry your silly napper. Tight fixes were made to get out of—and we've got to get out of this one."

"How, you ass? How?"

"I don't know how, but we've got to!" I declared. "Looking at things squarely, we don't seem to have many chances. There's some rope here, and I dare say we could manage to reach the rocks. But we couldn't swim to the shore, could we? We might as well be on an island in the Pacific. But something'll turn up before long," I said hopefully. "I can feel it in my bones!"

Tommy Watson grunted.

"Well, it's a fat lot more than I can feel!" he said. "We're going to be kept here for weeks and weeks; we're going to be fed on bread and water; in fact, we might be put to death——"

"Go on!" I said encouragingly. "Don't stop at that, Tommy. We might be drawn and quartered, you know—or shoved in boiling oil, for a change. Talk about a cheerful companion! What's the matter with you, you idiot?"

Tommy didn't reply, and as I paused we

both heard a faint and far-away hail. In a second we had jumped up and had rushed for the window. We arrived simultaneously, and had quite a fight as to who should look out first. I won, of course.

Gazing down, I could dimly see a boat moored against the stone steps. By the look of it, it was a small motor-launch. And two men were getting out. They stood upon the steps, and the boat at once slid away, and the faint sound of engine throbs came to my ears.

"A couple of visitors, Tommy—for us, I expect," I whispered. "They're going to stay, too, by the look of it. Their boat's off back to the shore."

"Oh, my hat!" muttered Tommy. "Circle chaps, I expect."

"Shouldn't be surprised!" I said, as lightly as I could. "Now look here, I've got a word to say. I'll bet those chaps have come here to question us."

"I sha'n't say a word!" vowed Watson doggedly.

"If you refuse in the ordinary way, they'll twist your arm, or something," I went on. "Anyway, they'll try to force you to speak. Our best policy is to be frightened out of our wits——"

"Rats!" said Tommy warmly. "I ain't frightened, you ass!"

"Oh, you cuckoo! I didn't say you were!" I exclaimed. "Pretend to be frightened—see? If we're questioned we'll be so scared that we can't talk at all. Shiver and shake—cringe and look as though you'd like to die. They can't do much to us—and we shall gain time. It'll be humiliating, but as we ain't really frightened, it doesn't matter a toss."

We huddled ourselves up in a corner, against some cases, and waited. And, sure enough, within ten minutes a key rattled in the lock and three men appeared—two well dressed and the other obviously the lighthouse-keeper.

"All right, Thurston," said one of the well-dressed men, whom I recognised as Grant, the Circle Chief Agent. "You can leave us with the youngsters; we are going to question them for a few minutes."

"H'm! Pretty-looking pair, I must say," exclaimed the other man, after Thurston had gone. "Rouse up, kids—we sha'n't hurt you!"

I looked round fearfully.

"Oh! Oh, please, I—I——"

Then I broke down, and snivelled. Tommy Watson, not to be outdone, huddled further into his corner, and shivered amazingly well. We looked a sorry pair, and I wasn't surprised to see the contempt in the men's glances.

"Pull yourselves together, you young cowards!" snapped Grant. "If you answer our questions, we sha'n't hurt you. First of all, I want to know why—— Confound you," he added savagely, "don't snivel like that!"

Both Tommy and I had practically drowned his words by an outburst of frightened sobs. Tommy played his part well, and

I don't think I was so bad either. Anyhow, both the men were firmly convinced that we were suffering from a bad attack of funk.

"Give the young hounds a kick!" growled the other man. "You can't question them while they're in this state, Grant."

Fortunately we didn't receive any kicks, but Grant grabbed our shoulders and shook us until our teeth rattled—and until he became quite breathless.

"Now then," he panted. "Pull yourselves together and look at me."

"Pup—pup—please, sir, I—I can't!" I gasped sobbingly. "Oh, you won't hurt us, will you? We—we didn't mean anything. I—I—"

Words failed me again—or appeared to—and this time I simply rolled on the floor and shook with fright. Tommy Watson, seeing no reason why he should be left behind, followed my example. And Grant swore savagely.

"Hang the brats!" he snapped. "We can't question them while they're in this state. We sha'n't hurt you, boys—you need not be afraid."

"Thrash them with the rope's-end," advised the other man harshly.

"That's what I intend doing," said Grant. "I'll give them half an hour, and no longer. Do you hear me, you brats! If you are not composed in thirty minutes' time you'll each receive a sound thrashing—and you will be thrashed until you speak."

He picked up the lamp and passed out of the room, his companion following grumpily. The key turned in the lock, and we heard them descending the stone stairs to the apartment below.

Tommy Watson nudged me.

"My hat!" he murmured. "I thought they were going to see through it, Benny. What are we going to do now? How about when they come back?"

"Well, there is only one thing for it," I replied. "We shall have to take that thrashing—and a dozen other thrashings, possibly. Anyhow, we're not going to speak. We won't say a giddy word."

"It seems to me that the trick was useless," grunted Watson. "It has only delayed things, Benny. We've got half an hour to think of that thrashing, now—"

"A lot may happen in half an hour," I said grimly. "It's a breathing space, Tommy, and it's all to the good. Look here, couldn't we manage to—"

I paused, thinking deeply.

"Couldn't we manage to what?" asked Tommy irritably.

I didn't reply, but walked over to the little window and looked out. As I have said before, I think, our apartment was situated high up in the lighthouse, and the sea was splashing against the rocks far below. Immediately beneath our window was another of the same sort, and a dim glow was coming from it. I could see that the framework was partially opened, although the space was heavily curtained.

"What are you staring out there for?" asked Tommy behind me.

"I'll bet a quid those chaps are in the room below us," I said tensely. "It's the living-room, I expect. I've been thinking, my son, and I don't see any reason why I shouldn't shin down and listen at that window. I might be able to hear something important."

"You—you mad idiot!" said Watson fiercely.

"Thanks!"

"How the dickens can you shin down a bare wall?" went on Watson indignantly. "You're dotty, Benny. You aren't a fly—"

"No, but I can hang on to a rope, can't I?" I broke in. "Over in the corner there are several coils—this place being a store-room—and if we can only fix the end it will be easy enough to shin down."

"Oh, my goodness!" muttered Watson. "Suppose you slipped, Benny?"

"Well, then I should fall," I replied lightly. "The laws of gravity wouldn't allow me to fly up to this window again. But you're always supposing things—you're always getting silly ideas into your head. I sha'n't slip."

"You might," declared Tommy anxiously. "Don't be silly, Benny! You don't want to kill yourself, I suppose?"

"I'm not particularly anxious to," I replied, groping across the apartment. "There is no danger of that, though. Lend a hand with these ropes, and don't growl so much!"

Tommy Watson nearly burst with indignation, and laid us open to danger by speaking in a loud voice. At last, however, he saw that I was intent upon my plan; and he helped me to knot the ropes with a will.

We found one packing-case just against the window. It was tremendously heavy, and by looping the rope round this it afforded a perfect hold. My weight would not shift the case an inch—and even if it did no harm would be done.

The rope was strong, and I made a series of knots all down it, so that I should be supplied with a good grip. Then, with a cheery word to Tommy, I climbed out of the window and hung in space.

I suppose, really, it was rather a risky proceeding. I was dangling in mid-air, with jagged rocks far below me. A slip would certainly mean instant death—there would be no escape for me. But I didn't even consider this lively prospect as I slithered down the rope.

I was obliged to go with extreme caution, for any unusual noise would have brought somebody to the window; and then my swaying form would have been seen at once in the reflected light from the great lamp above.

At last I found myself on a level with the other window. Voices came to my ears, but they were thick and blurred. After a few efforts I succeeded in gaining a firm grip upon the window-sill itself. And here, with my feet resting on a knot below, and with my knees gripping the rope, I clung to the ledge.

My head was right in the deep window opening. And now the voices from within were quite clear.

"... boys don't know much, anyhow," one man was saying. "I consider it is a waste of time, Grant. In all probability Leighton is captured by this time—at any rate, our men are on the look-out."

"We can't be too careful," I heard Grant say. "If Leighton has been taken, all well and good. But it won't do any harm to get the truth from these infernal youngsters. If they won't answer, we'll take them to Rapley."

"The Home, you mean?"

"My dear Bowen, you know as well as I do that the Home is situated a mile below Rapley," replied Grant, to my infinite satisfaction. "If these boys won't speak up here, we'll see what can be done with them at the other place. As you say, Leighton may be already in our hands—but it would not be wise to count upon it. There are big issues at stake, as you are well aware."

"Well, we'll see what a rope's end will do," said Bowen, with savage satisfaction. "Pah! What can you expect from snivelling schoolboys? If we make their skins smart a bit, they'll soon tell us all they know."

I grinned to myself, and wondered where the rope's-end would fall—not that there was much doubt on that point. The Circle men would find, however, that Tommy and I—

My thoughts suddenly came to an abrupt stop. From the other side of the great light tower came the distinct splashing of oars. This was immediately followed by a lusty hail. I didn't lose a second, but commenced scrambling up the rope with more speed than safety.

However, I managed to get in all right, and found Tommy Watson gasping with excitement and anxiety.

"You, you—you bounder!" he panted, grabbing hold of me. "I'm jolly glad you've got back, Benny. The way you scrambled up that rope, too! I was expecting to see you drop down every second!"

"Didn't you hear a boat?" I asked breathlessly.

"Yes, and saw it, too."

I didn't ask any more questions, but turned to the little window again. And now, far below, I could distinguish a ship's lifeboat. It was moored to the steps, and several figures were moving about upon the steps. The voices of the men came up clearly.

"Ahoy there!" bawled a hearty voice. "Ah, there's somebody living 'ere, then?"

I judged that the lighthouse-keeper had appeared at the door, and made certain of this a second later, for I saw his lantern swaying to and fro as he descended the steps.

"... blooming Huns!" came an indignant voice from below. "Torpedoed, we was. One or two chaps got missed, and we didn't pick 'em up until they was well-nigh dead beat. Yes, three of 'em—all unconscious. I want to bring 'em in if I can. . . Brandy, if you've

got any. . . . Like to send them Huns down to where they belong!"

I hadn't heard much, but the whole story was quite clear to me. The men in the boat were survivors from a torpedoed steamer, and two or three of them were in a bad way and needed immediate attention. It was only natural that the party should call at the lighthouse, since the coast was very bare about here, and there would be no hope of gaining assistance from the shore.

Tommy managed to squeeze his head out beside my own, and we watched the unconscious men being carried slowly up the steps into the lighthouse. This incident was totally unlooked-for—both by us and the Circle agents. We hadn't been prepared for such an event as this. I noticed that the light had been extinguished in the room beneath, and it was fairly certain that Grant and Bowen had concealed themselves—or probably they had ascended into the lamp-room. It certainly wouldn't do for them to be seen on the lighthouse by strangers.

And before long a sudden idea entered my head—an idea which set my pulses throbbing and which made me grip Tommy so tightly that he almost yelled out.

"What's the matter with you, ass?" he growled, rubbing his arm.

"Look at that boat!" I whispered tensely.

"Well, what about it?"

"It's deserted! They have all come into the lighthouse, and the boat is left there on its own!" I continued. "By Jupiter! It's our chance, Tommy—we can get away!"

"Get—get away!" stuttered Watson amazedly.

"Yes, we can pinch the boat!" I went on. "It's rather a dirty trick on those shipwrecked chaps, but they won't come to any harm here—and once we're ashore we can send another boat out in next to no time."

I was fairly dancing with excitement. The chance was too good to be missed. A pure stroke of luck had turned this opportunity into our path, and we should have been idiots to ignore it.

"Pinch the boat?" repeated Watson dazedly. "You're dotty, Benny!"

"No, I'm not!" I exclaimed. "There's plenty of this rope, and it's fixed all ready. We've only got to join on another length, and we shall be able to slither right down. Don't you see? Our captors didn't trouble about the rope because they knew that we should not be any better off even if we did get down to the rock. But the arrival of this boat has made all the difference—it's given us the chance we wanted! You're game, aren't you?"

"Game for anything!" declared Watson, catching my enthusiasm. "You're a wonder, Benny—you think of everything! But suppose we're spotted half-way down?"

"Well, we shall be collared again—that's all," I said. "Our position won't be any worse, will it? And it's a ten-to-one chance that we get clear away. The odds are all with us, my son. Once we are in that boat

we shall be O.K. They can't even follow us, because there is no other boat here!"

We could hardly believe that such an amazing opportunity really existed. But it actually was so, and not because of any slackness on our captor's part. The arrival of these torpedoed mariners was an event which could not possibly have been anticipated.

And now, while the lighthouse-keeper was attending to the wants of his unlooked-for visitors, and while Grant and Bowen were helpless, Tommy Watson and I made our bid for freedom.

By the light of my electric torch we fastened the ropes together. One length was much thinner than the others, and didn't seem extra strong. It was the only piece remaining, however, and we had to use it. But we tied it on last, so that if it broke the fall would not be severe.

Even now we were not absolutely certain that the length would reach to the base of the lighthouse—but we had to chance that.

I went first, and worked my way down as quickly as possible. When I arrived at the thin length of rope I went with greater caution, and found, to my joy, that it was of ample length.

Standing upon a rock ledge, I waved up to the tiny speck above—at least, Watson's head looked like a tiny speck from down below.

He saw my signal, and at once commenced descending.

I won't deny that I was anxious, for Tommy wasn't accustomed to this sort of thing; and some of the bravest chaps in the world turn giddy when hanging from a great height.

My fears were groundless, as I soon discovered. Tommy Watson came swaying down magnificently, as agile as a monkey, and at length he stood beside me.

"Done it!" he panted, quite out of breath.

"Splendid, old chap—ripping!" I declared, slapping him on the back. "Coming down a rope like that is a jolly lot more difficult than it seems. How are your hands?"

"Nearly torn to bits!" said Watson. "But we can't stop for a few burns—let's get to the boat."

I could quite understand that Watson's hands were scorched and grazed by the friction of the rope. Mine were half raw, and they throbbed painfully. But, after all, it was only a trifle.

Glancing up, I saw that the door of the lighthouse stood half open, but there was no sound of a voice, and no light. The party had obviously mounted to one of the upper apartments.

We tumbled into the boat, and I quickly unfastened the painter. Then, with a heave, we sent the little craft outwards into the smooth sea. A minute later the oars were being pulled strenuously, and the South Crag Lighthouse dropped away.

We had escaped!

CHAPTER VII.

(Nipper concludes the episode.)

ONE STROKE OF LUCK IS IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWED BY ANOTHER, AND THE CIRCLE OF TERROR MEETS WITH COMPLETE DEFEAT.

TOMMY WATSON scrambled out of the boat, and his feet plunged into a foot of water. But he didn't mind this in the least. We had reached the shore, and complete freedom was ours.

The beach was utterly deserted, so far as we could see. Some little way along a low wooden structure could be seen, and I judged it to be somebody's private bathing shelter, of a small boathouse, and immediately facing us a line of telegraph posts stood out against the night sky.

"There must be a road running practically flush with the beach, Tommy," I said. "Anyhow, we'll have a look."

We had hauled the boat up well clear of the lapping waves. And now, with the winking light from the South Crag behind us, we turned our steps inland. As I had surmised, we found that a fairly decent road ran almost parallel with the beach.

"Lonely piece of coast, ain't it?" remarked Watson. "I suppose we'd better tramp along until we reach a village, or——"

"What's that?" I interrupted abruptly.

We both stood stock-still, and clearly heard the throb of an approaching motor-car. And, at the same time, two small lights came into view round a bend.

"My hat! That's lucky!" said Tommy.

"We shall probably be able to get a lift——"

"Fathead!" I hissed. "It may be a Circle car!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

We dived into the low ditch, and crouched against the hedge. And, rather to our surprise, the motor-car came to a halt about forty yards away. I was now practically certain that it contained agents of the Circle. They seemed to be as numerous as flies. And then a voice floated distinctly down upon the light breeze.

"Begad, that's the lighthouse!" I heard the voice exclaim. "It's a shockin' way out, ain't it, sir? How are we going to reach it?"

Tommy Watson gave a jump.

"Benny—Benny!" he gasped excitedly. "Do you hear? It's Montie! I must be dreaming——"

I didn't wait for any more, but jumped up and ran like mad down the road. Of course it was Montie! I'd recognised his unmistakable voice in a second. And the gov'nor was with him, too!

Tommy and I simply burst upon them like a whirlwind.

"Gov'nor!" I gasped breathlessly.

Just for one tense second there was a dead silence.

"It's Benny—Benny and Tommy!" shouted Sir Montie Tregellis-West, tumbling out of the car frantically. Begad, it's too good to be true!"

"Oh, how splendid—how splendid!" exclaimed a soft, gentle voice.

I was terrifically confused for a minute. Miss Eileen was with Montie and the gov'nor! They were the last people in the world I expected to see at that moment, on this particular spot.

A wave of relief swept over me. I had been imagining all sorts of terrible things with regard to Montie and Nelson Lee. And here they were, as safe as houses, and Eileen Dare was with them!

"Apparently we have arrived too late," remarked the gov'nor coolly. "We came to this spot, Nipper, for the express purpose of rescuing you. But it seems as though you have rescued yourself."

"I'm—I'm blessed if I know what to say, gov'nor," I exclaimed, gripping his hand. "Fancy you being here! And Miss Eileen, too!"

I shook hands with Eileen, and felt as happy as a sandboy. Tommy Watson was hubbubbing over with excitement, and even Sir Montie couldn't quite retain his usual languid urbanity.

"I suppose I'd better tell my yarn, hadn't I, sir?" I asked, after a minute or two.

"Yes, Nipper—but be brief."

It wasn't an easy matter to be brief, for I had such a lot to relate. But I told my interested audience all about our confinement within the lighthouse.

"By George, yes!" exclaimed Tommy Watson, when I got to the part where I had climbed down the rope to the lower window. "You didn't tell me what you heard, Benny."

"Well, I didn't hear much," I said. "But it was jolly interesting. I found out where that Home for dotty people is situated."

"You did, Nipper?" asked the gov'nor sharply.

"Yes, sir; it's about a mile below the village of Rapley. That's in Surrey, isn't it?"

"Rapley!" repeated Nelson Lee. "Not so very far from here. By James, we shall be able to travel there straight away. It is even possible that we may be able to rescue Leighton before it is too late. We must start without a second's loss of time."

"But I want to finish my yarn, sir," I protested.

"My dear lad, we can't wait——"

"And I want to hear what happened to you!"

"We can continue our talk whilst we are travelling," said Nelson Lee crisply. "This information of yours, Nipper, is of the most vital importance. You have done well, my boy—very well, indeed."

I flushed with pleasure, especially when I saw that Miss Eileen was regarding me with distinct approval. Everything was going smoothly now. Luck, having deserted us earlier, was now doing its best to make amends. For, as we soon found out, even greater good fortune was to befall us.

Notwithstanding the great hurry, Nelson Lee stopped at a coastguard station a mile

away. Here he gave instructions to have the two Circle men detained, and to send assistance to the shipwrecked sailors.

I felt more satisfied when we had started afresh. The chances were that Grant and Bowen would escape, but it was distinctly possible that they would be taken by surprise and captured.

I was sitting next to Eileen, and she told me all about her adventure with Todd, and what had occurred since. The car was only a two-seater, but there was a folding arrangement behind, and Tommy and Sir Montie occupied this. The gov'nor and Eileen and myself were in the front seat—it was a tight fit, but I didn't mind it a bit.

"You see, Nipper, the Circle's car was stuck in the pond," explained Eileen. "There must have been a big delay in getting it free, and it's just possible that we may reach the Home first. In any case, we must trust to Providence to set matters right."

Although the gov'nor was tremendously relieved to find that Tommy and I were safe, he was, nevertheless, very worried over Stanley Leighton. The boy had been taken by the Circle—and the task before us seemed to be a very heavy one. Upon the whole, things had gone splendidly; but if we could only get Leighton back we could claim complete and absolute success.

I had a feeling within me that our mission wasn't to be in vain; the information I had learned by my little acrobatic feat on the lighthouse was far more valuable than I had at first supposed. For we knew exactly where to go. We knew that Leighton had been taken to the Home at Rapley. So, in a way, there was nothing to worry about. But, if possible, the gov'nor wanted to get hold of Leighton again without allowing the Circle to know that we were aware of the Home's exact locality.

It was well into the night now, of course, but we didn't care a jot. Sir Montie was in high spirits.

"I might have been dozin' in bed now, Benny," he said, bending over towards me. "But I couldn't stop in the dormitory, begad. I lay tossin' about in a frightful agony of mind, an' at last I went downstairs to Mr. Alvin'ton. He's a brick, Benny—he is, really."

"You needn't tell me that," I said cheerfully. "My hat! Don't we have some adventures together, eh? If the other chaps get to hear about this, they'll go green with envy."

"Dear fellow, they're turnin' green already," smiled Sir Montie. "I had simply a fearful time with Handforth. You know what a curious chap he is, don't you?"

I chuckled.

"It won't do to tell the chaps too much——" I began.

And just then I heard Nelson Lee catch his breath in quickly. He acted with amazing promptitude, for the car's electric lights were switched off, and he brought the vehicle to a stop and shut off the engine.

And then I understood.

We were within about ten miles of Ropley, and, swinging round a bend, we had just sighted the rear light of a big motor-car. It was at the side of the road, stationary, and two men were clearly visible in the glow from its headlamps. Obviously they were tinkering with the engine. It was running spasmodically, and making a considerable amount of noise.

Owing to Nelson Lee's prompt action the two men had seen nothing of our approach—and they had heard nothing. We were now within about two hundred yards, but in total darkness. Thus, if the fellows glanced up the road, they would see nothing against the dead black background.

"That car may be quite an innocent one," murmured the gov'nor softly. "But we had better make sure."

"Oh, do you think they are the Circle men?" breathed Eileen tensely, gripping my arm.

"I don't know, Miss Eileen," was Lee's reply. "But it would be foolish of us to drive straight up under the present circumstances. The probability is that this car is the one which overtook you. I should say that the engine was partially disabled, owing to its immersion in the pond—and it has been causing trouble."

The gov'nor's idea was a shrewd one. It wasn't likely that any ordinary wayfarers would be upon this lonely road at this hour of the night; but it was likely that the Circle men would be. And it would be distinctly advisable to make certain before driving past. After all, precaution costs nothing.

"There's a thick hedge here," whispered Nelson Lee. "It will be an easy matter to creep along behind the hedge until we come opposite our quarry. One glance will be sufficient to tell us the truth."

"Oh, I must go with you!" declared Eileen quickly. "I shall know the man at once—"

"(Of course—of course!" said the gov'nor. "You boys had better remain here.")

"I'll come, sir," I put in. "Supposing there's some fighting? I'll creep along about ten yards behind you, so as to be handy."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"All right, Nipper," he said. "But your chums must remain."

Montie and Tommy didn't look exactly pleased, but they couldn't argue with "old Alvy." And while they sat in the car, the gov'nor and Eileen softly stepped over to the hedge, and I followed them.

There was a low bush growing amongst tall ones, and Lee gently picked Eileen up and deposited her on the other side. I heard her give a little silvery laugh as she landed—although it was too soft to carry any distance.

The gov'nor and I hopped over quickly, without ceremony, and then I fell in behind. As silently as mice the pair in front crept

onwards. I disobeyed the gov'nor's command to remain well in the rear, for when he and Eileen halted I was only a few feet away.

"Yes," I heard Eileen breathe. "They are the men! Oh, how fortunate!"

I raised my head slightly, and peered with great caution between two portions of the hedge. The car was a big landaulette—a Rolls-Royce.

The two men who were tinkering with the engine were both dressed like millionaires, and they seemed to be highly cultured gentlemen. Just for a moment I caught a glimpse of a pale face at the window—and I knew that it belonged to Stanley Leighton.

The next instant Nelson Lee dashed through a gap in the hedge, and was upon the two men before they could possibly prepare themselves for an attack. I started up, gasping, and saw that the gov'nor had tied his handkerchief over the lower part of his face—a wise precaution.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed one of the men hoarsely. "Who—"

He didn't get any further. Both he and his companion had turned to face this surprising apparition, and the one who had spoken received an upper-cut which sent him to earth with a thud. His companion acted promptly, swinging a spanner round with the intention of delivering a stunning blow. But Lee was just a trifle too quick for him. He shared the same fate as his companion, and went crashing down. They were both momentarily stunned, and lay groaning upon the ground.

"To the car!" hissed Lee, turning to us. "Get it ready!"

Eileen and I needed no second bidding; and by the time we had got the little Sunbeam round, Nelson Lee came pelting up, half carrying, half dragging Leighton with him.

We were all ready. The pair bundled in anyhow, and as they did so Eileen, who was behind the driving wheel, slipped the clutch in, and we glided off.

A glance round showed me that the two Circle men were staggering dazedly to their feet. They were too confused to know what had happened—but they would soon find out!

After covering ten miles we were satisfied that no pursuit was being made. Leighton himself, having got over his original fright, was joyful to find himself amongst friends again.

We should have preferred to capture the scoundrels, but under the circumstances this had not been possible. It was sufficiently satisfactory to wrench Leighton from their clutches.

So ended this particular episode in our new battle with the Circle of Terror. We had been victorious all along the line—although at first luck had seemed dead against us.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!—(See p. iv of cover)

BEGIN OUR NEW SERIAL TO-DAY!

In the Grip of the Huns.

A Magnificent Tale of Thrilling Experiences in Germany.

By CLEMENT HALE.

NOTE.—As the title "In the Hands of the Huns" has already been used, we have altered the name of our Serial to the above.

The Chief Characters in this Story are :

GEORGE GRAY and his brother JACK, who are the English Staff of the Berlin Rovers, a football club in Germany.

OTTO BRACK is a scoundrelly German member of the team. But another German, named

CARL HOFFMAN, is friendly, and advises the Englishmen to leave Germany, which they refuse to do. They are arrested and sent to a camp at Oberhemmel. One of the guards ill-treats Jack, and George goes to his rescue, knocking out a gaoler named Kutz. He and his brother are then put in separate cells. Some days afterwards all the prisoners are called out and formed up in the square. The new governor, Von der Klutz, is going to make a speech.

(Now read on.)

THE NEW GOVERNOR.

VON DER KLUTZ called for silence and attention. His fierce eyes roamed along the lines of patient and long-suffering Britishers. A cruel smile curved his lips.

"Prisoners," he cried, when at last dead silence reigned, "this is the last day you will spend within the walls of the prison of Oberhemmel. Doubtless you will be gratified to hear it. I have always understood, and have been told, that you Britishers are lovers of fresh air. Very well"—and he laughed harshly—"you will have plenty of it where you're going to. A camp has been prepared for your reception within sight of the prison walls. It is well protected by a barrier of barbed wire defences, which will be electrified to prevent any attempt at escape. If any prisoner should be rash enough to lay his hands upon the live wires, he will be instantly electrocuted. Besides this precaution sentries will be posted at intervals around the camp, with strict orders to shoot down any prisoner who may attempt to pass the wires."

He paused for a moment and his fierce eyes roamed up and down the ranks of the unfortunate captives. He seemed to take a malicious delight in their sufferings. His

eyes dwelt for a long moment on every dejected face he saw, and then his smile would broaden.

"Jack, I'd like to kick that German beast," murmured George, "though he's better than the other one, for he does possess a sense of justice."

"Silence in the ranks, you swine-hounds!" roared the governor fiercely. Then he continued: "Your food will be distributed at regular intervals during the day. Water will be supplied from a pump within the camp. And you will have plenty of time to yourselves. I hope you will make good use of it."

Again he paused, and then he rapped out with:

"And if there is any prisoner who imagines he has a grievance, let him send his complaints to me. If I find them justified, I will not fail to punish the offender, even if he is a German, but if I find the complaint ill-founded, flogging will be nothing to the penalty I shall inflict. Let that be a fair warning."

With that he swung upon his heels and strolled away, his fat hands clasped behind his back, his head slightly bowed.

"March the pigs back to the cells," he roared. And with the utmost expedition the order was obeyed.

Before they had time to realise what was happening, the prisoners had been formed into line two deep and were swinging across the gravel to the doors of the frowning gaol, the armed guards that accompanied them indulging in jokes at their expense and laughing at their helplessness.

THE CAMP.

THE next morning, after a frugal and unappetising breakfast, consisting of thin coffee and black bread, with a species of lard or fatty dripping, the prisoners were again marched to the parade ground, marshalled there, and kept waiting for half an hour or more.

Then the word was given, and under strong escort they swung through the gates of the

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

prison, and out into the open streets, which were lined on each side by the citizens of the town, who jeered at them as they passed.

Not for the first time George felt thankful that the armed guard was strong, for men, women, ay, and even children flung themselves forward and tried to reach the helpless prisoners, whom they reviled with coarse and loathsome epithets.

It pained George to see some of the women, who ought, at least, to have known better, shaking their fists at them as they passed, their faces distorted with passion, their lips trembling with hate.

Some of the women spat. The men and the children threw dirt and mud at the helpless captives. The escort of soldiers, as usual, behaved with Prussian thoroughness. They, in some instances, used the butt ends of their rifles upon the people.

As the streets narrowed the procession was brought to a halt, and the advance guards had to force a way through.

As long as they remained within the town the nightmare continued.

But at last the open country lay before them, the streets were left behind, the crowd vanished, and they swung along in the open under a hot summer sky towards the camp.

The camp? Where was it? What would it be like? Would it afford a chance of escape, as George fondly hoped it might?

They passed within sight of the frowning walls of the prison, which stood on high ground. There frowned the hated place, built of heavy blocks of stone. As he took in its ugly lines, and noticed the slits of windows, and the depth of the drop from wall to ground below on this side of it, George felt glad that they were free beneath the sky.

Let the Huns occupy the beastly place as a barracks. They were welcome to it.

Wormwood Scrubbs was a fool to such a place as this. George left it without regret.

And now they saw the camp. One of the guards pointed it out to him with a grim chuckle of Hunnish satisfaction.

"Great Scott!" George exclaimed, in spite of himself.

Could this really be the place? Surely it was impossible.

He saw in front of them a field measuring some thirty acres or thereabouts, which was surrounded by wire defences of entanglements seven feet high. There were three rows of wire, supported by wooden uprights. The wire was strong and barbed, and each row was connected by feeders with the others.

At intervals around the wire defence sentry-boxes were posted.

There were any number of these, and they were already occupied, the guards striding up and down between each with arms sloping and bayonets fixed.

Within the field there stood a few forlorn trees. For the rest, there was no shelter or accommodation of any kind, only the bare and uneven grass, which ran into hollows here and there.

The whole was overlooked by the prison of Oberhemmel.

Around the camp stretched an open country, intersected by narrow but well-kept roads. The landscape was bare, the trees few, and the country, so far as they could judge from a superficial view of it, was poor in the extreme. In the distance they could see some brick workshops or factories being erected, the chimneys of which were rising as if by magic.

"Is—that—where we've got to stay, George?" asked Jack, big-eyed.

"I'm afraid so, Jack my boy."

"But—George—there are no huts, no sheds, not even a barn. Where do they expect us to sleep. They won't surely march us back to the prison every night?"

"No, Jack. We shall have to sleep out here in the open, I expect.

Jack Gray uttered a cry of alarm.

"But—it's impossible," he exclaimed. "It won't be so bad now, but what about when the weather breaks." He searched the sky with eager eyes, but could find no trace of a cloud. Overhead blazed the sun. The earth was parched and dry. Everything exuded or reflected heat.

"We must pray that it will remain fine, my boy," said Ablott, from behind. "If it'll only do that for a bit, we could do worse than sleep out here, I give you my word; and no doubt in a day or so, if not sooner, they'll begin to run up shelters for us."

"If they don't," growled a voice, "some of us will be wanting to know the reason why."

It was Wilson who spoke. Wilson did not care a rap for Prussian bullying and brow-beating. "You can but die once," was his axiom. "and life ain't so full of honey now that I care to cling on to it at the sacrifice of my self-respect."

And so he defied his guards, jeered at the German Emperor, and refused to kowtow to any Prussian in uniform. He was a man of very determined character, and was consequently feared, and for the most part left alone.

Through a break in the wire the prisoners were marched, and when the last of them had gone through the soldiers set to work to fence in the open space. Hammer and mallet and spade were set to work. Long coils of barbed wire were unrolled from immense wooden drums or wheels, and the work was completed like magic.

The prisoners were then informed that the current had been turned on, and that the wires were alive.

None of them was fool enough to make a test to see.

They were now at liberty to roam where they pleased, and, breaking up into little groups, they strolled about the camp, quickly exhausting all its possibilities. That done they threw themselves down in the hot sun and basked in it, drawing in deep breaths of the life-giving fresh air. Tobacco and cigarettes were shared by those who had

(Continued overleaf.)

been lucky enough to have purchased some, and the hours that immediately followed were the pleasantest that any of them had spent since their captivity.

The least responsible among them began to bless the new governor, Von der Klutz, for sending them there.

To these such men as Wilson and Abloit listened with a smile.

"It's all very well for them to talk like that," growled Wilson, "but wait till to-morrow. It may turn cool, or it may keep warm. If it's warm we shall have a decent time enough, but if it turns cold we shall need protection against the heavy dew that's sure to fall, and we've got none. And—if it rains, God help us!"

George studied the heavens.

"It won't rain," he declared. "At least, not for some hours. The weather conditions are set fair. Let's hope it'll last a week or two. They'll have the huts up by then."

Wilson shook his head.

"What? You don't think so?"

"I don't, boy."

"Why?"

"Do you think a Prussian is going to bother his head about housing a lot of prisoners when the problem he's got to solve at this moment is to house the troops who are being called up by the hundreds of thousands right through the German Empire? Not likely, boy. Why, we'd let our prisoners go to the wall in England if it came to a pinch like that, and we're tender-hearted compared with a German. Take it from me, my lads, whatever we've got ahead of us, we'll have to see it through."

As if in confirmation of his words, all through the day they saw troops marching by different roads, to and from Oberhemmel, troops being taken from one place to another by motor-lorry and motor-car, troops halting by the way. The field-grey uniform was everywhere.

And already they had proof, if any were needed, that the Huns did not intend to worry about the British interned prisoners of war.

Hour after hour passed, and there was no sign of any food being brought them.

The pangs of hunger assailed them. They were devoured by a parching thirst.

They began to roam up and down until they were jaded and tired in body and mind. They tried to get water from the tap which had been set in a corner of the camp. The tap was there all right, but the water had not been laid on yet.

To add to their agony of spirit, some soldiers who passed by bearing buckets of water offered them to drink, and then went their way jeering with laughter at the helpless prisoners.

"The beasts—the brutes," growled Wilson. "If I could lay my fingers on their throats, I'd strangle them."

It was not till sundown that they were relieved. Then some soldiers came along the road, dragging hand-carts behind them.

A sergeant was in command of each party. The carts contained a kind of coarse black bread.

This bread, none of the freshest, was flung to them over the wires.

Unappetising as it was they were grateful for it, and caught, and divided, and ate it.

After that they felt better. But they wanted water, or some other drink, and they clamoured for it.

For a while they believed it would be denied them, but at last some was brought in buckets, and a way being opened through the wires they were permitted to fetch it.

How they revelled in the cold, clear, drinking water! How their spirits rose after they had sampled it!

George and Jack and some of the others even went so far as to thank the soldiers who'd brought it.

One of them replied:

"It's not our fault. We have to obey orders. Some of us would make things better for you if we could. I have lived in England. And—here—here's something for you."

So saying he tossed a football—of all things in the world—over the wires, which George caught and held.

(To be continued.)

NEXT WEEK'S STORY will be Entitled:

"THE SECRET MISSION."

It deals with Another Exciting Episode of NELSON LEE and NIPPER AT ST. FRANK'S COLLEGE. If you like it, do not fail to pass your Copy on to some friend, either at Home or at the Front. He will enjoy it as much as you.

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