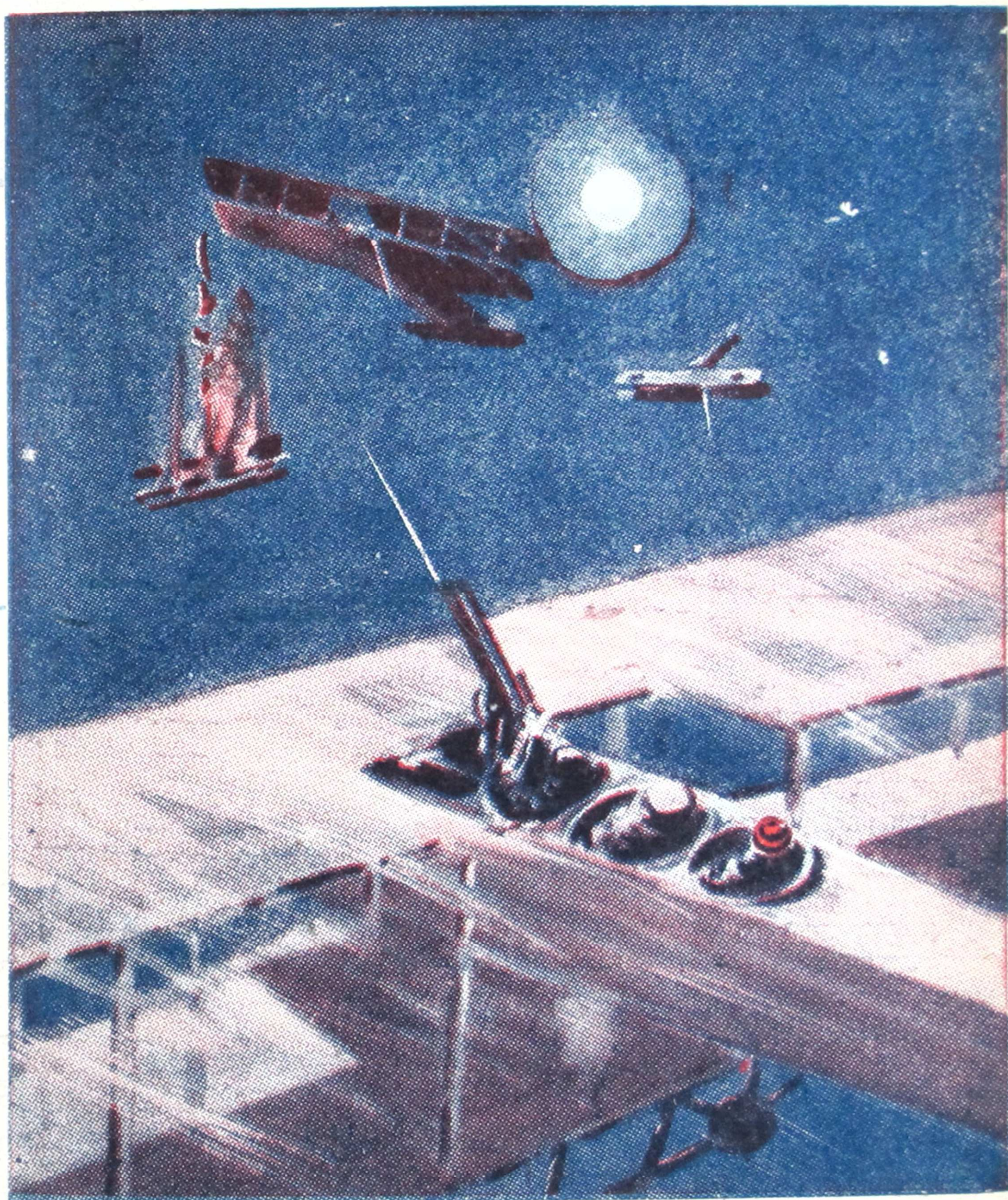


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'TWIXT SUNSET AND MIDNIGHT;

OR, THE CIRCLE'S VENGEANCE!

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.

March 23, 1918.

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Or, A TRAITOR TO THE FATHERLAND!"

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

AUTHOR'S NOTE.

Nelson Lee and Nipper are at St. Frank's College, as master and pupil, to escape the attentions of the murderous Chinese Secret Society, the Fu Chang Tong, whose hatred they have incurred.

EDITOR'S NOTE.

See page 23 for a matter of interest to Readers.

CHAPTER I.

THE RETURN OF THE ADVENTURERS—SIR MONTIE IS RATHER ANXIOUS.

ST. FRANK'S was utterly still and quiet. Not a sign of human life was visible in any direction. The two great houses—the Ancient House and the College House—were devoid of animation. Every window was closed, and not even a wisp of smoke ascended from any chimney.

The Triangle, usually noisy with juniors, lay silent, except for the soft whistle of the faint breeze as it rustled through the branches of the chestnuts and elms. The fountain was inactive, and only a ripple disturbed the water in the wide, circular pool.

The great school was like a place of the dead.

And what could be the meaning of this strange state of affairs?

The explanation, as it happened, was absurdly simple and commonplace. For the exact time, faintly discernible on the school clock, was 2.30 a.m. The famous school, to be exact, was fast asleep—at least, all its inmates were.

Yet that statement is scarcely true. For Dr. Malcolm Stafford, the headmaster, still remained in his study. He was very wakeful indeed, and his ears were on the stretch.

He rose to his feet quickly as he heard the faint but mistakable sound of an automobile engine. Bearing in mind the chill breeze, the Head donned a cap and a silk scarf; then he ventured out.

A big motor-car was standing outside the gates, and as the Head moved across the Triangle several figures appeared at the

small masters' gate and entered. They came bustling towards him.

"Dear me!" exclaimed the Head, with great relief. "Is that you, Mr. Alvington? I have been worrying—"

"Mr. Alvin'ton ain't with us, sir," said Sir Lancelot Montgomery Tregellis-West, of the Remove. "He an' Bennett have stayed behind, you know. They'll be comin' along in the mornin'. Begad, we've had a rippin' time, sir!"

"Good gracious!" ejaculated the Head.

He observed that there were two other boys and a man. The boys were Tommy Watson and Sessue Yakama, of the Remove; but the man was a stranger.

"It's frightfully late, sir, ain't it?" asked Sir Montie.

"My dear lad, we are already in the small hours of the morning," said Dr. Stafford. "But I am puzzled. Who is this gentleman?"

The gentleman answered for himself.

"My name is Smith, sir," he explained. "Detective-Sergeant Smith, of Scotland Yard. I was told off to bring these boys home -- and here they are. The other youngster and Mr. Alvington will return later."

"I sincerely trust no harm has befallen them?" said the Head anxiously.

"Bless your life, sir, we've had simply the time of our lives," said Detective-Sergeant Smith. "One of the finest coups I've ever had the luck to be connected with. Mr. Alvington's one of the masters here, isn't he? Well, he's simply the goods!"

"Quite so—quite so!" said the Head. "Mr. Alvington is certainly the er goods. In other words, he is a very clever gentleman."

But will you please come indoors for a few minutes? We cannot very well talk out here, and I am still greatly puzzled as to the meaning of this mystery."

Dr. Stafford led the way to his study, and he noted, with approval, that the three boys were all looking quite contented. Evidently nothing of a serious character had taken place.

The fact of the matter was, Mr. Alvington and Dick Bennett—or, to be more exact, Nelson Lee and Nipper—had set out in the early part of the evening upon a scouting expedition in connection with a very grim tussle with the Circle of Terror. The facts of that case have already been dealt with by Nipper himself; but it would be just as well, perhaps, to outline a few brief details of the affair.

The Circle of Terror's latest scheme was a most ambitious one. It had originated in one of the usual demands, such as the Circle always used in their various enterprises. This insolent communication had been received by Major-General Stanley Leighton, D.S.O.

It was a curt order for the general to meet an agent of the Circle—this meeting being for the sole purpose of discussing a secret mission which General Leighton was to undertake. Naturally the demand had been ignored, and the Circle had made determined efforts to kidnap the general's son, Stanley, from the River House School—which was situated within a mile of St. Frank's.

In this way, Nelson Lee had got wind of the affair, and had at once dealt with it. After various adventures Stanley had been rescued from his captors, and was now in the safe keeping of Miss Eileen Dare.

But the Circle was by no means frustrated. Only the previous evening Nelson Lee had learned definitely that General Leighton himself had been made a prisoner; and, furthermore, that he had been taken to a private lunatic asylum known as the Rapley Convalescent Home.

Lee and Nipper, accompanied by Tregellis-West and Watson and Yakama, had set out upon a scouting expedition, intending to arrive home at St. Frank's in time for supper.

But they had met with far greater success than they had anticipated. Owing to a fortunate train of circumstances, Nipper had been enabled to gain a clear insight into the exact plot.

He discovered that Major-General Stanley Leighton had been forced to agree to the Circle's wishes. These were quite simple in their way. Leighton was merely required to meet his brother at Boulogne, and to obtain from him certain vital despatches. The general's brother, Sir Maxwell Leighton, was a King's Messenger, and the Circle of Terror, having got hold of the despatches, would demand an enormous sum from the Prime Minister for their return. That, in a nutshell, was the exact position.

Nelson Lee had acted very promptly.

He had 'phoned up to Scotland Yard, and by eleven-thirty a number of official detectives were on the spot. Professor Cyrus Zingrave himself, the High Lord, fell into Nelson Lee's trap completely, and he had

been captured. This, in itself, was a great triumph.

In addition the home had been raided, and two other high Circle members had shared Zingrave's fate.

But it was then discovered that Major Leighton had already started out upon his mission! By the time Nelson Lee became aware of this fact the general was already en route for Boulogne, and he would meet his brother upon French soil the very instant the boat arrived!

Nelson Lee therefore knew that further action was at once necessary. Having been so far successful, the great detective had every intention of making the affair a complete triumph. It was highly necessary to stop General Leighton before he met his brother.

Detective-Sergeant Smith, as he had explained to Dr. Stafford, had been instructed to bring the three boys back to St. Frank's. Nelson Lee and Nipper had remained behind, to conclude their work. And now the sergeant lost no time in giving a few details to the Head. He described how the High Lord had been captured, and how the Rapley Home had been successfully raided.

"Why, sir, we've been after this High Lord for months and months," declared Smith. "It's about the best night's work we've done for many a day—if that doesn't sound too contradictory!"

"I quite understand you, Smith," nodded the Head. "Dear me! There has been quite a lot of excitement. And when will Mr. Alvington return? What is he doing now?"

"I can't say exactly, sir," replied the Scotland Yard detective. "After what's happened, though, I've got heaps of confidence in him. Mr. Lennard—the inspector in charge of the whole case—has tremendous faith in Mr. Alvington."

The Head smiled slightly.

"No doubt, Smith—no doubt," he exclaimed.

Detective-Inspector Lennard, of course, was fully aware of "Mr. Alvington's" real identity, and it wasn't surprising, therefore, that he should have complete faith in him.

"I suppose I must be getting along," said Smith, after a short pause. "It's late enough, in all conscience, and these young gentlemen ought to have been in bed long ago. Still, by what I understand, they did their bit splendidly. The Yard isn't ashamed of giving credit where it is due."

A few minutes later Detective-Sergeant Smith took his departure, and the Head regarded the three Removites with a somewhat severe expression.

"I trust that Mr. Alvington and Bennett will turn up safely in the morning," he remarked. "These affairs are all very well, boys, but they are most worrying."

"Why, there's nothing to worry about, sir," said Tommy Watson. "We've had a splendid time; and just think of the good that's been done! We were collared by the Circle rotters, locked up in a barred room, and I don't know what else! Yakama had a terrific fight with a dog, sir——"

"Good gracious me!" gasped the Head. "I am extremely glad that you have returned safely. But no doubt you are exaggerating, Watson. Yakama doesn't appear to be much hurt."

The Japanese boy smiled blandly.

"It is not I who suffered the agony, esteemed sir," he murmured. "The dog, were it favoured with the quality of speech, would possibly relate a different narrative. I am of the fear that the poor animal was severely bruised."

"Just slightly, anyhow!" grinned Watson.

It appeared, from what the boys had to say, that Yakama had been attacked by a savage dog in the grounds of the Rapley Home. Owing to the Japanese boy's amazing agility, it was the dog who had suffered in the fight which had ensued.

"Well, I can only say that the whole affair is disgraceful!" declared the Head, adjusting his glasses.

"Begad! Disgraceful, sir?" protested Sir Montie.

"My dear lads, just glance at the clock!" said Dr. Stafford. "Are you not shocked?"

The three boys looked at the clock and merely grinned.

"Ten minutes to three," remarked Tommy Watson lightly. "Well, sir, we've had a good time, so we mustn't grumble. And it wasn't our fault that we're late, sir. Mr. Alvington told us that we shouldn't get into any trouble."

The Head smiled.

"So you are quite contented—eh?" he said, rising to his feet. "Well, boys, you must get to bed at once, without a moment's delay. Punishment would be unjust, under all the circumstances. For this reason you will be excused when the rising bell——"

"Do you mean we can lie in bed, sir?" asked Watson.

"Yes; you won't be called until midday."

The three juniors looked rather dismayed.

"Begad! We don't want to be pampered like that, sir," declared Tregellis-West. "We'll get up as usual, with the risin' bell. We should be chipped frightfully by the other fellows if we stayed in bed until dinner-time. An' what about mornin' lessons, sir?"

"You will miss them, of course."

"But we don't want to, sir," exclaimed Watson quickly.

"The desire on our part to miss the ridiculous morning lessons is completely absent, honoured sir," murmured Sessue Yakama, with concern. "We have the earnest wish to rise as the usual, and to participate in the esteemed breakfast!"

The Head frowned.

"I was thinking of your health, boys," he said. "This loss of sleep will do you no good——"

"Oh, I say!" said Sir Montie. "It won't hurt us for once. Besides, we had a rippin' nap in the car. We were asleep nearly all the way home, and we shall get another five hours at least. We'd much prefer to do everything as usual—we would, really. The

fellows would talk tremendously if we stayed in bed, begad!"

"No doubt you are right, Tregellis-West," replied the Head. "We certainly do not wish to cause more comment amongst the juniors than is necessary. The boys will be curious enough as it is."

"That's what we were thinkin', sir."

"Well, since you are so determined, I will allow matters to take their usual course," said Dr. Stafford. "I fancy, however, that you will not be quite so ready to leave your beds when the rising bell rings," he added drily. "Your views will undergo a change by the morning, no doubt."

The three juniors grinned sleepily, and lost no time in getting up to bed. The Remove dormitory was quite silent, except for the regular breathing of the boys. Nobody was awake, and the three late-comers undressed without exchanging any words.

Then they tumbled into their respective beds, and wondered what their reception would be like in the morning: it was quite certain that the other fellows would question them unmercifully.

Tommy Watson and Yakama dropped off within the first five minutes, but Sir Montie lay in a semi-dozing condition for some little time. To tell the truth, he was concerned about Nipper and "Old Alvy."

Where were they? What were they doing now? When Sir Montie finally dropped off into the land of dreams, he did so still wondering dimly as to the fate of the absent pair.

Nelson Lee and Nipper, as it happened, were having a very exciting time indeed!

CHAPTER II.

NELSON LEE'S DECISION—THE FIGHT OVER THE CHANNEL—A SURPRISE.

NIPPER was excited.

As a rule Nelson Lee's young assistant remained perfectly calm; but just at present certain events were causing him to fairly dance with animated expectancy. Although the night had provided many excitements already, the best part of it all—in Nipper's opinion—was yet to come.

He and his master were standing in the doorway of a large aeroplane hangar, watching the numerous preparations of two or three air mechanics, who were overhauling a huge twin-engined battleplane.

A young man, well wrapped up in complete flying kit, lounged round from the rear and stood eyeing the little scene nonchalantly. He lit a cigarette, and passed his case to Nelson Lee.

"We'll get you over long before the boat arrives, Mr. Alvington," he said easily. "I don't pretend to know what it's all about, and I'm hanged if I care. My job is to take the 'bus across in record time, and I'll do it!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I'll tell you the whole yarn when we

have more leisure, Lieutenant Brenner," he exclaimed. "I assure you this matter is not a fool's errand. A great deal depends upon the success or failure of our venture."

Flight-Lieutenant Brenner, R.F.C., chuckled.

"I don't think we shall fail," he said confidently. "Couldn't have finer weather, and there's a bit of a moon coming up. In fact I shouldn't be altogether surprised if we ran into a few Boches. A good few of our chaps are all prepared for the alarm, anyhow."

"Great Scott!" murmured Nipper, tugging at his master's arm. "Do you think we shall run into some Gothas, sir?"

"I hope not, young 'un."

Nipper stared.

"You hope not?" he repeated. "Why, I'd give anything to have a scrap——"

"Perhaps I am not such a fire-eater as you are, my boy," interjected Nelson Lee. "My main reason, however, is of a different nature. An air fight would necessarily mean delay, and delay just now is altogether undesirable. It is my earnest hope to alight upon French soil before the cross-Channel boat discharges her passengers—and she is already half-way across."

"Yes, of course, there's that about it," admitted Nipper.

Lieutenant Brenner turned to the pair.

"You'd better be tumbling into some of those warm things," he suggested. "We shall be starting in a minute or two."

Nelson Lee and Nipper lost no time in donning suitable outer attire, which was kindly placed at their disposal. The party would consist of four—Lee and Nipper themselves, Lieutenant Brenner, the pilot, and Lieutenant Somerton, the observer-gunner. It was not by any means certain that enemy aircraft would be sighted, but it was just as well to be prepared.

Nelson Lee, of course, was "Mr. Alvington" to these cheerful youngsters of the Royal Flying Corps. Possibly they would have been more delighted had they known the true identity of their distinguished passengers.

As "Mr. Alvington," Lee had very little influence, and, alone, he would have been unable to requisition the use of this aeroplane. In his own character the task would have been simplicity itself, but at present Nelson Lee's own identity was hidden.

It was owing to the good offices of Detective-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard, that the favour had been granted.

Nelson Lee, having captured the High Lord of the Circle of Terror, was now naturally anxious to complete his work thoroughly. Major-General Leighton was on his way to France, with the object of obtaining by trickery certain important despatches which were being carried by his brother, Sir Maxwell Leighton, a King's Messenger.

The position had been rather difficult. Lee had found it necessary to formulate a plan of action without a second's delay. A cable of warning was quite impossible, owing to the secret nature of the whole matter. A tele-

gram in code was equally out of the question.

The only positive way was to arrive at Boulogne before the cross-Channel boat discharged her passengers. And it was this course which Nelson Lee decided to adopt. An aeroplane formed the only means of gaining his end—and aeroplanes were somewhat difficult to obtain.

Detective-Inspector Lennard, acting upon Nelson Lee's advice, had not lost a second in making full arrangements. The telephones had been busy for some little time, but in the end the Scotland Yard official succeeded in gaining permission from the commanding officer of a large aerodrome to place a powerful aeroplane at the disposal of the police authorities. "Mr. Alvington" and "Bennett" were the special representatives of the official force.

Naturally the worthy commander was somewhat astonished at this seeming incongruity. A mere civilian and a schoolboy! Lennard, however, assured the commander that the matter was perfectly in order—and no hitch occurred.

The detective-inspector himself, nearly bubbling over with satisfaction, was now en route for London with the most important capture he had ever made. Professor Cyrus Zingrave, the High Lord of the Circle of Terror, was under arrest at last! Lennard made no attempt whatever to conceal his great satisfaction.

Thus, while the High Lord was speeding to London in the care of the Scotland Yard detectives, Nelson Lee and Nipper were on the point of commencing the trip to France. The whole case would be completely over by the morning, it seemed.

The twin-engined battleplane was not leaving its aerodrome especially for Nelson Lee. The machine was to have made a prolonged night flight, in any case. And it made very little difference to the pilot and observer whether a couple of passengers were taken or not. And there was certainly something sporting in the knowledge that they were out to race the Channel steamer.

The two young lieutenants, indeed, welcomed the change, and were quite enthusiastic. Their night-scouting expedition was to be enlivened. And Brenner's prophecy that a few Huns might be encountered was to prove accurate!

The machine was soon ready for departure, and Lee and Nipper climbed into their seats. They were placed immediately behind the pilot. The observer occupied the foremost position of all, being perched right upon the nose of the body—with a deadly-looking machine-gun in front of him. There was no propeller and no engine in the dead centre of the aeroplane—for she was fitted with two engines, one on either side.

The machine was not one of the very latest design. So far as Lee could understand, she was an odd 'bus—one which had been produced with the object of standardising the pattern. But the experts, owing to some

little technical defect, had vetoed the design completely.

For all that, the machine was a splendid one in every way. Her pilot considered the pattern to be perfect, and his remarks concerning the experts were not altogether complimentary. Nelson Lee was somewhat inclined to agree with him—having had some experience of Government "experts" himself. Nipper in fact even went so far as to declare that the very fact that the machine had been turned down proved it to be a regular stunner!

At all events the "Strafe Merchant"—as she had been elegantly christened by her crew—was a thoroughly efficient fighting machine, capable of high speed and as reliable as clockwork.

She was wheeled out into the open. The moon was already up, and was casting a pale, yellowish glow over the wide expanse of the aerodrome. The pilot was already in his seat, and the observer sat behind his gun with an air of careless indifference which didn't quite please the critical Nipper. He was a very young officer indeed, and didn't seem capable of any particular cleverness in the "strafing" line. He treated the whole affair as though it were merely a joy ride.

The word was given, and the engines roared thunderously. A moment or two later the big biplane skimmed across the grass for a short distance, and then took the air superbly.

At seventy feet the pilot turned the machine, banking heavily, and then commenced a long spiral ascent into the blue of the heavens. Brenner did not attempt the actual start until six thousand feet was registered.

Then, still climbing steadily, the Strafe Merchant sped away across country. Nelson Lee and Nipper were keenly satisfied with the behaviour of their "aerial taxi." She was speeding along at something like ninety-eight miles an hour, despite a very faint headwind.

Nelson Lee would have preferred to pilot the machine himself—as he was fully capable of doing. The trip would have been far more enjoyable under those conditions. But he had no wish to presume upon the good nature of his young friends. And it was only a personal matter, after all. Lieutenant Brenner was a very able pilot. Both he and Somerton, in fact, had participated in a good many aerial battles.

The sea was soon sighted, and Nipper judged that they were crossing the coast somewhere between Folkestone and Dungeness. The night was clear, and the whole coastline was surprisingly visible in the moonlight. Away inland the country had the appearance of a flat, patchwork quilt.

Soon after crossing Nipper saw the observer point away to the left, and the pilot at once looked in that direction. And Nipper caught his breath in quickly, for there, within a half-mile of them, and flying at about the same height, was another aeroplane.

She was travelling in the same direction, and

although her outline was only dimly visible, those on board the Strafe Merchant could see that she was British. Nipper glanced at his master inquiringly.

"Scouting, I suppose," shouted Lee into the lad's ear. "There's probably an air-raid anticipated—the Huns couldn't have a finer night, at all events. See, he is veering off to the northward now."

Nipper watched with interest. The other aeroplane had nearly disappeared already. But a few minutes later something happened which caused Nipper to give a little jump.

He heard nothing unusual, owing to the monotonous roar of the engines; but, clearly and distinctly in the darkness, a succession of tiny sparks became visible. These were almost instantly followed by another bunch a short distance away.

"Machine-gun fire!" roared Nipper excitedly.

The flashes could be nothing else, and Nipper bent forward with great eagerness. Even as he did so a tongue of flame leapt up into the sky. It hovered for a second, licked upwards, and then a glowing mass dropped down towards the sea, leaving a ruddy trail of sparks in its rear.

"That was a Hun!" roared the pilot enthusiastically. "By Jove! We're in this. Somerton! Get that pop-gun of yours ready!"

The observer merely heard a faint sound from behind him, but he knew well enough what Brenner was driving at. At the same time the Strafe Merchant swerved round in a giddy half-circle and roared onwards on a different course.

Nelson Lee was frowning somewhat, but Nipper was quite content. The pilot, in fact, was filled with the fighting spirit. Careless of his original mission, he was bent upon giving battle to the baby-killers.

This would mean delay, but Nelson Lee merely shrugged his shoulders, and dismissed everything from his mind except the matter in hand. Truth to tell, his pulse was beating rapidly, and he was as eager as Nipper himself.

"It's going to be a fight, guv'nor!" roared Nipper.

"So it seems," replied Lee calmly. "Sit tight, young 'un!"

"One of the beasts went down in flames a minute ago," went on Nipper animatedly. "Let's hope we send another—By Jupiter!"

As he was speaking, he saw a dim shape rushing towards the Strafe Merchant from the gloom. Hazily visible, other shapes hovered on either side. Nipper knew what they were!

"Huns!" he roared. "Oh, my hat! Give 'em beans!"

Nipper would have given worlds to have had a gun in front of him just then. He hated being a spectator at any time, and just now he wanted to join in the fray properly.

But, as this was denied him, he had to content himself with sitting tight and look-

ing on. He could see Somerton clutching his gun, two or three drums of ammunition being handy.

And then the fight commenced!

The Gotha swerved round at about two hundred yards range, and opened fire. Nipper could see the vicious spurts from the machine-gun, but the bullets all went wide, and the next moment the two machines had flashed past one another.

Round went the Strafe Merchant, Brenner's Aand as steady as a rock. He was climbing constantly, for he wished to gain the advantage of superior altitude. The two combatants manœuvred cleverly, and there was no doubt that the Gotha's pilot was skilful.

Swish!

The two aeroplanes rushed past one another, with less than fifteen feet dividing them. Somerton opened fire on the instant, and discharged a whole drum into the body of the enemy. At the same moment the Gotha's forward machine-gun spat with fire, and the British 'plane shook and shivered.

A number of bullets had pattered against the body, but apparently no real harm was done. The fighters had shot past again; but now they turned and rushed at one another with a deadliness of intention which caused Nipper to catch his breath in huskily. Somehow, he couldn't help respecting the Hun who was piloting the enemy machine—at least he was a plucky fighter.

This time the combatants passed one another even closer, and again Somerton plastered the enemy with bullets. The Gotha seemed to stagger, sway dizzily, and swerve round almost out of control.

The tail of the machine nearly caught the outside edge of the Strafe Merchant's planes. The forward gunner of the Gotha, at least, had perished, for there had been no reply.

Owing to the abrupt swerve the Gotha had lost height, and was now speeding away twenty or thirty feet below the British machine. Lieutenant Brenner swung his craft round, and roared away in chase of the fugitive—for the Hun had evidently had enough and was attempting to escape.

The chase was short and swift.

Brenner suddenly altered his levers, and sent the Strafe Merchant shooting down giddily. Somerton got the range at once, and literally riddled the Gotha with a continuous succession of hissing bullets.

A crash seemed inevitable, but Brenner elevated in the nick of time, and the big machine roared upwards triumphantly, swinging round at once, in case the enemy still contained "sting."

But the raider was falling to the sea completely out of control. Leaning out, Nipper could see the German machine fluttering down, its engines silent, like a crippled butterfly.

And the Strafe Merchant, unsatisfied, hunted round in search of further prey. But the other Gothas had completely disappeared into the gloom. So far as Nelson Lee and Nipper were concerned, the fight was over.

"Wasn't it glorious, sir?" shouted Nipper breathlessly.

"A splendid fight, young 'un!" replied Lee. "But I am afraid we have not escaped altogether scathless."

And a moment later Nipper knew that his master was right.

The big biplane was not roaring along so smoothly as before. One of the engines apparently had been hit, and, although not crippled, it was running spasmodically. Brenner did his best, but he could not alter affairs.

He turned round, his face suffused with a delighted grin, and waved his hand. Somerton had also turned; and Nipper saw that he was carelessly wiping a stream of blood from his cheek. Nipper's opinion of Lieutenant Somerton was totally changed now. The observer was a fighter of the first quality.

Having exchanged congratulations, as it were—by facial contortion—the party settled themselves down in their seats once more. And the Strafe Merchant, its nickname thoroughly upheld, roared onwards towards the French coast.

The speed was not so great now, and the fight had taken the machine a considerable distance out of its course. So there was a considerable amount of leeway to make up. All things combined, it was pretty hopeless for the battleplane to attempt to arrive on French soil in advance of the cross-Channel steamer.

However, hopeless as it seemed, Brenner had a good try. He coaxed his engines kindly, and got every ounce of speed out of them possible. But when at last the travelers landed, they found that the boat had been in for thirty-five minutes.

Nelson Lee and Nipper, having bade their friends good-bye (Somerton, it proved, was only scratched), made all speed to reach the quay where the Channel steamer was moored. They arrived after some little difficulty, and discovered that Major-General Leighton was already with his brother, Sir Maxwell.

Possibly the harm had been done!

With a grim face Nelson Lee hurried to the picturesque hotel near the docks where the King's Messenger was awaiting the hour when he could go aboard the homeward-bound steamer.

Yes, the distinguished Englishman had a visitor, declared the effusive proprietor of the establishment. Without hesitation Lee sent his card up to the general. Leighton, of course, knew "Mr. Alvington's" identity, and he would undoubtedly receive the visitor.

Three minutes later Nelson Lee and Nipper were escorted to a private room. And here they met the two brothers. Both were looking serious; but the fact that they were together proved that everything was all right—so far.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed General Leighton, taking Lee's hand. "I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw your card, Lee. What on earth does this mean? Have—have you brought news of my son?" he added eagerly.

"Yes," was Lee's quiet reply.

"He—he is safe?"

"Perfectly safe, general."

"Thank Heaven!" muttered the other huskily. "Maxwell, the position isn't nearly so serious as I supposed. This gentleman is Mr. Nelson Lee, whom I was talking about a few minutes ago. And Nipper——"

The introduction was soon over. Sir Maxwell was a straight, kindly-looking gentleman; but his eyes had a look about them which suggested a grimness of purpose. He was frankly puzzled by Nelson Lee's unexpected appearance.

"To tell you the truth, Stanley, I am quite unable to make head or tail of the business," he declared, smiling. "It is splendid to hear that your son is safe, for now you are in a position to snap your fingers at these Circle of Terror scoundrels——"

"Great Scott!" gasped Nipper, staring at the general. "Have—have you told him, sir?"

"Told him what, my boy?"

"Why, that you had certain instructions from the Circle——"

"Sir Maxwell is acquainted with the whole series of facts," said the general quietly. "But, really, I cannot quite understand how you know all this."

"Why, sir, as soon as the gov'nor heard that you'd been taken prisoner by the Circle he was up and doing in a minute," explained Nipper eagerly. "He guessed that you had been taken to that Home, and we went there last night to do some scouting."

"By George!" exclaimed the general. "By George!"

"Nipper was not satisfied with scouting, however," smiled Nelson Lee, thoroughly relieved. "We must attempt to sort things out, general. Nipper managed to overhear that scoundrel Grant giving you your orders, and threatening to kill your boy unless you agreed. You were duped, my dear sir. Stanley was in safe keeping all the time. I gave you my word that he should be kept safe, and I have not failed. You were made to believe——"

"Lee, I'm downright ashamed of myself!" exclaimed General Leighton huskily. "I have been saying many hard things about you to myself. And to think—— Those dastardly rogues! But how was I to know? I naturally assumed that they had kidnapped Stanley."

"Under the circumstances, you could scarcely think anything else," agreed Nelson Lee. "You see, general, the Circle attempted to make you do their bidding by means of a murderous threat; and I understand from Nipper that you agreed to undertake the Circle's scoundrelly mission——"

The general smiled grimly.

"I passed my word that I would journey to France—that I would see my brother," he replied. "I have done so, Mr. Lee—and within the first five minutes of our meeting I had given him a very clear warning of his peril. Good gracious! Did you suppose that I meant to betray my country?"

Nelson Lee looked very serious.

"But your son?" he asked. "You must

have warned your brother, thinking all the time that your boy would be murdered?"

"The position was intolerable," was the general's quiet reply. "I was nearly mad with anxiety, Mr. Lee. But even at such a price I could not deliberately debase myself by doing the Circle of Terror's bidding."

"I owe you an apology, general," said Lee frankly. "I had half feared that you were bent upon tricking Sir Maxwell, in accordance with your instructions. I concluded that your agony of mind was so terrible that you were almost driven to desperation. It gives me infinite pleasure to assure you that Stanley is in safe hands. In addition, I have further news for you."

And then Nelson Lee told the two brothers all about the capture of the High Lord and the raid upon the Rapley Convalescent Home. In fact the truth of the whole business was made clear.

The joy of General Leighton was unbounded, for his troubles were at an end. Sir Maxwell Leighton was equally delighted, and when the party sat down to a meal before starting out for the boat they were laughing and cheerful.

Nelson Lee and Nipper assumed that the Circle of Terror's reign was at an end. With Professor Zingrave a prisoner, the whole organisation would undoubtedly collapse. But further excitement was brewing even then.

The Circle of Terror was planning vengeance!

CHAPTER III.

SIR MONTIE'S WHEEZE—AMAZING NEWS THE STRANGERS ON THE QUAY.

"**B**EGAD, it's shockin'ly exhaustin' Tommy boy—it is, really!" Sir Montie Tregellis-West spoke rather plaintively. He and Tommy Watson were lounging under the chestnuts in the Triangle. Morning lessons were over, and the sun was shining brilliantly.

Just for the moment Sir Montie and Tommy were enjoying a respite; but it was the first which had been granted them. Throughout the morning, since the moment of rising, they had been answering questions.

And, as Tregellis-West remarked, it was somewhat exhausting.

Handforth and Co. had been particularly persistent. Then, of course, such fellows as Burton, and De Valérie, and Owen major, and Farman, had insisted upon a full story being told.

The Fossils—as the Ancient House juniors were called—were keenly interested, as a matter of fact. They wanted to hear all about the excitement, and declared, in no uncertain terms, that Study C got all the luck.

Bob Christine and Co., the leading lights of the College House Remove, were no less interested. So, upon the whole, Sir Montie and Tommy felt that they had earned this little breathing-space.

"We can't tell the chaps any more—it ain't reasonable," remarked Tommy Watson.

"And we shall have to be careful, Montie; it wouldn't do to say too much, you know. It's rather a good thing the affair isn't completely over."

"Dear fellow, why?"

"Well, because we ain't obliged to answer all their questions—we can tell the chaps to wait until Benny comes back," said Watson with a grin. "He'll have to do all the giddy jawing then."

"Begad, that's rather a good idea!" remarked Tregellis-West, eyeing Watson thoughtfully through his pince-nez. "We'll refer all the chaps to Benny after this. But I'm worryin', Tommy."

"About old Benny?"

"Yes. I was expectin' that he an' Mr. Alvin'ton would turn up before this, you know," said Montie. "But perhaps we shall be hearin' somethin' before long. One generally does hear things if one waits long enough."

"One! There's two of us, my son—we're both waiting," grinned Watson.

The pair strolled off as the gong for dinner sounded. It was a half-holiday that day, and Montie was looking very thoughtful as he entered the dining-room. The majority of the fellows were acquainted with the main facts of the case.

It was public knowledge that the High Lord of the Circle of Terror was in the hands of the police; but "Mr. Alvington's" part in the affair had not been mentioned in any of the papers. The St. Frank's fellows, however, had a shrewd idea that "old Alvy" had played quite a big part in the adventure. And the Fossils, as a body, determined to give Nelson Lee a rousing welcome when he returned.

Tommy Watson and Montie received a welcome piece of news directly after dinner. A telegram was delivered, addressed to them jointly. It was from Nipper, and had been dispatched at Boulogne.

"Cheerio, my sons!" it ran. "Everything O.K. Mr. A. and I will arrive Folkestone six o'clock. Expect us to supper.—BENNETT."

Sir Montie's eyes gleamed as he read the message.

"Arrive at Folkestone at six!" he murmured. "Tommy, old boy, this is where we shine—this is where we fairly dazzle!"

"Do we?" asked Watson in surprise. "Well, you practically always shine, Montie!"

"Begad, I didn't mean in that way, dear fellow!" protested the schoolboy baronet. "I was thinkin' of somethin' else. It's a half-holiday to-day."

"Go hon!"

"Dear boy, I ain't jokin'," said Tregellis-West seriously. "It's a half-holiday, an' the day's simply rippin'. I'm goin' straight to the Head, Tommy. There's a most important question to ask."

"What are you driving at, you dotty idiot?"

"Really, Tommy, I ain't a dotty idiot," complained Sir Montie. "I want to ask per-

mission for a whole party of us to meet the returnin' wanderers."

Watson stared.

"You ass!" he roared. "We don't want to get permission for that! Can't we go down to the station—?"

"Dear boy, I was thinkin' of takin' a trip to Folkestone—by car, you know," explained the swell of the Ancient House. "A whole party of us, begad. Jappy, an' the good old Bo'sun, an' Farman, perhaps."

Tommy Watson looked excited.

"My only hat! That's a topping wheeze!" he exclaimed. "Oh, but the Head wouldn't let us go, Montie."

"He might, you know, if we talk to him very sweetly."

"And what about the car?"

"We can get that from Bannin'ton—order it by 'phone."

"Who's going to pay, you ass?"

"I am, old boy," said Sir Montie calmly.

"But it'll cost quids and quids!"

"Dear Tommy, I've got an odd tenner which I've been wonderin' what to do with," explained Tregellis-West. "That tenner's been worryin' me, an' it'll be a relief to spend it in a good cause. Besides, it won't cost a tenner, Tommy, or anythin' like it. It'll be my treat—what?"

Tommy Watson was full of enthusiasm, and then and there the two Removites hastened to the Head's study. As Montie had predicted, a certain amount of gentle persuasion was required in order to gain the Head's permission, but it was given at last.

"Rippin'!" murmured Sir Montie, as he and his chum left. "An' now for the 'phone, old fellow."

Within ten minutes the car was ordered, and would arrive in less than half an hour. After a hasty discussion Sir Montie and Tommy decided that only three juniors could be taken in addition to themselves. Even then it would mean that seven persons would have to do the return trip—not counting the chauffeur—and Sir Montie hadn't ordered a char-a-banc.

"Well, I can name the three best chaps right off," said Tommy. "Yakama, of course, because he's already been in this business. Burton's a special pal of ours, and it wouldn't be a bad idea to take old Handforth. He's a decent stick, really, and it would stop his constant growls about Study C having all the fun."

"That's rather a good idea, old man," agreed Sir Montie. "It would keep Handy quiet for weeks an' weeks. Let's go an' break the news."

As it happened, they found Yakama and Burton chatting with two or three other juniors in the common-room. Needless to say, the subject of conversation was connected with the exploits of "Old Alvy."

"I say, here he is!" exclaimed Teddy Long eagerly. "What was that telegram you had, Tregellis-West? The chaps are dying to know—"

"The chaps ain't doing anything of the sort, you inquisitive little bounder!" growled

Owen major. "We don't want to pry into your affairs, West."

Sir Montie beamed.

"It's all right, dear boys," he said. "The wire was from Bennett, an' was dispatched in France."

"Phew!"

"Gadding about — what?" drawled De Valerie, with a smile.

"I don't know about gaddin'," said Sir Montie. "They went on business, you know. The fact is, Benny an' Mr. Alvin'ton will arrive at Folkestone at six o'clock. I'm goin' to take one or two chaps in a car to meet them."

"My aunt! That's ripping of you, Montie," exclaimed Teddy Long eagerly. "Thanks awfully!"

"Begad! What are you thankin' me for?"

"Why, for inviting me——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you cackling at, you asses?" howled Long. "You're going to take me, Montie, ain't you? You're going to take your best pals, ain't you?"

Tregellis-West nodded serenely.

"Certainly, dear fellow," he agreed.

"There you are!" roared Long triumphantly. "I knew my old pal wouldn't leave me out of it. What time do we start, Montie? You might lend me one of your ties just for the occasion!"

"Begad!"

"And I shouldn't mind if you lent me your topper, De Valerie," went on Long fatuously.

"I should," remarked Cecil De Valerie.

"You would what?"

"Mind!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, all right, keep your rotten topper!" sniffed Long. "I can borrow one from somebody else. I daresay Montie will——"

"Dear boy, you must allow me to point out the fact that you are labourin' under a sad misapprehension," said Sir Montie kindly. "An', really, I cannot allow you to address me by my Christian name. I ain't a snob, but there's a limit, begad! You seem to think that you're comin' with us, but you ain't—you ain't, really!"

Teddy Long nearly exploded.

"But—but—but you said your best pals!" he stuttered.

"You slab-sided swab!" roared Burton impatiently. "Do you think you're one of Tregellis-West's best pals? Shiver my tops! You ain't got the sense of a ship's cat, bust me if you have!"

"Ain't—ain't I goin' then?" asked Long weakly.

"I'm sorry, dear boy, it's impos.," exclaimed Sir Montie. "That is to say, I ain't sorry at all. I should have to be shockin'ly hard up for a companion if I invited you, Long. I may sound frightfully rude, but it's really necessary to speak out plainly on certain occasions. Dear boys, will you please boot the boulder out of the common-room?"

Teddy Long backed away in alarm.

"Yah! You beast!" he roared defiantly.

"Fancy inviting a chap and then backing out of it! Yah! You worm!"

Having relieved his feelings to that extent, the sneak of the Remove considered it a wise move to retire as gracefully as possible. Sir Montie smiled serenely and regarded the somewhat anxious faces before him.

"Begad, it's awfully difficult," he observed. "I'd like to take the whole Remove, but it ain't possible. So I was thinkin' of you, Yakama, for one, and you, Bo'sun. Will you honour me by acceptin'?"

"The graciousness of your esteemed invitation is unprecedented," beamed Yakama. "It is with the extreme gratification that I accept the honoured and extraordinary favour. I am of the huge pleasure."

The Bo'sun was not quite so flowery.

"By hokey!" he exclaimed enthusiastically.

"Will I accept? By the skipper's whiskers, I will—rather! Thanks, messmate!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's all right, then," said Sir Montie serenely. "I'm sorry for the other chaps, but it can't be helped. Oh, and by the way, where's Handforth? We'll take him along as well, just as a favour to the fellows who are left behind. It'll be a tremendous relief for St. Frank's to get rid of Handy for a few hours, begad!"

"I guess you won't take Handforth, pard," grinned Justin B. Farman. "Say, that boob'll sure be tearin' his hair when he learns about this. He's quit!"

"Quit?" repeated Sir Montie vaguely.

"Sure. I guess the galoot was feelin' kinder gay," explained Farman. "He toted off somewhere around Bannington with his two study pards. He guessed that the cinema would make him feel real good."

"That's right," agreed Owen major. "Handy went off to the giddy pictures. My hat! I can just imagine his face when he finds out what he's missed! Why not call for him at the cinema?"

"Dear boy, I wouldn't dream of spoilin' his enjoyment," replied Sir Montie, shaking his head. "Besides, Church an' McClure would want to come, an' I shouldn't have the heart to leave them there. Farman, old fellow, will you make up the party? I shall be delighted if you'll come."

The boy from California grinned.

"Say, your delight is just nothin' compared with mine," he said heartily. "Gee! I'm some glad Handforth isn't around!"

And so, after a few hasty preparations, the little party went out into the Triangle to await the arrival of the motor-car. This turned up within five minutes, and proved to be a big landaulette.

The boys took their places in the luxurious tonneau, and the journey commenced. The other Removites stared after the car somewhat dismally, and the only consolation they had was the thought of seeing the face of Edward Oswald Handforth when he learned what he had missed.

The distance from St. Frank's to Folkestone was not extremely excessive. In a

powerful car the distance could be covered easily within two hours. And when the schoolboys arrived the time was only just ten minutes past five. They were therefore well in advance.

Gliding through the town, the car passed a newsagent's shop, and Tommy Watson suddenly clutched at Sir Montie's arm.

"Look—look at that!" he gasped excitedly.

All the boys stared, and then saw the cause of Watson's sudden animation. Standing outside the shop was a rough blackboard, with the day's news chalked upon it—the principal item, that is. And the words ran:

"AMAZING ESCAPE OF THE HIGH LORD."

The juniors gazed at one another blankly as the car continued serenely on its way.

"Escaped!" gasped Sir Montie. "Oh, begad! An' the frightful scoundrel was only captured last night!"

"Shiver my bowsprit!" exclaimed the Bo'sun. "There's something wrong there, shipmates. The police must have been asleep——"

"Let's buy a paper!" exclaimed Watson excitedly.

But just then Sir Montie leaned forward and quickly beckoned to the driver to pull up. As the car was slowing down Sir Montie leaned out of the window and hailed a thick-set gentleman who was pacing along the pavement as though he had a personal grudge against the flagstones themselves.

He looked round with a scowl, and then his face cleared.

"Hallo, boys!" he said glumly, as the car pulled up against the pavement. "What the deuce are you doing down here? Come to meet your honoured master, I suppose?"

"That's it, sir," said Sir Montie, who had recognised the man as Detective-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard. Lennard was a personal friend of Nelson Lee's, and he had been in charge of the operations at the Rapley Home, and had, in fact, arrested the High Lord of the Circle.

"Well, I'm down here for the same purpose," said the inspector.

"I say," put in Watson eagerly. "Will you be able to get us permission to go on the quay, sir?"

"I daresay," was the good-humoured reply. "They're rather strict nowadays, but it can be managed all right. I suppose you've seen the paper?" he added bitterly.

"Begad! We saw the placard," replied Sir Montie.

"Yes, I saw that infernal thing," growled Lennard. "It stared at me like a positive rebuke! I suppose I'm silly to stand talking to you boys, but one or two of you, at least, were mixed up in the affair, and you'll be interested. Zingrave has vanished. By James! We were only able to hold him a few hours!"

"But it wasn't your fault, sir, surely?" asked Watson.

"That's immaterial; the scoundrel has got away," replied the inspector. "In justification to myself, however, I must say that I

wasn't in the least to blame. When Zingrave escaped I was fast asleep in bed."

"How did it happen, sir?"

"I can't go into full details, but it was a regular fight," declared the inspector grimly. "The most extraordinary affair in my whole experience. Zingrave was taken to Bow Street Police Station and lodged there. I went away feeling perfectly satisfied. From what I can understand, the fight commenced less than forty minutes later. It's quite clear that the High Lord's confederates were all prepared for such an emergency."

"But what actually happened, sir?"

"Well, about fifty armed men suddenly appeared," declared Lennard. "Sounds like a sensational novel, doesn't it? Fifty armed men, and they raided the police station by sheer force. I tell you, boys, it was absolute chaos for twenty minutes. The brutes were handling some patent kind of gas and smoke bombs. They forced their way in, and four police officers were badly injured. Others were rendered insensible, and by the time the excitement was all over the prisoner had vanished."

"Great Scott!"

"But the Circle agents didn't escape unharmed," went on the inspector grimly. "Four of them were killed by their own poison gas, and another three are in a critical condition. In addition, twelve are captured whole, so to speak. Numbers told, though, and the majority got away, with the High Lord in their midst. It was misty at the time, but it's a puzzle how they managed to disappear. So far, there's no sign of the gang whatever."

"Oh, my goodness!" murmured Tommy Watson.

The boys had every reason to be dismayed. It was a striking example of the Circle of Terror's ruthless power. By sheer brute force the High Lord had been rescued from the hands of the police. Careless of the cost, Professor Zingrave had regained his liberty. The whole affair was the biggest sensation for months. Nelson Lee and Nipper, when they learned the news, would undoubtedly be greatly disturbed.

Detective-Inspector Lennard climbed into the car and accompanied the boys to the docks, for he had been on his way there himself. He was most anxious to tell Nelson Lee with his own lips what had occurred.

The party experienced very little difficulty in gaining permission from the authorities to await the arrival of the boat on the quay. The steamer was already in sight, and the boys watched her interestedly. The escape of the High Lord was not of tremendous importance to them, and they were not vastly perturbed.

Sir Montie, for all his languor, was as keen as a razor. And the movements of two well-dressed strangers interested him quite a lot. These men were talking earnestly together near a pile of high packing-cases. Occasionally they nodded to the incoming steamer.

"I don't like the look of those fellows,

Tommy boy—I don't really," murmured Tregellis-West. "Where's Mr. Lennard?"

"Gone off with some official or other," replied Watson. "I don't suppose we shall see him again until after the boat's in. But what are you jawing about?"

"Those two men," murmured Sir Montie.

Watson eyed them critically.

"They look all right," he said after a while. "They must be all serene, Montie, or they couldn't have gained admittance to the quay. Rats to 'em! You don't suppose they're Hun spies, do you?"

"No; not Hun spies," said Sir Montie quietly. "But ain't it probable that they might be Circle agents? What do you chaps think?" he added, turning to the others. "The rotters know that old Alvy collared the High Lord, and they may be after revenge. Begad, just look at that!"

The two men had carelessly lounged behind the packing-cases, but they did not appear further on. Obviously they had concealed themselves; but whether it was by mere chance or deliberate intention was impossible to say.

"By the lee scuppers!" murmured the Bo'sun. "It looks queer, doesn't it?"

All the juniors agreed with Burton. Perhaps they tried to make themselves believe that there was something fishy in the movements of the two strangers. At all events, Sir Montie, fired by a sudden determination, accosted a police officer who was passing. He requested him, frankly, to arrest the two men.

The constable laughed.

"Been reading some penny 'bloods,' haven't you, young shaver?" he asked pleasantly. "Don't you be a young idiot!"

He walked on without saying anything further, and the boys glared after him indignantly. Sir Montie had certainly been treated very shabbily by the officious constable.

"I'll tell you what, dear boys," said Tregellis-West, his eyes gleaming behind his glasses. "We'll take the law into our own hands, begad. There's somethin' inside me which warns me that those chaps ain't here for any good purpose. As soon as the boat's in we'll rush up and collar the bounders ourselves. If we've made a mistake it'll be easy enough to make a graceful apology, you know."

"My hat! Do you think we'd better risk it?" asked Watson doubtfully.

"The suggestion is of the excellent quality," said Yakama. "I am of the entire agreement, esteemed chums. We will do the ridiculous collaring act!"

Whether right or wrong, the boys decided to take the law into their own hands, as Sir Montie had suggested. And when the big steamer finally hitched up to the quay the juniors were more keen than ever. The two strangers were still concealed; and that was very significant.

One of the first passengers to cross the gangway was Major-General Leighton. Behind him came Nelson Lee, with Nipper in

immediate attendance. And at that very moment Montie's keen eyes detected the two strangers slowly emerging from their place of concealment.

"Begad! Come on, dear fellows!"

The five juniors pelted away without hesitation. They dodged round the packing cases, and literally flung themselves upon the well-dressed strangers. It was far better to act first and ask questions afterwards.

But the boy's suspicions were right!

The two men were bowled over at once, taken completely by surprise. The boys simply piled on to them, and the commotion quickly brought other men to the spot.

And then it was discovered that the two captives were armed with air-pistols of a powerful type. Undoubtedly they had been about to discharge their weapons at Nelson Lee!

They were agents of the Circle of Terror, and they had orders to exact vengeance! Sir Montie's shrewd action had saved the great detective from certain death!

CHAPTER IV.

(Set down by Nipper.)

IN WHICH THE GUV'NOR IS PLEASED TO BE VERY CONTEMPTUOUS.

NELSON LEE was looking very thoughtful.

We had arrived at St. Frank's in good time for supper, and now I was facing the guv'nor in his study. Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson were just behind me.

It hasn't been possible for me to tell much of this particular episode personally, so I am contenting myself with shoving in a little bit. Later on I may be able to describe a few more incidents. At least, I hope so.

That affair on the quay at Folkestone had unsettled me a bit; and my chums were just as concerned. Without the slightest doubt Montie had saved the guv'nor's life. For we found that the two suspicious strangers were special agents of the Circle of Terror.

Then the news that the High Lord had escaped was more than disagreeable. I don't think Nelson Lee blamed anybody—certainly Detective-Inspector Lennard was not at fault—but he couldn't help being thundering annoyed.

After all his plans had materialised, after Zingrave had been captured red-handed, it was galling to learn that the master criminal had escaped from the police after a few hours' detention only.

And, besides that, there was the certain knowledge that Zingrave would attempt to exact vengeance. We had already received ample evidence of the fact that the Circle men were getting busy.

The guv'nor was not likely to forget good old Montie's action. He had already thanked my chum in his quiet, sincere fashion. Tregellis-West, of course, had been most uncomfortable during the ordeal, for he didn't

want thanking at all. He would have much preferred "Old Alvy," to keep quiet.

We were back at the school now, and our keen satisfaction at the triumphant conclusion of the whole case was greatly marred by Lennard's unwelcome news. It wasn't like the gov'nor to be moody, however, and he smiled at us with great cheerfulness after that thoughtful expression had vanished.

"Well, boys, we must be thankful that everything has turned out satisfactorily," he said. "So far as we are concerned we may claim a complete victory. And you may be quite sure that the plot against General Leighton has been finally dropped. There is another aspect of the case, however. The Circle of Terror, knowing that I took part in the big coup, has decided to show me quite a large amount of attention. Very fortunately their first attempt was frustrated—owing to the perspicacity of Montie—"

"Oh, I say, sir!" protested Tregellis-West mildly. "You ain't goin' to start over again, are you? We were all in it, you know—Tommy an' the Bo'sun—"

"Rats!" I cut in. "Tommy says that he and the others wouldn't have noticed anything if it hadn't been for your keenness to begin with."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Montie is extremely modest," he said pleasantly, "so I will not embarrass him by any further reference to the matter. The fact is I summoned you to my study to show you a very interesting communication, which was awaiting my arrival. It was delivered, I understand, during the course of the evening."

"An interesting communication, gov'nor?" I asked curiously.

And then I suddenly started.

"From—from the Circle?" I asked, with a quick intake of breath.

"Exactly!"

"A—a threat, sir?"

"Read it for yourself, Nipper, and you will soon understand," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "Your chums may read it, too, of course. And don't get excited. There is no cause whatever for alarm."

There was a sinking feeling within me as I took the letter from the gov'nor's hand. I unfolded it, and saw that the well-known purple circle was printed at the top of the sheet—the sign of the Circle of Terror. But, contrary to the usual custom, the communication was not printed. It was typewritten, and this clearly pointed to the fact that the letter had been prepared in a great hurry.

"I can only assume that the interesting missive was dictated over the 'phone to an agent somewhere in this vicinity," remarked the gov'nor, before I could read the letter. "It was evidently concocted during our trip home from Folkestone. It was delivered by hand, although nobody knows who brought it."

"Let's have a look at it!" whispered Tommy Watson anxiously.

The envelope, I saw, was addressed to

"Peter Alvington, Esq." Astute as the Circle was, it was unaware of the fact that "Mr. Alvington" was really Nelson Lee. That secret had been well kept. Only the gov'nor's personal friends—and mine, of course—knew the truth.

The Circle's letter was straight to the point:

"Headquarters,

Wednesday, the Tenth.

"Mr. Peter Alvington,—You have thought fit to interfere in matters which are quite outside your province. For this interference you will pay as dearly as a man can pay.

"By a mere chance you escaped the Circle's vengeance this evening, on the quay at Folkestone. Be assured that you will not escape again. You have played with fire, and your punishment will be swift.

"The full penalty will be exacted before the hour of midnight to-morrow, Thursday. If you are still alive after that hour—you will be allowed to live. I am a sportsman, and am prepared to give you a sporting chance.

"Am I not generous?

"THE HIGH LORD."

I looked grave.

"Great Cæsar!" I muttered. "This is terribly serious, sir."

"Do you think so, young 'un?"

"Think!" I panted. "Why, they—they mean to kill you!"

"That is evidently the High Lord's amiable intention," smiled Nelson Lee.

"And you don't seem to care a bit!" I roared.

"I assure you, Nipper, that I care a very great deal," the gov'nor declared. "But I see no reason for getting excited. As you will observe, Zingrave is pleased to be very cynical. His 'sporting chance' is a mere bluff."

"Begad!" said Sir Montie huskily. "Do you mean that you'll be in danger after to-morrow night, sir?"

"Not exactly that, Montie," replied Nelson Lee. "The warning explains itself, surely? The High Lord intends to take such measures for my destruction that there will be no possible chance of my living until midnight to-morrow. In short, I am to be murdered either to-night or during the course of to-morrow."

I went all shivery.

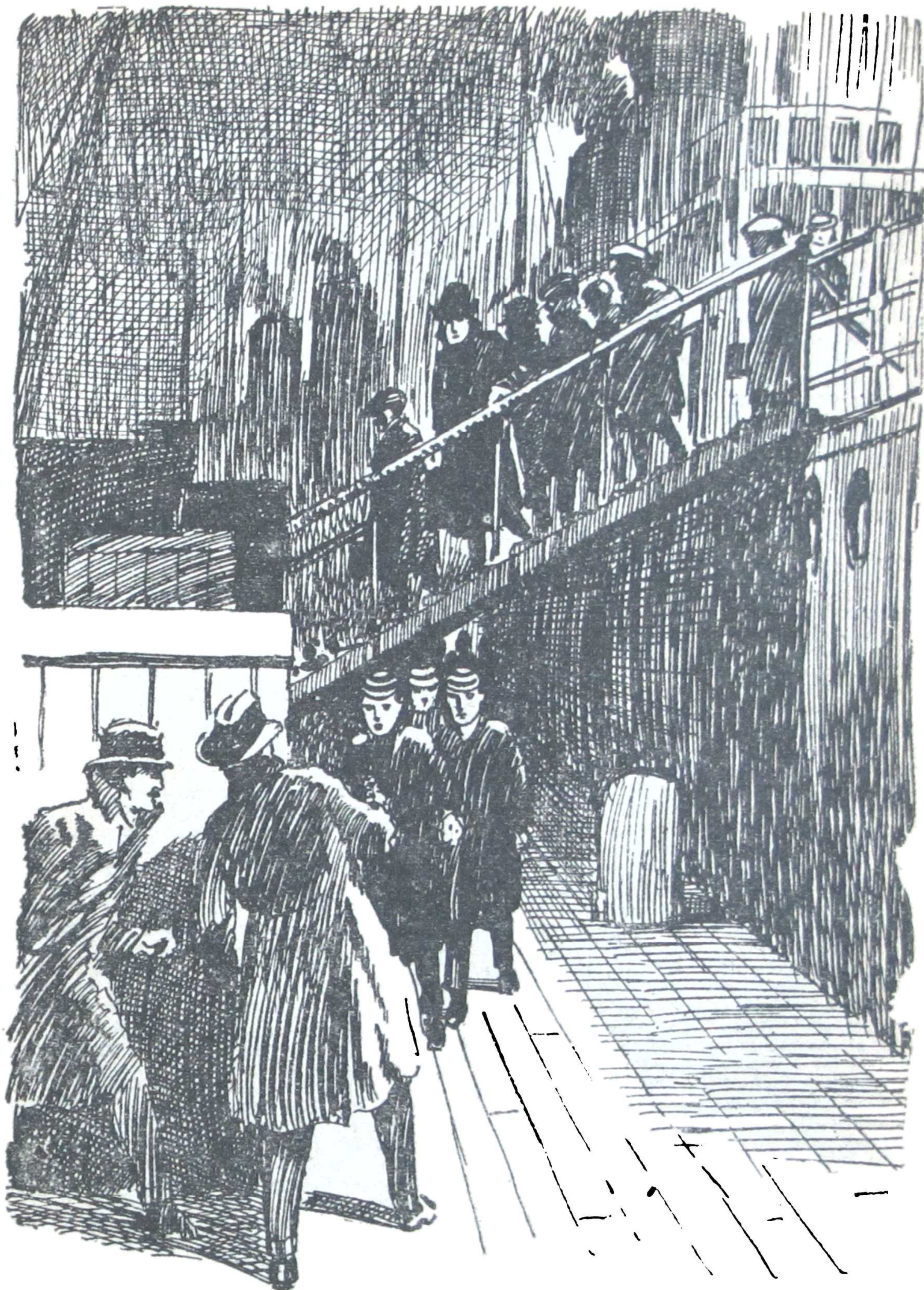
"I'm blessed if I can understand you, gov'nor," I said in a hoarse whisper. "You ain't tearing your hair, or looking worried, or—or anything! You simply stand there and talk about yourself being murdered as if you were a—a garden beetle!"

Nelson Lee bowed.

"I am highly complimented by the simile, Nipper," he said smoothly.

For the life of me I couldn't help grinning, and Montie and Tommy had great difficulty in keeping their faces straight.

"Oh, lor'! You know what I mean, sir!" I exclaimed. "The Circle intends business, and as sure as you're standing there they'll try to kill you!"



At that moment Montie's eyes detected the two strangers slowly emerging from their place of concealment.

"Begad! Come on, dear fellows!" he cried.—(See page 11.)

"Undoubtedly."

"They'll do all sorts of awful things, guv'nor!"

"I have every reason to believe so."

"And they'll probably finish you off!"

"You must allow me to remark upon your wonderful optimism, Nipper!"

"I shall burst in a minute!" I panted, glaring at the guv'nor. "You stand there as cool as an iceberg and smile at me! Great Scott! Can't you realise that you're in frightful danger, sir?"

"It may be necessary to take a few precautions——"

"A few precautions!" I roared desperately. "Is that all, sir?"

"If you wish to know the truth, my lad, I treat this insolent communication with complete contempt," said Nelson Lee calmly. "Perhaps I had better alter that statement, however. My contempt is not complete, since I shall take care to order my movements during the next twenty-four hours with unusual caution."

"That's not enough, sir," I protested.

"You ought to go away——"

"And run into danger? I think not, Nipper."

"Well, you ought to lock yourself up in—in a box-room!" I declared. "Tommy and Montie and I will take it in turns to guard the door. What do you say, chaps?"

"Rather!" said my chums in unison.

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"I appreciate your consideration, boys," he said kindly, "but I shall certainly refrain from skulking away in the fashion you suggest."

"It isn't skulking, sir," I burst out, half dotty with anxiety. "It's only proper precaution. Why, there might be a Circle agent outside the window even now! There might be a bomb hidden somewhere——"

"Or, possibly, a poisoned tack, standing point-upwards upon my chair?" suggested the guv'nor, with delicious sarcasm. "It is even conceivable that my breakfast will contain prussic acid, or that my tobacco is mixed with dynamite—eh? No, no, Nipper, these fears won't do. I don't intend to alter my habits in the least. I snap my fingers at the Circle of Terror, and wish to hear no more of your amusing but well-meant suggestions for my personal safety."

I simply boiled.

"Then they'll have you, guv'nor!" I declared hotly.

"Dear me!"

"In fact you're as good as dead already!" I shouted.

Just for a moment Nelson Lee's eyes flashed with sudden anger, but then he doubled up and burst into hearty laughter. I could see the humour of the situation myself then, and grinned as well.

"But, seriously, sir, it's a rotten position," I said, calming down. "I jolly well hope you'll be extra careful to-night."

The guv'nor's eyes twinkled now.

"Am I not to be trusted, Nipper?" he asked quietly. "Get off to bed with you,

and don't worry your heads about me. I have proved myself equal to the Circle of Terror's machinations in the past, and I see no reason why I should be caught napping now."

A few minutes later Sir Montie and Tommy and I left the study. But for the life me I couldn't help worrying. And with the guv'nor fairly mounted upon the high horse, I knew that trouble was brewing.

For Nelson Lee could be obstinate when he liked. He liked now, and I felt as though I could shake him. And as for his injunction not to worry our heads—well, it was potty.

We worried enormously—and not without reason!

CHAPTER V.

(Told by Nelson Lee.)

IN WHICH I REALISE, WITH GRIM CERTAINTY, THAT THE CIRCLE OF TERROR IS IN DEADLY EARNEST.

"GOOD-NIGHT, Morrow!"

"Good-night, sir!" said Morrow, the head prefect of the Ancient House. "I'm glad that you're back safely, sir."

"Thank you, Morrow."

I continued my way up the stairs with a smile, and Morrow passed below. The truth was, I had decided to retire somewhat earlier than usual; not because of Professor Zingrave's genial threat, but for the simple reason that I was tired.

Nipper, of course, was very worried. It was only natural that he should be. And I will not deny that I was somewhat concerned on my own account, but I had taken care to show no sign of this whilst chatting with the boys.

Looking at the matter squarely I knew well enough that my life was in great danger. The High Lord did not utter a threat in vain. Very special measures would be taken to encompass my destruction. I was quite convinced of that. These measures were of such a nature, moreover, as to practically exclude the possibility of my being alive after the hour of midnight on the next day.

I had an idea that the operations would not commence until the morrow. I was soon to learn how erroneous this idea was! I entered my bedroom, assuring myself that Nipper's advice was sound enough, but the thought of spending twenty-four hours in a box-room, with a guardian at the door, did not appeal to me in the least. It savoured too much of fear.

Having switched the light on in my bedroom, I closed the door and looked round keenly. There was no waiting assassin under the bed or squeezed into the wardrobe. I smiled rather grimly as I sank into the easy chair before the fire.

I had had no sleep the previous night, and I was genuinely tired. I felt that I should thoroughly enjoy my repose now. The morrow could bring what it willed, but to-

night, at least, I determined to cast all worry from my mind.

I bent down lazily, rendered drowsy by the cheerful fire, and commenced to unlace my boots. Whilst I was engaged in this necessary occupation I pondered over the events of the last day or two. It was a thousand pities that the High Lord had escaped from the police, but he had only done so at a heavy cost.

I felt under the big chair for my slippers, and yawned as I prepared to don them. Then something—instinct possibly—warned me to glance inside them. I did so with a half smile at my own touch of nervousness.

Then, in a second, I was upon my feet, alert and brisk.

"By James!" I muttered sharply.

Very gingerly I sniffed at the interior of one of the slippers. Then I took it immediately under the light and closely examined it. A very short inspection was sufficient.

"Very neat!" I murmured grimly—"very neat indeed!"

For I had discovered in the slippers the unmistakable powder of ground ivory root. This may not sound so very terrible, but it happened that I was well acquainted with the stuff. Ground ivory root is a deadly poison, even when applied in this curious fashion. I had heard of it being sprinkled within a pair of shoes before this.

"H'm! It behoves me to be extremely careful," I told myself. "Possibly there are a few other traps set for me, although that is not likely. Zingrave's emissary is evidently a smart fellow."

For, without a doubt, an agent of the Circle had found access to my bedroom—probably several hours before my entrance. This was a comparatively easy task, for the window was slightly open, and the house was quiet on this side after dark.

Then and there I made an examination of the room. I performed the task with extreme care, being wary of any possible booby traps in the shape of concealed pistols or poisoned spikes. Zingrave's ingenuity was well known to me, and I did not underestimate his cunning.

The examination, however, led me no further. I concluded, therefore, that my pleasant visitor had left no other reminders of his sojourn in my sleeping apartment. At the same time I did not become careless.

The drowsiness had left me and I was alert.

Placing the slippers carefully in the cupboard, I lit a cigarette and piled a few cobbles of coal upon the fire, for I had decided to sit in the big chair and think for a while. The flames blazed up cheerfully, and I sank back among the soft cushions contentedly.

I was wondering, to tell the truth, whether it would not be an act of wisdom on my part to swallow my pride for the time being and to sleep elsewhere. There were plenty of other bedrooms empty, but the beds would

certainly be unmade, and I have rooted objections to sleeping upon a bare mattress.

I gazed at the flickering flames through the cigarette smoke. And then my attention became fixed. Was it fancy, or were the flames slightly green in hue? I bent forward, waving the smoke away, and looked closer.

Yes, there was certainly a greenish tinge

Then, abruptly, a subdued explosion took place in the fire. It was not at all violent, being, indeed, nothing more serious than a great puff. But a dense cloud of dirty green smoke rolled out into the room towards me.

I did not hesitate a fraction of a second.

I flung myself backward bodily, careless of where I fell. As I did so the fringe of the smoke-cloud touched my face, and a certain amount of the vapour was drawn into my lungs.

On the very instant my senses reeled and my throat burned frightfully. But I was still in possession of my wits, and before the deadly fumes could fairly envelop me I had twisted round upon the floor and crawled like a rabbit towards the door. Wrenching at the handle, I opened the portal and staggered into the passage.

With the door tightly closed I stood there, gulping in the pure air. I knew that I had only inhaled a very minute percentage of the green vapour, but it had nearly overpowered me! One full breath and I should have died upon the spot. I was well aware of that fact.

The fiendish nature of the trick! Alert as I was, I had not suspected the harmless-looking coals in the scuttle. Probably there were other prepared pieces lying there. Had I not been acutely suspicious I should have fallen a victim to the diabolical device.

Even as it was my throat was parched and I felt as though my lungs were bursting. I found it impossible to diagnose the exact nature of the poison, but I took out my medicine case and swallowed a couple of pellets. These acted almost at once, for the pain decreased and I breathed with greater freedom. I had received the merest touch of the poison, but it had been nearly sufficient.

The appalling reality of my danger now forced itself upon me in earnest. Two narrow escapes within ten minutes!

What chance was there for me to survive the full twenty-four hours? I began to realise that there was not much hope of my outliving the given span. At the same time I obstinately resolved to make another attempt to sleep in my bedroom, as I had originally intended. I have my weaknesses, and one of these has often caused Nipper considerable distress. As he has himself declared, I never know when I have had enough!

After waiting for several minutes I bound my handkerchief round my mouth and nostrils, and then cautiously opened the door. My bedroom was slightly hazy, and the atmosphere, I judged, was still poisonous.

Without breathing I closed the door

crossed the room quickly, and opened the window wide. Then I again retired with all speed and waited in the passage for perhaps ten minutes.

By this time I calculated the room would be quite clear, and my surmise proved to be correct. There was still a faintly pungent odour permeating the air, but it caused no discomfort. The poison had vanished.

I lit another cigarette, closed the lower sash of the window, and stood upon the hearthrug. The fire was now burning as usual, and everything seemed strangely still.

I could understand the Circle's game quite easily. If one device failed there was always another to take its place. The scheme was simple. It seemed impossible that I could survive all the various tricks.

I was now quite convinced that other traps had been laid. My examination had not been sufficiently thorough. Remembering that I had not yet examined the bed—that is, the interior—I turned back the upper sheet cautiously. The bed was quite ordinary and looked most inviting.

With a sudden jerk I flung back the clothes completely. Something black twisted like lightning, and I fell back a pace, catching my breath.

A tiny snake wriggled to the floor in a flash.

"Good Heavens!" I muttered fiercely.

It was necessary to act quickly, and I grabbed up my dressing-gown, flung it upon the reptile, and stamped vigorously. Something crushed beneath my heel, but I did not desist until I was finally satisfied that the brute was dead. A brief inspection was sufficient, and I kicked the dressing-gown half under the bed.

The thing was developing into a positive nightmare. Common sense now told me that my best policy was to quit—and this I decided to do. Before leaving the room, however, I thought it would be as well to attempt a little trickery on my own account.

With a grim, set expression I turned the chair so that its back was towards the window and facing the fireplace. Then I propped a pillow in position, and placed my smoking cap upon the summit so that it just projected over the top. From the window one would imagine that a man lay dozing in the chair before the fire.

Taking my boots, I switched off the light and left the apartment. Out in the passage I donned the footwear and crept noiselessly downstairs. Having obtained my thick overcoat and cap, my next move was to leave the house by means of a side window. A thick hedge grew just near, and I crept along under cover of this until I arrived at a spot where I could clearly see my own bedroom window and the ground immediately beneath.

Here I settled down to wait. Patience is a great virtue, and I fancy that I possess my share of it. The conviction was within me that the night's adventures were not yet over, and if a Circle agent could visit my bedroom once, he could visit it again. It was a simple train of reasoning.

A full hour passed and the situation remained precisely the same. I was beginning to think that my argument was at fault. And then, like a blacker shadow, from amongst the other shadows, something dark moved. My muscles tightened, and I held myself ready for instant action.

A man was gently propping a ladder against the upper window sill. He secured it to his satisfaction, and mounted so silently that I could scarcely help admiring his ability. I did not even hear the raising of the lower sash, as I was quite sure it had been raised.

The fellow stood perfectly still upon the ladder, making no attempt to enter the room. I heard a soft, sharp click upon the still air. Then a sigh of satisfaction came down to me, and the figure commenced the descent.

But, meanwhile, I had not been idle.

When the marauder set foot upon the ground once more I was immediately behind him. If ever a man received a fright, this one did. My arms closed about him like a vice.

He simply gave one frantic scream and fainted!

I was not in the least surprised. Without a doubt the fellow was possessed of strong nerves. But the grip had been so unexpected, so mysterious, so totally terrifying, that he had proved too weak for the strain. His terror was so acute that he swooned away on the instant.

In less than a minute his hands and feet were securely bound. I lifted him up bodily—not without difficulty, although he was a small, wiry individual. Then with my burden in my arms I strode into the house.

It was not my intention to be extra gentle with the miscreant. If not a murderer actually, he was one at heart, and he deserved no mercy. Without compunction I conveyed him down into the cellars. These were quite dry, and one small stone apartment was fitted with a stout oaken door. I closed this upon the prisoner and shot the two bolts home. Escape for him was quite impossible.

My next move was to return to my bedroom. I examined the dummy, and, as I had anticipated, I discovered that a bullet had passed clean through the smoking-cap and the top of the pillow.

"Most interesting!" I murmured gently. "I wonder if the pace will keep up this present standard during the whole twenty-four hours? If so, matters will be extremely ugly."

I fancied, however, that the night's excitement was over. On the morrow, no doubt—the Circle agents would not dare to operate in full daylight. Once the new day dawned, therefore, I should probably be safe until darkness again fell. By this time, of course, Zingrave fondly imagined that I was no more.

With a short, hard laugh I made my way to the headmaster's study—taking care to do so in the dark—and entered the apartment. And having felt my way to the big lounge, I sprawled upon it and blinked

sleepily at the dying embers of the fire. For the time being I dismissed the Circle of Terror from my mind.

And thus I spent the night.

CHAPTER VI.

(*Nipper resumes.*)

IN WHICH THE GUV'NOR HAS ANOTHER NARROW ESCAPE—AND I BECOME EXTREMELY GRIM.

CLANG!

The rising-bell created its usual unwelcome din. This morning, however, there were three juniors in the Ancient House Remove dormitory who scrambled out of bed while the bell was still clanging away vigorously, being operated, no doubt, by the energetic Warren.

Those three juniors were Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, and myself. As a rule we didn't exactly hurry ourselves for a minute or two, but we were practically out of bed before we were fully awake. And we all three exchanged questioning glances.

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "I wonder if he's all right?"

"Shut up, you ass!" I muttered fiercely.

"Dear fellow, I'm sorry!"

There were other juniors awake, and we did not want any awkward inquiries concerning our topic of conversation. The fellows had questioned us until they were tired as it was.

I don't think it's necessary for me to mention that it was the guv'nor who was causing us so much anxiety. What had happened during the night? Was he still safe? I had remained awake for hours and had more than once thought of visiting Nelson Lee's bedroom in the middle of the night.

But what would have been the use? And at last I had fallen asleep and had slumbered like a top until now. My one thought as I dressed was to rush down to the guv'nor. Montie and Tommy, too, were nearly as anxious.

We had no time to listen to the growlings of Edward Oswald Handforth. That frowsy-headed youth was sitting up in bed airing his grievances to all and sundry. Occasionally he waxed quite indignant.

"Absolute rot, I call it!" he declared. "Why the dickens couldn't you have called for me at the cinema, Tregellis-West? A fine thing, inviting a chap to a ripping motor-ride and then leaving him behind! I reckon it was a dirty trick!"

"Ready, dear fellows?" asked Sir Montie.

"I'm talking to you, dummy!" roared Handforth.

Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez and surveyed the leader of Study D.

"Were you referrin' to me as a dummy, Handforth?" he asked severely.

"Yes, I was! And I'll refer to you as something else in a minute——"

"Pray don't waste your breath, old boy," said Tregellis-West. "An' you must allow me to point out that I have rooted objections

to being characterised as a dummy. It's painful, Handy—painful to you, I mean."

"How the dickens do you make that out?"

"Well, I shall be compelled to inflict a thrashing, that's all," said Sir Montie calmly. "It's a frightful bore, but life's full of worries, begad! On this occasion I'll let you off."

"Let me off!" bawled Handforth, jumping up in bed. "Look here, I—— Ow!"

A pillow whizzed across the dormitory with unerring aim, and caught Handforth a beautiful smack on the face. He collapsed backwards, but was up in a second.

"Who threw that?" he roared violently.

"I did!" I exclaimed. "Dry up, Handy, we're in a hurry!"

"Bust my mains'l!" said the Bo'sun. "You are in a hurry, messmates, and no mistake! Any particular reason——"

"My dear old Bo'sun, I can't stop to explain now," I said, moving towards the door.

"Come on, you chaps."

"Hold on!" bawled Handforth. "I want to jaw at Tregellis-West for not taking me to Folkestone——"

"All right, jaw at the other chaps."

I passed out of the dormitory with my chums, leaving Handforth shouting uncomplimentary remarks after us.

I am afraid that our ablutions were exceedingly hurried that morning. Sir Montie insisted upon giving himself a thorough wash, however. But Tommy and I insisted upon his doing otherwise.

There was quite a little argument for a minute, and we found it necessary to use force. Tommy let the water out of the basin whilst I smothered Montie's head in a towel. His protests were grimly ignored.

"But, dear fellows, I'm frightfully grimy!" he complained.

"Rats!" I cut in. "You can wash twice after breakfast if you like."

Seeing that the odds were against him, Montie gave in, and three minutes later we all hastened downstairs. My anxiety was very acute. If anything had happened to Nelson Lee it wouldn't be known yet, of course. I had horrible visions of the guv'nor lying dead in his room; I pictured the Head and a crowd of prefects bursting the door open with hammers.

It was necessary, however, to make sure beforehand. I intended going straight to Nelson Lee's study. If it was locked I should then rush up to his bedroom and hammer upon the door.

"Come on!" I said rather huskily.

I don't mind admitting that just for a second a kind of panic seized me. I pride myself that I usually keep a clear head, but my worry had reached its climax all in a moment. I was simply maddened by the thought that something ghastly might have happened to Nelson Lee.

I pelted down the stairs three at a time, with my chums behind me. Incidentally, we nearly bowled over Kenmore, of the Sixth, who happened to be passing at the time.

"Look where you're going, you young

idiots!" snapped the prefect, skipping out of the way. "Have you gone dotty, or what?"

We didn't answer, but whizzed across the lobby to the master's passage. And turning the corner the first person I saw was Nelson Lee himself!

"Oh, thank goodness!" I gasped.

The guv'nor was in the act of opening the study door, and he paused as we appeared.

"Good morning, boys," he said cheerfully.

"Is anything the matter? You seem to be unusually excited over something."

"You—you ain't dead, then?" gasped Tommy Watson.

Nelson Lee's eyes twinkled.

"I must warn you, Watson, against the practice of asking unnecessary questions," he said smoothly. "If you wish to know what has happened during the night, you had better come into my study. I don't wish to talk in the passage."

We all crowded into the study, and I closed the door while the guv'nor jerked up the blind. I felt perfectly happy, and wondered why I had been such an ass as to have any fears. Just as if the Circle of Terror could harm a brainy chap like the guv'nor!

"Well, sir, have they tried anything?" I asked eagerly.

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Several things, Nipper," he replied quietly. "Since you last saw me I have had not only one narrow escape, but four!"

"Four!" I gasped. "Not—not serious ones, sir?"

"I fancy that I owe my safety to the fact that I was extremely alert," said the guv'nor. "I can tell you, boys, I have had quite an interesting night. Poison of two varieties, a visitor in the shape of a snake, a bullet from the window——"

"Begad!" gasped Sir Montie. "You—you ain't serious, sir!"

In reply, Nelson Lee told us exactly what had happened during the night. And instead of my alarm decreasing, it became far greater. Four attempts during the night!

And there remained the whole day and the hours of darkness between seven o'clock and midnight! I simply stared at Nelson Lee aghast. Without a doubt the Circle agents would redouble their efforts when they found that they had failed. And what chance would Nelson Lee have now? A hundred different ways of inflicting death flashed through my mind. He couldn't possibly hope to escape the lot! A stray bullet, a jab from a knife from behind, a bomb—— Oh, there were so many ways of killing the guv'nor that I became positively bewildered. And, as I knew well enough, the Circle of Terror would go to almost any lengths to attain their dastardly end.

The guv'nor's greatest danger, I suspected, would be between seven o'clock and midnight—during the hours of darkness. It was unlikely that the Circle agents, impudent as they were, would attempt any determined attack in broad daylight. They would have ample opportunity after sunset.

At the same time I was fearfully worried.

"It's wonderful how you escaped, sir," I said huskily.

"Not at all, Nipper," was the guv'nor's easy reply. "The various tricks failed merely because I was well on my guard. Carelessness would certainly have been my undoing. But having been warned beforehand, owing to the genial nature of the High Lord, I very naturally took particular care. I daresay Zingrave is quite sorry now that he was so obliging."

"And what about that chap, sir?" asked Watson.

"He has already been taken away by the police."

"But you're still in danger, guv'nor," I exclaimed gravely. "The time doesn't expire until midnight. What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing."

"Ain't you going to take any precautions?" I asked anxiously.

"No more than I have."

"Begad! I hate to shove myself forward, sir, but may I make a suggestion?" asked Sir Montie. "Why not have three or four policemen about the place guardin' it? That would keep off these horrid fellows, wouldn't it?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I appreciate your concern, Montie," he said quietly. "But really I shall not upset the routine of the school by having police officers roaming about the grounds. They would only excite unwelcome attention, and would be quite useless."

"Useless, sir?"

"Exactly, Montie. The Circle agents are quite clever men," went on Lee. "In all probability they expected police to be on the premises last night. I shall do nothing more than I have done."

"Then you'll be killed, sir!" I said, breathing hard.

"I trust not, Nipper," said the guv'nor, patting my shoulder gently. "You mustn't take this matter to heart so much, boys. The worst is already over, so why should you worry now?"

"It's all very well for you to talk like that, sir, but it won't go down," I declared. "The worst isn't over by long chalks. I don't suppose there'll be much danger during the day, but what about this evening?"

"Well, what about it?"

"It'll be as dark as pitch to-night," I went on seriously. "Oh, guv'nor, you'll have to lock yourself up somewhere—you must! It's—it's only common-sense! What about the old tower in the College House? You'd be as safe as eggs there, especially if we kept guard——"

Nelson Lee frowned.

"No, no, boys," he interrupted sharply. "I tell you, once for all, I am not going to run into a funk-hole. If there is danger I will face it. Please don't pursue the matter any longer."

"But—but I——"

"You heard what I said, Nipper."

The guv'nor spoke sternly, and I knew that

It was time for me to dry up. I felt like rebelling, there and then.

What right had the gov'nor to be so obstinate? I knew this mood only too well. Our jaw had made him more obstinate than ever, and he was even inclined to be reckless. It was dotty, of course, but the gov'nor has his little ways just the same as other men.

And I knew that to talk to him any longer would be about as useful as jawing at a bronze statue. He'd made up his mind to brave the danger openly, and that meant unnecessary risk. If the gov'nor didn't want to live, I did want him to!

Morning lessons seemed endless that day. I've never been so restless before in my life. But at last the Remove was dismissed, and I pelted straight away to Nelson Lee's study and burst in unceremoniously.

The gov'nor was as whole as ever, and was sitting in his easy chair smoking a cigarette.

"Well, young 'un, what do you want?"

"You're still all right then, sir?" I gasped with relief.

Lee rose to his feet with grim deliberation.

"Look here, Nipper, this anxiety on your part is all very well, but please understand that too much of a good thing is rather annoying," he said sharply. "You seem to be under the impression that a hundred dangers are floating about in the air all round me. Don't be such a silly young ass!"

"You—you ain't wild, gov'nor?" I asked anxiously.

"Perhaps I am, slightly," was Nelson Lee's retort. "I know very well that you are concerned, lad, but don't make the thing into a nightmare. I can take care of myself, I suppose?"

I returned the gov'nor's gaze steadily.

"I'm not sure that you can, sir!" I said boldly.

"What!" he exclaimed. "You dare——"

"Oh, don't get wild, for goodness' sake!" I said, backing away slightly. "I'm only thinking of your safety, gov'nor. Still, if you like to go and get yourself done in, that's your look out. Jolly foolhardy, I call it!"

And in a bit of a huff I went out of the study and banged the door. I distinctly heard Nelson Lee give a snort of anger, and I had an idea that I should come in for a nice little lecture later on. But I didn't care a jot. I was getting wild myself now; I was fed-up with the gov'nor's fatheaded obstinacy.

Afternoon lessons were even more trying, but when they were over at last I resolved to repeat my performance of the morning. My first thought was to see if "old Alvy" was still safe and sound. But this time I took Sir Montie and Tommy with me; it was safer.

As we were crossing the lobby, however, I spotted the gov'nor walking briskly across the Triangle from the direction of the College House.

"No need to bother him," I remarked.

"He's all right, so far, anyhow, my sons. I vote we—— Hallo! What was that?"

Nelson Lee had suddenly started. He came to a halt, removed his mortar-board, and closely examined it. Then he continued his walk, but I noticed that his pace was now much sharper.

"Anything wrong, sir?" I asked meekly.

Nelson Lee had entered the lobby now, and he made no reply. Instead, he coolly plucked from the mortar-board a tiny dart. A sudden suspicion entered my mind as I gazed at it. My suspicion had been intensified by the fact that Lee picked the dart out with several folds of his handkerchief covering his fingers.

"What is it, sir?" I asked quickly.

"Just a little poison, Bennett," replied Lee with perfect equanimity. "It is fortunate that the dart entered my cap instead of my skin. Otherwise, you would have had the unpleasant task of examining my inert remains——"

"Great Scott!" I breathed, horrified.

"Do—do you mean that that dart was slung at you by some hidden enemy?"

"My meaning was quite obvious, young 'un."

I clung to the gov'nor desperately.

"And won't you lock yourself in a room now, sir?" I asked. "Just think of the terrible dangers——"

"That is enough, Bennett."

Nelson Lee's voice was like ice, and he pushed past me and strode across the lobby. Two or three other fellows entered the house at that moment, and I couldn't possibly say what I was bursting to say.

Sir Montie and Tommy had gone pale, and they looked half scared.

"Come on!" I said curtly.

And with set teeth I led the way along the Remove passage to Study C. I was grim now—grim and determined.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY—A SURPRISE—NIPPER AND CO. INDULGE IN A LITTLE TRICKERY.

NELSON LEE was very thoughtful. Tea was over and the dusk was gathering deeply. Nelson Lee was hardly visible in the depths of the big easy chair in his study. The blind was still up, but the evening light was dimming rapidly. Only a faint glow came from the fire.

The great detective was considering his precarious position. Undoubtedly he was in considerable danger, greater danger now than even before. A brief examination of the dart had shown him that it was coated with a particularly deadly poison—as he had surmised.

The agents of the Circle of Terror were active—they were keenly on the alert. It would be foolish to assume that they had reached the end of their resources. On the contrary, it was more than probable that the worst was yet to come.

Nelson Lee pondered deeply. He wondered if he would live through the coming ordeal. Although his common-sense told him that Nipper's suggestion was a good one, he couldn't bring himself to the point of admitting that the Circle of Terror had "got him beat," as Farman would have said.

The dusk grew into complete darkness, and Lee rose from his chair with a little sigh and lowered the blind. Then he switched on the electric light, and lit a cigarette. As he was throwing the match into the fire a tap sounded.

"Come in," called the housemaster-detective.

Nipper entered, looking subdued.

"Here again?" said Lee, frowning. "I will hear none of your suggestions—"

"All right, sir," said Nipper. "I was only going to ask you if you'd got your revolver in good order, and all that. If you will persist in defying the Circle rotters I want to feel satisfied that you're well prepared."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Have a look for yourself, young 'un," he said pleasantly.

Nipper fished his master's revolver out of his hip-pocket and examined it keenly. He twirled the five chambers critically, and satisfied himself that the weapon was ready for instant use. Lee, meanwhile, made up the fire.

"That's O.K., anyhow," remarked Nipper, slipping the revolver back into his master's pocket. "I suppose you're going to stay in this room, sir?"

"Probably," replied Nelson Lee. "If I am requested to leave, however, for some purpose, I shall do so."

"But you won't venture outside, guv'nor?" pleaded Nipper anxiously.

"I might."

Nipper made a helpless gesture.

"Then I give you up!" he declared flatly.

"Splendid!" chuckled Lee. "That's the best thing you can do, young 'un. Leave me to go my own way."

Nipper retired from the study, looking miserable. Nelson Lee smiled as the door closed, and then he settled himself down to some work, as though no such awkward persons as Circle of Terror agents existed.

But he was interrupted soon afterwards. A tap came at the door, and Tom Burton, of the Remove, entered. The simple, burly Bo'sun, in his usual blundering way, was to be the means of getting Nelson Lee into a tight predicament.

"Well, Burton?" asked Lee, laying down his pen.

"Souise me! I didn't know you were busy, sir," said Burton nervously.

"I'm not busy, my boy. What do you want?"

"I was wondering if you'd come out to the gym. with me, sir," said the Bo'sun. "One of the punching-balls has gone wrong, and I'm afraid the Third Form kids will smash it up if it isn't put right. But if you're busy, sir, I won't bother you."

Nelson Lee considered a moment. He had

always told his boys to come to him when they were in any little difficulty, and by following this practice he had endeared himself to the juniors of the Ancient House. It would be easy enough to refuse the Bo'sun's request, especially under the present circumstances. But Nelson Lee had a certain strain of obstinacy in his make-up, and he took a curious pleasure in doing things which his better sense told him he should not do. Obviously, it would be foolish to venture out into the dark Triangle on such a trivial errand, but, just as obviously, it was the very thing Lee would do.

"All right, Burton," he said pleasantly, "I'll come."

"Thank you, sir."

They left the study together and walked briskly out into the Triangle. Certain hilarious sounds in very juvenile voices proceeded from the gymnasium, intimating that the fags had already commenced "smashing up" the innocent punching-ball.

Nelson Lee and the Bo'sun had nearly reached the old chestnuts when something extraordinary happened. Lee's eyes were keen and his ears on the alert. The Triangle was quiet and dark. Then, all in a moment, several black forms appeared from behind the trees.

Burton uttered a startled cry, and Lee, at the same second, grabbed for his revolver. Quick as he was, however, the mysterious forms were quicker. They sprang upon him and bore him to the ground.

"Make a sound and you'll die!" hissed a grim, harsh voice.

Nelson Lee struggled desperately, but there were at least six against him, and the odds were too heavy. A sack was thrust over his head, and his feet were tied. Within two minutes he was utterly helpless. The Bo'sun had either gone down or had rushed off for help.

Before this could arrive Lee was picked up by his attackers and borne away. His mind was quite clear, and he bitterly upbraided himself—now that it was too late—for neglecting Nipper's excellent advice. If he had only acted sensibly, and had locked himself in a secure room, he would never have fallen into the hands of the vengeful Circle agents.

His precautions had been useless—and now the end would be swift. He wondered vaguely why the devils hadn't finished him off on the spot. Their very silence was sinister. Nelson Lee had a suspicion that something worse than death was intended for him—something ghastly. The Circle of Terror was not above torture when it came to a matter of revenge.

It was even impossible for him to cry for help, for the folds of the sack were thick, and his voice would be a mere mumble. He was half-carried, half-dragged along until he felt himself being taken down some steps.

He knew at once what this meant.

His destination was to be the old crypt beneath the ruined monastery. Here, unheard and unseen, the Circle men would be

able to wreak their will upon their victim? Not a word was said. The vault was reached at last, and Lee faintly heard the scuffle of booted feet upon the old stonework of the floor. Then came a sudden bang, as of a stone door being flung back. It was followed almost at once by a further movement.

Lee felt himself carried forward. He was set down upon something soft, and he experienced a slight feeling of surprise. Before he could fully understand the nature of the proceedings, however, there were two sharp tugs—one at his feet and one at the lower part of the enveloping sack.

Another scuffle of feet and then a heavy slam. After that came complete silence. Nelson Lee, his mind filled with wonder, realised that his bonds had been cut! He struggled quickly out of his sack and gazed round him.

Everything was pitch black.

He listened, but no sound of any sort came to his ears except his own breathing and the beating of his own heart. Feeling in his pockets he made two discoveries. His revolver had vanished, but his electric torch was still in its place.

Nelson Lee switched the light on, hardly knowing what to expect. He had a vague suspicion that this was the commencement of some diabolical trick—that he had been imprisoned possibly with some loathsome and deadly reptile.

But his light revealed a large, low vault, with bare walls and without the least sign of a door. How he had entered he could not tell, but it was quite obvious that a door existed somewhere. Overhead, in the centre of the vault, a small slit in the stonework probably led to the open air, acting as a ventilator. But it was only three inches wide even at the mouth.

The vault was dry, and by no means cold, and there seemed to be a faint smell of paraffin fumes in the air. Lee himself was kneeling upon an old mattress, and so far as he could see there was no other living occupant of the prison.

What could it mean?

Had the schoolmaster-detective possessed the faculty for seeing through brick walls, he would have been much enlightened. For on the other side of the heavy stone door his late captors were discussing plans.

The door was so thick that no sound would have passed through it, except, perhaps, a lusty shout. And these mysterious visitors were talking in whispers. The dim glow of a bicycle lamp set upon a ledge played upon the half-dozen conspirators. They were all disguised by the simple process of wearing long black cloaks with hoods over their heads.

"Dear fellows, I'm shockin'ly frightened," murmured one of the scoundrels. "Begad, we've done a terrible thing, you know—"

"Souise my maindeck!" murmured another. "I'm a bit scared, too, messmate!"

"Pull these rotten cloaks off now," exclaimed a brisk voice, which could be none other than Nipper's. "And don't you talk rot, my sons. We've done the best thing

under the circs. 'Old Alvy was in danger, and as he wouldn't look after himself, it was up to us to look after him!"

The supposed Circle men, in fact, were Nipper and Co.!

Even Nelson Lee had not guessed the truth. And the reason for such an alarmingly drastic move was easy to understand. Poor Nipper had been driven almost to desperation by his master's firm declaration to the effect that he would not seek a safe sanctuary.

Nipper had hit upon a scheme regardless of all consequences. If Nelson Lee would not consent to being locked up until after midnight—well, Nipper would lock him up himself! In a nutshell, that was the situation.

The agents of the Circle of Terror were abroad, but no matter how clever they were, they would never succeed in finding their intended victim in his present prison. Nobody in the whole school knew of it except these Removites themselves. One day, a week or two before, Nipper had visited the old vault beneath the ruins. And by sheer accident he had discovered an inner vault, the presence of which was totally unsuspected by anybody connected with the school. Nipper had only told his chums, realising that the secret chamber might prove useful.

It was an ideal refuge for Nelson Lee now. Nipper had thoughtfully warmed the old place with an oilstove before casting his esteemed master into it. And the floor being hard, a mattress had been provided.

Under the circumstances, it had been necessary to bring others into the secret, for Nipper and his chums would have been unable to effect a capture. Three juniors who could be thoroughly trusted had been told of "old Alvy's" danger, and they had eagerly consented to help. These three were Sessue Yakama, Justin B. Farman, and the Bo'sun.

"Well, I didn't think he'd come out at all," exclaimed Watson softly.

"What Burton said to him was the very thing to fetch him out," murmured Nipper. "He's obstinate, too, and came out of the house more out of bravado than anything else. That punching-ball will have to wait."

"Souise me! And are we going to keep Mr. Alvington locked up in that hole until after midnight, shipmates?" asked the Bo'sun.

"Of course, you ass!"

"It is essentially necessary that the wonderful Mr. Alvington should remain in the august concealment until the perilous hours have passed into oblivion," said Yakama. "I am of the entire agreement with the splendid and preposterous scheme!"

"Say, it's sure a dandy stunt," agreed Farman, nodding. "Guess old Alvy is fixed good an' proper!"

"And what's to be done now?" questioned Watson.

"Why, we've got to keep watch here until midnight, at least, until bedtime," replied Nipper. "It all depends how things go. Let's get upstairs into the fresh air."

Nipper was quite cool, and he led the way

up the rough old circular steps, holding Nelson Lee's revolver in readiness. It was quite empty, but Nipper didn't mind that. He had emptied the weapon himself whilst pretending to examine it in Lee's study—Nipper having heard of tragic misunderstandings occurring through lack of a little forethought.

Nipper was the first to emerge into the clear air of the night. The boys were making no noise, for they had no wish to attract attention in this direction. Nipper, at least, knew that the whole affair was of a deadly serious nature.

He was keenly on the alert, and his eyes were sharp as needles. And as he crept from the ruins he distinctly caught sight of two crouching forms over against the playing fields hedge. They moved slightly and then stood quite still. In a flash Nipper guessed the truth.

The men were Circle agents, waiting for their prey!

And Nipper, on the spur of the moment, decided upon a ruse. He and his chums had probably been heard, and it would be as well to subdue any suspicions in the men's minds at once.

"Come on, you lazy fatheads!" exclaimed Nipper in a loud voice. "We shall never surprise those College House chaps at this rate. Jolly good thing old Alvy isn't about. He's generally poking his nose somewhere!"

The other juniors gasped.

"Begad! What——"

"Wonder why he's gone out there?" went on Nipper, in a still louder voice. "Answer me, you asses!" he hissed fiercely.

"Out where, dear boy?" said Sir Montie promptly.

"Why, hasn't Mr. Alvington gone to the empty cottage by the river?" said Nipper impatiently. "You know, that one against the towing-path. Seems a jolly queer thing to do."

"Amazing!" agreed Tregellie-West, quickly catching on to the idea. "I can't understand it at all, Benny. Just fancy lockin' himself up in a beastly old empty cottage until after midnight! I'm afraid old Alvy is goin' off his rocker."

"Don't talk so loud, you ass!" said Nipper. "We don't want everybody to know that we've been prying into old Alvy's affairs."

"Have you chaps gone mad?" whispered Watson in alarm.

"It's all right now," breathed Nipper. "By Jupiter! I believe the trick's succeeded! Those two chaps have gone, anyhow——"

"Which two chaps?"

Nipper quickly told the others of what he had seen, and the reason for his apparent insanity was obvious. The trick was to get the Circle agents away from the school, to make them believe that their victim was at their mercy in the old ruined cottage by the river.

The chances were that the ruse would be entirely successful.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE EXPLOSION—THE CIRCLE OF TERROR FAILS—VICTORY.

BOO-DOOM!
A deep, low roar sounded upon the air. Every window at St. Frank's shivered and shook. The very ground seemed to quake, and from the direction of the river a livid flash of flame shot skywards.

The time was just upon nine, and the junior common-room in the Ancient House was crowded. Tommy Watson was there, but Nipper and Sir Montie were on guard at the old ruins.

Even above the din of voices the boom was heard. The juniors gazed at one another in sudden consternation.

"Air raid!" ejaculated Handforth promptly. "My hat! Let's go outside and see if we can catch sight of the howling rotters——"

"Rats! There wouldn't be an air raid on a night like this," interrupted De Valerie. "It's as black as pitch, and the Gothas only come by moonlight."

Nevertheless the Removites rushed out into the Triangle. Other juniors were doing the same; in fact the Triangle was soon crowded with juniors and seniors, prefects and masters. But everything was still now, and only a dull glow showed from the direction of the river.

Within five minutes the truth was known.

For some amazing reason—or by an unaccountable accident—the empty cottage by the river had been blown sky-high! Nobody had been injured, of course, for the cottage was far distant from other houses, and had been deserted for months. The damage was of no consequence, since the place had been nearly a ruin beforehand.

There was great excitement, of course, but it soon died down when the prefects hustled the juniors into their respective houses. There was nothing to be seen, in any case.

But Nipper and Co. were secretly jumping for joy. This explosion proved beyond all doubt that Nipper's ruse had succeeded. The Circle agents, believing their victim to be in the cottage, had blown it to atoms—probably by means of a time-bomb placed in a lower room.

Even if they did not leave the neighbourhood at once, they would still imagine that their work had been accomplished. The greater part of the danger was over, solely owing to that sudden impulse of Nipper's.

But Nipper didn't act yet—he didn't lose his head, either. He and one of his chums—or two others—kept watch continuously until bedtime arrived. Nothing had been seen, and Nipper deemed it safe to leave the vault alone until midnight. Even if the Circle men went down there they would discover nothing.

Nipper had been missed by nearly all the six, but they didn't mind this much. Nipper's acute anxiety had gone. He and Nelson Lee had beaten the Circle of Terror's evil designs! It was something to crow over

After lights-out the Removkes talked for quite a considerable time over the explosion. All sorts of wild ideas were mooted as to the cause. Nipper and Co. listened, but didn't join in the discussion.

And they didn't care how long the juniors talked, for they, themselves, had no thoughts of sleep. To complete their plan they had to remain awake until after midnight; and then Nelson Lee had to be rescued from his place of refuge.

By ten-thirty the dormitory was absolutely quiet. And after that time Nipper had to occasionally whisper to the others in order to keep them awake. The plan was to "accidentally" find the secret chamber, and to release the prisoner. Nipper and Co. would pretend to know nothing about the other affair.

But alas for their schemes!

The hour of midnight boomed out at last, and Nipper was scrambling into his clothing within a minute. The others, although not quite so prompt, soon followed his example.

They were successful in reaching the lobby. At this hour they assumed that everybody would be in bed, but to their utter dismay they ran full tilt into Dr. Stafford himself!

"Good gracious!" gasped the Head. "Boys! What is the meaning of this? How—how dare you leave your beds at this—"

"Oh, corks!" panted Tommy Watson. "How dare you make that absurd exclamation!" thundered the Head. "Answer me, boys! This conduct is perfectly outrageous!"

Nipper, who had been doing some quick thinking, realised that secrecy was no longer possible. And then and there he explained to the amazed headmaster exactly what they had done, and how the Circle agents had been tricked.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the Head, almost faintly. "What a truly astounding state of affairs! But really I fail to see how I can blame you for what you did, even though you used violence towards your own housemaster. Indeed, it is quite possible that you saved Mr. Alvington's life by your

commendable, if drastic, treatment. But come. We must release Mr. Alvington without any further delay."

Nipper and Co. were elated. But at the same time a tiny doubt still existed as to whether all was yet right. The Monastery ruins were reached, and the party descended to the vault.

Two minutes later Nelson Lee stepped out—free and alive.

The danger was over, and Nelson Lee knew well enough that he owed his life to the violent measures adopted by Nipper and Co. Under the circumstances, Lee could not possibly be angry. To tell the truth, he had suspected the truth long before his release.

When all was told, indeed, he could do nothing but laugh heartily.

"I must give you best, boys!" he exclaimed. "You tricked me in the neatest manner possible, and I fell into the trap like a veritable booby. However, it is just as well that I did, perhaps."

"You're safe, anyhow, sir!" said Nipper gladly.

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Yes, Nelson Lee was safe.

In spite of the efforts of the Circle of Terror he still lived. And he was quite convinced that Professor Cyrus Zingrave, scoundrel though he was, would not have him molested again. The High Lord would admit defeat, but he would also believe that the Circle's ruthless methods would prove a lasting lesson to the interfering "school-master."

Thus ended the whole affair, and it could not be denied that Nelson Lee and Nipper had scored all along the line. The fact that Zingrave had regained his liberty was owing to no fault of Lee's. He had captured the master criminal, but the police had found him too slippery to hold.

Perhaps at some future time Nelson Lee and Nipper would have yet another tussle with the Circle of Terror!

THE END.

A MATTER OF INTEREST.

With our next number **THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY** will be issued at the War-Time Price of **THREE-HALFPENCE**. This measure has been reluctantly decided upon owing to a variety of causes—the ever-rising cost of labour and material being amongst the chief reasons.

"The Clue ^{of} the Fancy Vest"

is the Title of Next Week's Story, and I think all our readers will find that it is well worth the extra halfpenny. I may also add that stirring times are ahead for **ST. FRANK'S**, and the unexpected adventures of our friends there will be related in a magnificent New Series commencing in a couple of weeks.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY. WAR-TIME PRICE—THREE-HALFPENCE.

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 illtreats Jack, and George goes to his rescue, knocking out a guard 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. He tells them that they are to leave the barracks and be put in an outdoor camp. The next day this removal takes place. The hours seem very long till a friendly warder gives them a football. Two sides are quickly made up; one side, wearing their waistcoats, is called Blacks, while the other, in shirts, is named Whites. Then play begins.

(Now read on.)

THE GAME OF FOOTBALL.

THEN after the Blacks had had a spell, back came the Whites again, and Jack broke through.

"Go on, Jack boy!" yelled Wilson, ambling up to support the forwards.

Jack beat the left-half, and made for goal. The backs closed in frantically on him, stopped him for a moment, and were then beaten and the boy shot.

But not into goal. George's body was in the way, and the shot was smothered. Wilson secured, and lobbed back to Jack. Jack trapped the half and made again for goal, only to find himself forcibly tackled. George's foot blocked the ball, there was a tussle, and on one knee George glided the ball away, and Jack went down on his hands and knees.

The right-back secured, and gave a gliding pass to the far wing, which was taken nicely by the Blacks' left-winger, who drove in at

goal and shot on the run, beating the goalie all ends up as he dropped a fraction of a second too late to save.

And again a frenzied shout of sheer enjoyment rang from the lips of the onlookers, who were thoroughly enjoying the athletic treat.

The laughter and the cheers were all gall and wormwood to the assembled Germans, who scowled in silence beyond those live wires.

One of them in particular could stand it no longer. He made for that part of the defence through which the men who brought the prisoners' food were wont to pass. The current here was shut off, and the armed Hun passed through into the camping ground.

"I'm going to get hold of that football," he cried, while the crowd cheered him on. "It's an insult to the Fatherland for prisoners to enjoy themselves like this while Germany is at war. I'm going to stop it."

The man was Kutz—Kutz the envious, Kutz the malicious, Kutz the blackhearted and traitorous villain who would have sold his own mother and sister for gain, if he could. And as he advanced towards the football field he uttered a low chuckle of delight, because he was going to spoil a sporting game.

HOW KUTZ SECURED THE BALL.

NONE of the prisoners saw the armed sentry until he was among them. The players were far too engrossed in their game to pay any heed to their enemies. And it was not until the familiar and hated field-grey uniform loomed up and the flash of the glistening bayonet quivered in the bright sunlight that a warning cry rang out.

"Look out boys!"

George Gray stopped in the heat of the fray and looked round, his handsome face aglow from the exercise, his breath coming in deep, long draughts. In a moment he saw and recognised Kutz.

He stood stock still, and the colour vanished from his face, and his eyes blazed with a

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deadly hatred, he who until he had known all that Kutz was capable of had never hated any man.

He felt that he would like to hurl himself at his enemy's throat, and he had a hard job to keep himself under control.

Beyond the wire the German sentries had their rifles ready. Wilson, realising that something dreadful might happen if any of them interfered with the German scoundrel, ran up to George.

"Steady, old man," he whispered. "He means mischief, so for all our sakes speak him fair."

George forced a smile.

"All right. I'll control myself," he answered.

He then faced Kutz, and securing the ball as it was rolled towards him by one of the players, set his foot upon it.

"What is it you want?" he asked, and his voice hadn't as much as a quiver in it.

"You've no right to have that football. Games are not allowed," answered Kutz, with a vindictive leer. "Give it me."

"It was handed to us by one of the warders of the prison when they marched us here yesterday," answered George. "We have had no orders from the new governor that we are not to play. You are not master here, Kutz. And I suppose we can do what we like in our own time?"

Kutz uttered a cry of anger. He knew that what George Gray said was perfectly true. He had no authority to interfere with the prisoners, or to punish them in any way. He had no right to take anything that belonged to them without being ordered to do so.

But all the same he meant having that football.

Besides, people in the crowd were calling him coward, and demanding to know why he didn't pick it up.

"If you've any complaint to make, you can make it to the governor in writing," he shouted. "Meanwhile, I shall act as I think best. Games are not allowed. I mean to have that ball."

The scoundrel knew well enough that the prisoners dared not touch him. There were all those armed comrades of his with rifles loaded and bayonets fixed to back him up. He was safe.

So he advanced, and pushing George Gray back off the ball stooped to seize it. He missed, for Ablott, who had come up, just touched it with the toe of his boot as the German's outstretched fingers scraped the leather, and the football glided away.

"Don't let him have it, boys!" cried Ablott defiantly. "Hang it, they won't shoot us down for a bit of harmless fun, will they?"

"At any rate, we'll risk the bullets," said Wilson, "and keep the ball."

Kutz drew himself up, shaking with rage and livid to the lips.

And from the assembled crowd came a roar of laughter. It amused them to see an armed German made a fool of by a lot of prisoners. It was something new to them.

They called him fool and pig, dolt and blockhead.

George Gray reached the football in a stride or two, and stood with it at his feet.

"Look here, Kutz," he said, smiling now, for the humour of the situation had struck him too. "We are going to keep the ball and finish our game. If the governor wants it, he can send an order for it. We shan't surrender it to you, so you'd better go back and resume your duties."

Kutz uttered a yell like a madman.

"I mean to haf ze ball," he yelled, and he advanced with a rush.

The fiend entered George's heart as he saw his enemy advancing towards him. Here was an opportunity not to be missed.

"Very well, take it, then," he cried, and he lunged at the resting ball with all his might.

His aim was true, and up it swung, to strike the German guard full in the face with a resounding thwack that echoed clear above the laughter of the assembled crowd.

Kutz was knocked clean off his feet, and landed on his back with his jackboot heel flying in the air.

Down crashed his rifle, and he lay there blinking up at the cloudless sky, which suddenly became spangled with a million coloured lights, that moved in circles and danced amazingly.

The footballers, with hands to their sides, yelled themselves hoarse with laughter.

It was difficult to say whether they and the interned onlookers or the crowd from Oberhemmel laughed the more. Even the armed guards beyond the live wire grinned beneath their spiked helmets.

Then Kutz arose.

He stood swaying on his feet, with the crimson dyeing nose and lips. He was fully conscious of the ridiculous figure he cut. It began to dawn upon him that he might get himself into trouble over this, and murder flashed across his brutal mind.

Stooping, he seized his rifle, then with a mad shout he drove at George with bayonet pointed.

"I'll kill you for dat!" he shrieked. "I'll kill you deat."

"You've got to catch me first, old sport," laughed George Gray as he backed away.

"Run for it, George—run for it," yelled the prisoners.

And then the gaping German crowd were treated to another amusing spectacle.

The well-trained and athletic footballer raced round the huge encampment, dodging and turning, and looking round every now and then to see exactly where his enemy was.

After him pelted Kutz, hampered by his heavy jackboots and his rifle, which he bore with both hands.

First to one corner, then to another George ran. Then he crossed the ground until the wire brought him up, when he dodged, evading Kutz's rush with ease, until the German nearly impelled himself on to the death-deal.

(Continued overleaf.)

ing wires. Then into the middle of the field, and among the laughing yet somewhat serious prisoners he ran.

George kept it up until even he began to tire.

But by that time Kutz was almost dying of exhaustion. His face was purple, his mouth was wide open; he was panting frantically for breath, and his heart was beating against his ribs like hammer-strokes on an anvil.

He could no longer shout. He was past it. The crowd, seeing that he had lost the humiliating game his lack of sense had caused him to start, reviled him, sneered at him, jeered at him in the guttural language of the Fatherland.

Suddenly he paused, and with an oath swung the butt of his weapon to his shoulder. He pointed it full at George Gray.

"I will shoot you teat!" he panted, and then, just as his finger touched the trigger, Wilson came behind him and tripped him up.

He fell on his face with a bang. The bayonet drove itself into the ground, and the exploded cartridge impelled its bullet deep into the earth.

Kutz had not hit a bull's-eye that time, and he lay spreadeagled on the ground, utterly unable to rise.

George, glad of a rest, looked round at his friends.

"I wonder," he cried, and his eyes were serious enough now, "what the governor will say to this."

And they, knowing full well what the Germans thought of an insult to the uniform, wondered too.

GEORGE GOES BACK TO PRISON.

SO the wild career of Kutz ended in utter and ignominious disaster.

Had the fellow been nothing but a paid clown, whose duty it was to pander to the mirth of the crowd, he could not have roused the merriment of the on-lookers more effectually.

Many of the prisoners who had lived in Germany, or visited it at frequent intervals from year to year, were well aware of the many sides that go to make up the national character; although, especially in war time, the uniform was almost revered and the military chiefs idolised, no one rejoiced more in the humiliation of one of its wearers than the people who bowed to its authority.

And so, as Kutz rambled round the compound, with his rifle in his hands, its bayonet fixed, his finger ready to pull the trigger, his one aim and object being to kill the Englishman who had made a laughing-stock

of him, the roars of laughter that rang from the lips of the crowd and the smiles that stretched the faces of the sentries deepened as the chase went on.

Had Kutz succeeded in slaying the English footballer, the mob would have shrugged its shoulders and have passed over the incident by saying: "It served him right; he ought to have known better." In like measure as the unarmed Englishman proved himself in every sense of the word more than a match for his armed enemy, so did derisive taunts and contemptuous jeers descend in an avalanche upon the head of Kutz.

His fall, and the explosion of the cartridge, which did no harm to anyone, was the last straw.

The yell of delight that rang out must have made itself heard in the town.

By this time the matter had gone far enough to call for active interference on the part of the officer in command of the guard.

His orders were issued, and half-a-dozen men were swiftly marched through the wire barricade.

With thud, thud, thud of jackboot, arms sloped at a regular angle, they came swinging onward, very workmanlike and soldierly to look at.

When they reached the spot where Kutz lay, the exhausted and utterly demoralised soldier was trying to scramble to his feet.

"Shoot him dead," he mumbled, his face smothered with blood and mud. "He assaulted me. Kill him? Kill him!"

The officer scowled at Kutz. The utter contempt he felt for the miserable rascal showed itself upon his face.

"Get up," he cried, spurning him with his foot. "Get up, you pig-dog!"

Kutz got more and more erect, and then fell prone again.

"Pull that dolt on to his feet," roared the officer, with an impatient gesture.

In a moment Kutz was hauled erect and held firmly. The crowd, seeing the state he was in, yelled themselves hoarse.

"Why don't you catch the Englishman," bawled a wag.

Kutz turned his fishy eyes upon the officer.

"The footballer must be seized," he groaned. "Lieutenant, you will see that I am avenged."

"The commandant will attend to you," answered the officer derisively. "March that fellow away. Quick, we are wasting time."

A sergeant had picked up the soldier's rifle. He ordered two of his men to march away, and accompanied them; the rifle at the trail.

"What's the meaning of this?" blustered Kutz.

(To be continued.)