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V. THE CIRCLE OF TERROR.

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The SECRET OF MELSEY ISLAND.

Another Magnificent Story of NELSON LEE versus
"THE CIRCLE OF TERROR."

By the Author of "*The Yellow Mask*," "*The Brass-bound Box*," "*Fangs of Steel*," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE CIRCLE OF TERROR'S LATEST FRIGHTFULNESS.

"WHO'S Mr. Horace Lippingill?" It was Nipper who asked the question. The lad looked up from his newspaper, and eyed Nelson Lee inquiringly. The famous criminologist stirred his coffee thoughtfully.

"Lippingill? Why, the banker, of course."

"Oh, yes! I knew I'd seen his rummy cognomen somewhere or other," said Nipper, helping himself to another egg.

"He's the head of Lippingill's Bank, isn't he? Oh, well, he can afford to have his country residence busted up! All the same, it's rather hard lines."

"What on earth are you talking about, Nipper?"

"Didn't you see this paragraph in the stop-press column, guv'nor?"

"Considering that you seized the newspaper the very instant you entered the dining-room, and have been poring over it ever since, it is not exactly remarkable that I haven't seen the stop-press column, Nipper," replied Nelson Lee. "I am living in hopes of securing the paper for myself before long."

Nipper grinned.

"Sorry, sir!" he exclaimed. "I thought you were too busy with your brekker to bother about the newspaper. I've been reading out the headlines, anyhow, so you can't grumble."

Nipper passed the newspaper over the

table. He and his famous master were seated in their comfortable dining-room at Gray's Inn Road, and they were partaking of breakfast. The bright May sun shone in at the window gloriously, and the various conglomerated noises of the busy traffic below floated up through the open window, and was music to Nipper's ears.

Only the previous day the pair had arrived back in London from Somerset, where they had been investigating a mysterious burglary. The affair had been settled satisfactorily, and so Lee and Nipper had returned to town.

Nipper, at least, was glad to be back. Except in the very hottest of hot weather, he loved London, and the traffic of Gray's Inn Road had a particularly homely ring about it which was more than welcome.

"Rather queer, isn't it, guv'nor?" asked Nipper.

"Oh, yes. The stop-press column," said Nelson Lee, turning to that particular portion of the newspaper. "I had forgotten, Nipper. Let me see the news concerning Mr. Horace Lippingill."

The detective glanced over the paragraph.

"Yes, young 'un, it is rather queer," he went on. "The report is singularly lacking in detail, and it is really impossible to gather much from it. Nevertheless, the affair was extraordinary."

"It's the last line I can't understand," said Nipper.

"Exactly. The piece of information in the last line is remarkable," agreed

Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "The report is an official one, too, I observe. It was issued by the Press Bureau early this morning."

"Why can't those official jokers be more explicit?" demanded Nipper. "What's the good of putting a paragraph like that in the paper? It'll only make people wonder and get funny ideas into their heads."

"Perhaps the officials know no more than they have stated," suggested Lee. "I am inclined to think, however, that a further report will follow. Mellthorpe Grange, I believe, is in Kent."

The detective sipped his coffee, and re-read the item of news. It was short, and certainly astonishing. It ran:

"PRESS BUREAU, 1.50 a.m.

"Between eleven and twelve o'clock last night a mysterious affair occurred at Mellthorpe Grange, the country residence of Mr. Horace Lippingill, J.P., D.L. An aeroplane appeared over the house, and performed several complete circles. While engaged in these evolutions, the machine dropped fifteen high-explosive bombs, and, unfortunately, they all fell upon the building and exploded with disastrous effect. The damage caused was very considerable, and two fires were started. Fortunately, there were no lives lost, Mr. Lippingill and family being in town, and the servants escaping in time. It is feared, however, that the famous Lippingill library is totally demolished. The aeroplane disappeared almost at once. The machine, it has been definitely ascertained, was not an enemy aeroplane."

The amazing point of the disaster was contained in the last line of the report, as Nipper had remarked. The bombs had not been dropped by an enemy aeroplane! This positively led one to assume that the machine was British.

But such a possibility was unthinkable.

A British aeroplane dropping high-explosive bombs upon a peaceful country house! The thing seemed almost farcical. Yet the paragraph had been issued by the Press Bureau, and that last line, at all events, was quite clear in its meaning. It was not possible to read it in another way.

At the same time, there was much left to the imagination. Where had the mysterious aeroplane come from? Where had it gone to? Had it been traced and

brought down? If so, who was the pilot?

"Perhaps the airman had gone dotty, sir?" suggested Nipper.

Nelson Lee nodded.

"That is certainly a permissible supposition," he replied. "We know, at least, that the machine was British——"

"Mightn't it be a neutral?"

"That is hardly possible. If a neutral Government sent an aeroplane over to Kent to bomb a harmless country mansion, the report would have been worded very differently. Such an act would have been an act of war, Nipper, and I don't think the neutral nations wish to go to war with us," smiled Nelson Lee. "No, the machine was British—the report admits the fact."

"Then the pilot must have gone off his chump," said Nipper. "That's what it was, guv'nor, for a cert. They didn't like to put it in so many words. Some poor fellow who's been at the Front, I suppose. Went dotty while flying, and dropped his bombs, thinking he was over Berlin!"

Nelson Lee suddenly paused in eating.

"Either that, Nipper, or——"

"Or what, sir?" asked the lad, as Lee stopped.

"It is a further exhibition of frightfulness on the part of some old enemies of ours," said the detective quietly. "It just struck me, young 'un. By James! it's a likely theory. Just the very thing they would do, too!"

"Who? The very thing who'd do?"

"Can't you guess?"

"Old enemies of ours?" muttered Nipper. "No, I'm bothered if I can!" He paused, and stared at Lee with his mouth wide open. Then he banged the table to such good purpose that a considerable portion of his cup of coffee was neatly deposited upon the snowy-white cloth.

"The Circle of Terror!" shouted Nipper.

"Exactly!" assented Nelson Lee.

"But, my dear Nipper, there is really no necessity to attract the attention of everybody in Gray's Inn Road! You must learn to moderate your voice when you get excited."

Nipper whistled.

"The Circle of Terror!" he repeated.

"You've hit it, guv'nor! My idea of a British pilot going dotty was right off the rails. Those bombs were dropped

by the Circle aeroplane. They've got one, as we know. They've used an aeroplane in two or three affairs. You travelled in it once—during that business of the brass-bound box; when you were nearly suffocated."

Nelson Lee nodded grimly at the recollection.

"I am not likely to forget that experience, either," he remarked. "It was then that I discovered the identity of the Circle's High Lord—when I learned that the High Lord was none other than our old friend, Professor Cyrus Zingrave."

"And Mr. Lippingill, I suppose, did something the Circle didn't like?" suggested Nipper. "That's just Zingrave, to a tee. He's ruthless and devilish enough for anything! By Cæsar! But it's a bit too thick to follow the Huns' game!"

"Don't speak with such certainty, Nipper," said Nelson Lee quietly. "After all, it is only a possibility. The Circle of Terror may be quite innocent of this particular piece of frightfulness."

"I'll bet a fiver that machine belonged to the Circle," declared Nipper.

And his master, although he certainly would not have gone to the length of betting, was of the same opinion.

During the remainder of the meal both Lee and Nipper were silent. They were thinking of their several fights against the powerful organisation of criminals who had styled themselves the Circle of Terror—and who had startled the whole country, east and west, north and south, some months before.

Owing to various circumstances, Nelson Lee and Nipper had found themselves involved rather deeply in the affairs of the Circle of Terror; that is to say, the famous detective and his young assistant were engaged upon the perilous task of fighting the Circle of Terror, tooth and nail, when an opportunity arose.

So far, there had been several adventurous encounters, and, upon the whole, Lee and Nipper had emerged with flying colours. Their lives had been threatened by the Circle many times, but, owing to constant vigilance, the pair had always succeeded in outwitting their enemies.

At the commencement Nelson Lee had been groping in the dark; there had been nothing in the nature of a clue to direct him upon the track. But, by

dogged perseverance, Lee had learned many things.

The Circle of Terror was utterly ruthless. In order to gain its ends, it would not hesitate at wholesale murder. Railway trains had been wrecked, disastrous fires started, and no thanks were due to the Circle of Terror that no lives had been actually lost.

Nelson Lee was responsible for the arrest and conviction of at least one important member of the Circle's Inner Committee. This man was named Edmund Cross, and before his exposure he had been quite above suspicion. At one particular time Nelson Lee had thought that Cross was the Circle's chief.

But in this supposition Lee was wrong. The chief of the grim organisation had at least three titles for himself, for he had called himself the High Lord, the Dictator, the Supreme Chief. But, generally, he preferred to use the former.

The High Lord's identity had been a mystery for some time, but by great perseverance and daring Lee had ultimately discovered that the High Lord was none other than the notorious scientist, Professor Cyrus Zingrave, the powerful man who had once been the Chief of the League of the Green Triangle.

It was the cunning, clever brain of Professor Zingrave that directed all the various villainies of the Circle of Terror. Where the High Lord's stronghold was situated still remained a mystery.

On one memorable occasion Nelson Lee had succeeded in gaining an entrance into the High Lord's secret retreat, and he had only escaped by the skin of his teeth. And, owing to adverse circumstances, Lee did not know the precise whereabouts of the Circle's headquarters.

Upon the whole, the great detective's campaign had so far been very successful. Nipper had taken quite a large part in all the happenings, and he believed that he had made at least one friend—a friend among the enemy. For one of the Circle's responsible members—a man named Montague Todd—had every reason to be grateful towards Nipper.

The man had attempted to take Nipper's life, but had accidentally fallen into a swiftly running river himself. Being unable to swim, he would have been certainly drowned had it not been for a wonderfully generous act on Nipper's part. The lad, although bound by

the wrists, had dived to the rescue, and had brought Todd safely to shore.

Nipper firmly believed that Todd was a decent man in the main, and the day following the adventure, Nipper had received a note from Todd in which the man said he would one day pay his debt of gratitude. But Nelson Lee, knowing the scoundrelly nature of the Circle's members, was inclined to be sceptical. In all probability, Todd would attempt to lead Lee and Nipper into a trap.

The most stringent precaution was necessary constantly. Lee and Nipper never relaxed their vigilance, and in consequence of this they had so far escaped the machinations of the enemy.

The detective's idea in regard to the bombing of Mr. Horace Lippingill's country residence was to receive surprising confirmation before the day was over. For, during the afternoon, the great banker called upon Nelson Lee in person.

Mr. Lippingill was great in two respects. He was great in the sense that he was a power in the banking world, and he was a man of bulky proportions. Standing fully six foot high, he was more than proportionately broad. When he entered a room he seemed to fill the whole apartment. Nipper positively affirmed that the house shook to its very foundations when the banker ascended the stairs to the consulting-room. This, however, was an unwarrantable exaggeration.

"I have come to you, Mr. Lee, upon the advice of a very old friend of mine—Lord Mount-Bevon," began Mr. Lippingill gravely. "Some few weeks ago he was persecuted by those dastardly scoundrels who have termed themselves the Circle of Terror."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"That is so, Mr. Lippingill," he agreed. "The famous Mount-Bevon jewels were demanded from his lordship, and I was successful in regaining possession of them. In that particular enterprise the Circle of Terror was totally defeated."

"Well, it is my wish that you should do your utmost to bring this infernal Circle of Terror to justice," declared the great banker fiercely. "Oh, I've suffered enough—I don't suppose they'll attempt to do me further harm. But I want reparation, Mr. Lee. I want to see those rogues that into prison."

"I think there are many people with similar views, Mr. Lippingill," smiled Lee.

"No doubt—no doubt. But I have a particular reason for desiring the Circle's downfall," replied Mr. Lippingill. "I'm a rich man, Mr. Lee, and I will willingly pay every expense you may incur in bringing the villains to justice. I have come to you because I have tremendous faith in your ability and astuteness."

"You are very flattering——"

"No, no! I loathe flattery at all times, and would never descend to it," replied the visitor earnestly. "You will soon understand, Mr. Lee, why I am so furious. You will soon realise that I have been victimised in the most appalling manner."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I think I understand the position fairly accurately now, Mr. Lippingill," he replied. "Your country residence was partially destroyed last night by an agent of the Circle of Terror, who dropped bombs upon it from an aeroplane."

"You have seen the newspaper report, of course?" asked the banker. "I daresay you guessed the truth at once. Mr. Lee, although no mention of the Circle is made in the brief report which was passed for publication."

"Was the damage exaggerated?"

Mr. Lippingill shifted his great bulk in the chair.

"Exaggerated?" he added. "Upon my soul! I wish to Heaven I could tell you so! The truth is, Mr. Lee, Mellthorpe Grange is nothing but a total ruin. The bombs that were dropped were of the most appalling nature, and the house was practically demolished by the explosions alone. Fires broke out as a natural consequence, and they effectively completed the work of destruction. It is a fearful blow to me, but I am more than thankful that no lives were lost. Two servants were seriously injured, but they will recover, I believe."

Nelson Lee pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"Why are you sure that this aeroplane belonged to the Circle of Terror?" he asked, passing his cigar-case to the visitor.

"There is no doubt regarding that point," declared Mr. Lippingill. "In addition to bombs there were several—
I should say scores—of metal discs

dropped upon the house and grounds. Upon them was painted a purple circle—the sign, as you are well aware, of the infamous society."

"I presume you incurred the Circle's enmity?" suggested Lee quietly.

"Yes. I was foolish enough to make a firm stand against them," replied the banker, with some bitterness. "I have only myself to blame, I suppose. I should have profited by the disasters which occurred to the Southern Counties Railway and other concerns who defied the Circle of Terror. I realise, now that it is too late, that I was mad to refuse the Circle's demand."

"You have certainly lost more by defiance," remarked Lee.

"I have lost something which can never be recovered—my precious library," replied Mr. Lippingill bitterly. "But how could I have guessed, Mr. Lee? How could I have anticipated such appalling—"

"You know that the Circle was utterly ruthless, at all events."

"True. But I was furious—as any man would be," protested the other. "I was calmly ordered to pay the Circle of Terror the sum of twenty-four thousand pounds! The thing was preposterous—and I ignored the whole matter. The result was— Well, you know the result, Mr. Lee."

Nelson Lee puffed at his cigar for a few moments.

"Have you had another demand from the Circle?" he asked, at length.

"Another demand?" repeated Mr. Lippingill. "Good heavens! You don't mean to suggest that this Circle of Terror will persist in their scoundrelly game? No, I have heard nothing since the second warning was delivered—three days ago. I tore it up, and the wrecking of my country home was the consequence. Man alive! They will surely leave me alone after that dastardly outrage?"

The banker seemed aghast, and he allowed his cigar to burn unevenly. Between puffs he gazed at Nelson Lee with a kind of fascinated horror. He had apparently not considered the possibility of further persecution.

"It is quite possible that the Circle will demand the payment of the large sum you mentioned, just the same," said Nelson Lee gravely. "Your home was demolished merely as an exhibition of,

the Circle's power. On the other hand, they may drop the thing completely. But I should not rely upon that.

"Suppose—suppose they renew their demands?"

"Then I should pay up."

"You actually advise me to meekly give in?" asked Mr. Lippingill hotly.

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear sir, would you have me advise you differently?" he asked. "If you defy the Circle of Terror a second time another—and a greater—misfortune will befall you. And you will pay in the end. So why not avoid all disaster by—"

"But—but the position is intolerable!" shouted Mr. Lippingill, furiously. "Is there no law in this country? Great Heaven! Are we living in a time of feudalism, when a hidden band of scoundrels may demand anything and everything they like? Is there no redress? Cannot this vile campaign of terrorism be stopped?"

Nelson Lee neatly jerked the ash from his cigar.

"At present, there is no prospect of the conditions being altered," he replied smoothly. "You must look at this thing in the right light, Mr. Lippingill. What can the police do? What can I do? This Circle of Terror is sheltering behind the impenetrable shadows of the unknown. Nobody knows exactly how powerful they are. To wage war against them is a dangerous business. My assistant and I have been on the brink of death several times since the Circle commenced its deadly campaign. Yet I have discovered much, and I can faintly see the dawning light of better conditions ahead. I hope to be able to wage a war against the Circle of Terror on equal terms. At present they have every advantage. You have often heard of the Black Hand, and the Mafia, and the Camorra? These secret societies are insignificant compared to the Circle of Terror. The man who is ruling the Circle has brought everything up to the latest degree of perfection. He has spies everywhere; he has every modern appliance. And he possesses unlimited power. It is essentially a slow and tedious business to wage war against him—and, I may add, a deadly dangerous business."

Mr. Lippingill drew a deep breath.

"You have certainly made me understand the position better," he said.

"But it is monstrous, Mr. Lee! The whole thing sounds like the wildest fiction. Yet the bombing of my country home was real enough! Where, in Heaven's name, does that aeroplane come from? Why was it not traced and brought down?"

"There again the Circle has the advantage," said Nelson Lee. "It is no easy matter to trace a modern aeroplane. Its secret hanger may be in the centre of a great moor, where it can rise unobserved and attain a great height. Then it flies across country unseen and unheard. And, supposing the aeroplane was captured? What then? One man would be arrested. Would the Circle's power be any the less? The loss to them would be insignificant, for, in all probability, they possess many secret aeroplanes."

"Good gracious! It is unthinkable!"

"Sooner or later a hitch will occur," went on Lee. "A flaw will develop—a flaw which will spread and resolve itself into a definite opening. Once that opening appears, the Circle of Terror will be defeated. For, when it is possible to strike a decisive blow, that blow will be struck quickly and heavily. The Circle will crumple up and cease to exist."

"I pray that time will soon come."

"It may be months—perhaps years," said Nelson Lee gravely. "On the other hand, the flaw may develop within a few weeks. It is impossible to speak with certainty. But at present it is madness to defy the Circle. I have given the same advice to all who come to me—obey the Circle's demands. It is the only safe way—and the cheapest in the long run."

"I realise that your advice is excellent," said the banker. "Although, naturally, it goes against the grain to 'knuckle under.' I was extremely foolish not to see things in this light before, Mr. Lee."

"Pay the money, and save yourself from disaster—that is my advice," said the great detective. "Perhaps you will think such a course savours of cowardice? But is it not wisdom? Every man who has defied the Circle has suffered terrible loss, and has paid in the finish. When the Circle is smashed a huge reserve of money will undoubtedly be discovered. The money will, in the natural course of things, be returned to its rightful owners. So, by paying quietly, you will only be laying by a certain sum of money. You may not get it all back, but

you will certainly get a certain proportion. The Circle of Terror may retain its power for months to come; but, sooner or later, there will be a swift collapse."

Mr. Horace Lippingill smiled.

"Well, I adhere to my request, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed. "Whether I am persecuted further or not, I want you to fight this infernal society with all the wit and strength you are capable of. I will willingly supply you with funds——"

"That is generous of you, Mr. Lippingill," interrupted Lee. "When I find myself in want of capital I will approach you. And you may rest assured that everything possible is being done to defeat the Circle. Scotland Yard is working at full pressure—and perhaps they will succeed in bringing the Circle to ruin before I even feel my feet. I am inclined to think differently, however," added the detective drily.

After a further chat Mr. Lippingill took his departure, and Nelson Lee sat in a big chair, and finished his cigar. Nipper, who had been present at the interview, wondered what was "in the wind." And Nelson Lee came to a decision which was to lead to astonishing things.

There was nothing startling in the decision itself—nothing surprising, in fact—but some extremely strenuous times were ahead of Nelson Lee and Nipper, if they had only known it.

CHAPTER II.

THE AIRCRAFT OF MYSTERY.

ALTHOUGH Mr. Horace Lippingill and his troubles dropped out of the affair from that time onwards, it was owing to his visit that Nelson Lee came to the decision which was to lead to such astounding issues.

"Look here, Nipper," said the great detective thoughtfully. "We have been neglecting a rather important thing. It seems to me that the Circle of Terror intends to make more extensive use of its aeroplane—or aeroplanes—than it has hitherto done. The High Lord knows how valuable a swift flyer can be. The bomb-dropping episode of last night, for example. Mr. Lippingill's home was wrecked, and it is quite impossible to bring the crime home to its authors."

"Old Zugraxe's a cunning fox, guv'."

nor," declared Nipper. "Fancy taking a leaf out of the Huns' book! Fancy dropping bombs on a peaceful country house, careless of whether lives are lost or not! It's—it's awful!"

"It's possible, even probable, that further demonstrations of a similar nature will occur," said Nelson Lee. "If so, I should like to be fully prepared for such an emergency. We have practised flying a good deal, Nipper, but it is night-flying which is the most important."

"Are we going on a trip, then?" asked Nipper brightly.

"Yes—to-night. We will run over to Hendon, and take our machine out," replied the detective. "Just a practice-flight, you know, Nipper. If we ever get an opportunity of chasing the enemy we must be as efficient as he. Therefore, I intend to do a good deal of night-flying in future. It is a precautionary measure which may mean a lot later on."

"Good business," said Nipper. "I'm game, guv'nor."

So, after dark that evening, Nelson Lee and Nipper travelled out to the famous aerodrome at Hendon—now, of course, under military control. Lee experienced no difficulty in gaining permission to fly, so long as he restricted his flight to a certain area. A mere civilian must not fly anywhere and everywhere he chooses in these strenuous days.

Nelson Lee possessed an aeroplane of his own.

It was a small monoplane, of the scout type, and was capable of attaining a high speed. It was a two-seater, and both Lee and Nipper were efficient pilots. Nipper, in spite of his youth, was extremely clever, and one occasion he had performed some startling evolutions while in the air.

Lee, however, was sternly against trick flying, and Nipper never indulged in that sort of thing again. As Lee said, most of the flying accidents occurred while pilots were attempting to perform "fool" tricks. Straightforward flying, by day or by night, was as safe as driving a motor-car.

Nelson Lee's 'plane was kept in one of the Dowell Flying School hangers, and Dowell himself always kept the "'bus" in trim for the detective. Consequently, it was now tuned up to perfection, and ready for instant flight.

Augustus Dowell was a clever pilot, and an extremely able instructor; he had trained scores of the most successful Service men, and was renowned for his "safe" flying. He never performed "stunts," and had never had a serious accident. Nelson Lee knew that his monoplane could not be in better hands.

"Why, it's Mr. Lee," exclaimed Dowell heartily, as he saw the detective entering the hangar. "I was just off, to tell you the truth. Not thinking of going up now, are you?"

"That is my intention," smiled the detective.

"H'm! It's dark, Mr. Lee," said Dowell, a clean-limbed young man of twenty-seven. "Think you'll be able to manage all right? You'll get up without a smell of trouble, I know. It's the landing that's the deuce. It would be jolly serious if you went and crooked yourself——"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"You seem anxious about me, Dowell," he exclaimed, with a twinkle. "I don't presume to be such a skillful pilot as you——"

"Oh, chuck that!" grinned Dowell. "You're all right, Mr. Lee. I dare say you could give me a few tips. Anyhow, I've never seen a machine handled better than you handle one. Scott! You can make the 'bus do any old thing!"

"The guv'nor's all right," said Nipper confidently.

"And you're not so slow, either, young man," remarked the instructor. "I'll say this much: I'd trust any of my machines with either of you, and I'd be perfectly comfortable. But night-flying is tricky—infernally tricky."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"That is precisely my reason for coming here to-night, Dowell," he agreed. "I am anxious to become thoroughly proficient in night-flying, and I intend to make fairly frequent flights after dark, in future."

Dowell glanced out of the open doorway of the hangar.

"It's black to-night," he said uneasily. "Starlight, I'll admit, and there's not a ha'porth of wind. I was up myself an hour ago, testing a new engine, and the air was splendidly even. But this darkness——"

"My dear fellow, where were you at eleven o'clock last night?"

The instructor stared.

"Where was I at eleven o'clock last night?" he repeated. "What the deuce has that got to do with —"

"Where were you—roughly?" smiled Lee. "I don't want to pry, you know."

"Oh, that's all right. I was just coming out of the Hippodrome, I believe," said Dowell. "That new revue rather tickled me, too, by the way. You ought to go and see it, Mr. Lee."

"Never mind the revue," chuckled Lee. "I just wished to remind you that a nearly full moon was sailing behind the clouds last night. Being full up with the revue, however, you didn't notice it. In all probability, too, you stepped straight out of the Hippodrome into a taxi."

"You're a daisy, Mr. Lee," said Dowell. "That's just what happened. Of course, I do remember, now. The moon's due to rise in about an hour, I believe. By the time you come down there'll be plenty of decent moonlight. I wondered what the thunder you were sitting at."

They all laughed, and Dowell walked across to Nelson Lee's machine, obviously at ease. At present it was pitchy dark, but the moon would soon be rising, and landing by moonlight was quite an easy matter. An easy matter, that is, to a very skilful pilot.

Although Lee trusted Dowell thoroughly, the detective, nevertheless, tested every nut, bolt, and stay of the aeroplane before starting off. The man who never has a bad flying accident is the man who takes precautions. There is no excuse for the pilot who starts out on a flight with slackened stay and control wires.

"I had the engine running this afternoon," remarked Dowell. "She went like a dream. You've got a first-class article there, Mr. Lee. Aeroplane engines are like shop-eggs; some are good right through, some are squiffy and uncertain, and others are absolutely rotten!"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"Suppose we run her for a bit?" he suggested.

There was a self starting arrangement fitted, and in a few moments the powerful, 100-horse-power motor was roaring round with a musical buzz. The machine was, of course, secured.

For ten minutes Lee allowed the

engine to run at full power. As Dowell had said, it went like a dream. By this time Lee and Nipper had donned thick overalls, and they took their places—Lee in the cockpit, and Nipper in the observer's seat.

Dowell and one or two mechanics dragged the machine out of the hangar, and then Nelson Lee carefully "taxied" across the grass to a spot from where a clear start could be obtained.

The detective allowed the engine to tick over gently, for it was wonderfully flexible, while Dowell and his men got the machine into exact position. Then, while they hung on, Lee opened out the throttle. The motor roared, and the wind from the tractor-screw almost levelled the grass.

Lee gave a yell, and in another second the aeroplane was bounding across the grass into the darkness. She rose beautifully, but Lee did not attempt to turn until he was, he judged, fully a hundred feet up. Then he swept round in a wide circle, and commenced a long spiral ascent.

The engine had now settled down into a low roar. It was more than usually silenced, and it was quite possible for Lee and Nipper to converse, provided they used their lungs sufficiently. On some aeroplanes conversation is simply out of the question.

Lee remained over the aerodrome for a good twenty minutes, rising all the time. He had no intention of starting off across country until he was fully five thousand feet up. It is always safer to fly high.

There was an electric lamp fitted just inside the hood, and by switching this on Nelson Lee could see the various dials of the instruments. The detective reckoned to be up about a couple of hours, but during that time he would not stray far. If he had started off upon a direct course, he would have found himself somewhere in the Midlands, or on the South Coast, at the expiration of two hours.

Lee's plan was to keep within the limit of about thirty miles. By this method he would not exceed the line of St. Albans—Ware—Chelmsford, all three towns comparatively near to London.

Up at that height the moon was already visible to them, and before long it was shedding its weak light upon the dark country beneath. Presently, the light

would grow stronger, as the moon rose higher.

Nipper was enjoying himself. He loved flying at all times; but there was a spice of adventure in a night flight, especially when they were merely out for a joy-ride, as he described it.

Looking down he could distinguish practically nothing. Just here and there a dull glimmer of light, but the surface of the country was completely enshrouded in gloom. Nipper could realize why the Zeppelins dropped their bombs at random, when the murder-machines came. The bombs were dropped at random simply because it was too dark to distinguish any positive objective.

When the moon was higher things would be different. The Circle of Terror machine, which had destroyed Melthorpe Grange, had done its dastardly work in brilliant moonlight, and had been flying quite low. Zeppelins, on the other hand, were in the habit of choosing the darkest of dark nights, and flying at a great altitude.

"This is ripping, guv'nor!" roared Nipper enthusiastically.

Nelson Lee half turned.

"I am afraid there would not be much chance of chasing the Circle machine," he replied. "It would be able to elude capture quite easily. You see, Nipper, an aeroplane has every chance of escape at night. Searchlights, even, would be powerless to locate a small 'plane at a great height."

"Oh, you never know," bawled Nipper confidently. "When the time comes we may find it quite an easy job. Where are we now, sir?"

"Just about over Broxbourne, I believe," replied Lee. "When we sight Chelmsford we'll turn and make for home again. We mustn't stray too far away. It may be difficult to locate Hendon again, too. We can only tell our position by compass, young 'un."

"When the moon gets up we'll see the ground easily, guv'nor."

The machine was doing about ninety miles an hour, Nelson Lee noted. This was by no means its maximum speed. "All out," the aeroplane could touch the hundred-and-ten mark.

But there was no necessity to strain the engine. It was running sweetly now, and there was no prospect of trouble. Engine-trouble, indeed, could be the only danger to fear. It would have been risky to make a forced landing.

The miles slipped by, and Nipper lay

back in his comfortable seat and gazed above and ahead through his goggles. The sky was singularly clear, and the stars were now somewhat weaker, owing to the influence of the growing power of the moonlight.

There was not a cloud to be seen, and Nipper, gazing at the moon, found himself wondering if there could be such things as streets and houses and motor-buses and trees. He seemed to be in a world apart. Everything was gloriously free and open; there was space to move about in; there was delicious air to breathe—

And then Nipper came back to reality.

He stared fixedly at one particular spot ahead. Then, with a curious quickening of his heart-beats, he fumbled for his binoculars. Having secured the glasses, he carefully levelled and focussed them.

For several seconds Nipper remained silent.

Then he leaned forward in his seat, and jabbed Nelson Lee in the back—for the pilot's cockpit was just in front of him. Lee half turned, and looked at his young companion inquiringly.

"What's that up there, guv'nor?" shouted Nipper excitedly.

He pointed ahead of the aeroplane, a little to the left. Nelson Lee followed the direction of Nipper's finger, and stared intently. At first he saw nothing except the star-spangled dome of the heavens, with the three-quarter moon fairly low, and rather hazy.

Then the detective's keen eyes noted a little speck in the sky. It seemed to be hanging quite stationary, and was about a thousand feet higher than Nelson Lee and Nipper.

"Have you got it, sir?" roared Nipper, behind.

"Yes. Let me have the binoculars."

Nipper handed the glasses over, and Lee adjusted them, controlling the aeroplane quite easily with his feet. Not that it needed controlling at all, as a matter of fact. A well-balanced aeroplane will fly perfectly without being touched, and it is quite safe, provided the machine is high.

Lee was several moments gazing at the vague speck in the sky. Even with the binoculars it was quite impossible to determine what the thing was. By daylight, of course, it would have been easy to distinguish the object. It just seemed to be a dull blob, and hung in the sky seemingly stationary.

"It is certainly not an aeroplane, Nipper," said Nelson Lee musingly. "Aeroplanes cannot hover in one fixed position as that thing is doing. And it is too small to be an airship; we should be able to recognise a gas-bag in an instant. It seemed to be a kind of kite—although a kite at such an altitude as this is amazing. The thing must be fully seven thousand feet from the ground."

Nipper didn't hear all that his master had been saying. The lad was staring at the object in the sky. The most surprising part of it was the complete stillness of the hovering object.

They were nearer to it now, but by continuing on their present course they would naturally fly a thousand feet beneath it and fully a couple of miles to the right of it.

Lee was puzzled and interested. He could not form any opinion as to what the strange thing could be. And Nelson Lee did not like anything that could not be explained. And he had a vague suspicion in his mind that this mysterious object in the sky was to prove of unusual interest.

Accordingly the detective opened the throttle still wider, and the engine roared a fiercer tune. Then, sweeping round in a wide circle, the machine rose higher and higher into the vault of heaven.

In a comparatively short time Lee and Nipper were at just about the same height as the other thing—which still remained in the same position, and at the same altitude. It seemed as though it had not moved an inch since Nipper had first sighted it.

The country below was quiet and dark, and there was certainly not a military aerodrome in this particular district. The spot was probably about eight miles from Chelmsford, in Essex.

"What are you going to do, guv'nor?" asked Nipper.

"Find out what that thing is," roared Lee in reply. "Use the binoculars carefully, young 'un, and note every detail. Perhaps we are making a mystery out of nothing—the object may be merely an extra large kite."

"But there's no wind!" shouted Nipper. "Not a breath, guv'nor. Kites can't fly without a breeze—they can't get up to this height, anyhow!"

This was true enough, and Nelson Lee made no reply. He had headed the aeroplane straight for the mysterious hoverer, and it was now about two miles ahead. Lee and Nipper were rushing towards it

at such a speed that they would arrive at the spot in little over a minute.

Nipper levelled his glasses and fixed them intently upon the thing in front. It was now growing clearer and more defined. With a little catch in his breath Nipper made out a shape similar to an aeroplane, but quite different in many details. And as the lad watched the strange thing seemed to swing round broadside.

And now Nipper saw a light.

It was electric light, and seemed to be coming from a little window, which was set into a dark bulk. The object was undoubtedly an aircraft of some description. But it could not be an aeroplane, for it was hanging there without moving, and aeroplanes, wonderful as they are, are not capable of remaining stationary in one spot. Neither could the aircraft be a dirigible balloon, for the gas-bag would have been instantly visible.

What could it be, then?

As Nipper watched he caught his breath in. He had distinctly seen a figure move across the light. There was a man within the cabin—perhaps more than one man! And Nelson Lee, with his naked eye, observed the same thing.

By now both the detective and his assistant were filled with wonder and astonishment. This remarkable machine was certainly something of an entirely novel character, something which was almost unbelievable. But it was no illusion—the aircraft hung there distinctly.

Nelson Lee was just preparing to swerve round, in order to avoid a collision, when a surprising thing happened.

The mysterious aircraft commenced rising straight into the sky, perpendicularly! It rose rapidly, and Nelson Lee's aeroplane roared beneath it and then swung round. By the time Lee and Nipper could see the strange craft again it was fully five hundred feet higher. And even as they watched it commenced speeding off towards the north-east at an amazing rate.

Great Scott!" bawled Nipper blankly.

His master made no reply, but at once set his course in a similar direction to that taken by the other machine. Lee allowed his engine to run "all out," and the aeroplane must have been travelling at fully a hundred and twelve miles an hour. Well ahead now, the other aircraft grew smaller and smaller in the distance.

"She's showing us a clean pair of heels, guv'nor!" bellowed Nipper.

"Might as well try to chase a comet! What in the name of all that's queer can that machine be? I've never seen anything so absolutely amazing in all my natural!"

"It is indeed astounding, Nipper!" replied the great detective.

In less than a minute the unknown flyer was totally invisible. It had streaked off at a speed which could certainly not have been less than a hundred and fifty miles an hour. And now it had vanished utterly.

A chase was obviously impossible.

Nelson Lee eased his engine down somewhat, and then turned for home. It would be foolish to proceed further afield.

The whole adventure was startling, and both Nelson Lee and Nipper had the same thought in their minds. This strange machine they had encountered was the aircraft belonging to the Circle of Terror!

Certainly it was not a machine known to the public, or even to those closely associated with aviation. Lee was well acquainted with most of the very newest machines which were being added to the flying services. And the vessel which he and Nipper had seen was certainly not a military one.

It was something entirely new in aviation—a mystery machine in very truth.

CHAPTER III.

LEE VISITS THE AIR MINISTRY—THE SECRET OF MELSEY ISLAND.

DURING the return journey to Hendon, Lee and Nipper were very thoughtful. They had started out upon this flight with no prospect of encountering anything in the shape of another aircraft. And the machine which they had seen was such an extraordinary craft that they could scarcely believe that the incident had actually happened.

Yet it was impossible for them both to have imagined the thing.

The machine had been there—had hovered seven thousand feet from the ground, and had sped off at a speed which, in itself, was almost staggering.

Nelson Lee was at once struck by the sinister possibilities. That aircraft belonged to the Circle of Terror! It was that machine which had bombed Mellthorpe Grange!

The brevity of the official report was

now somewhat explained. That machine which Lee and Nipper had seen could have hung over any building, and could have dropped its bombs with absolute accuracy.

Such an aircraft, in the hands of the Circle of Terror, could be a menace of the most appalling description. Zeppelins would be toys compared to them. That strange flyer was capable of remaining in a stationary position, and of travelling through space at a speed hitherto unattainable.

The Circle of Terror's dangerous power was increased enormously by the possession of this new invention; for it was undoubtedly something entirely fresh in the world of aeronautics.

Nelson Lee thought deeply on the subject. Professor Zingrave, cunning and clever and ever resourceful, had evidently discovered the secret of the new air-vessel; had, perhaps, paid the inventor a huge sum to construct the machine secretly and unbeknown to the outside world.

What if the Circle possessed a whole fleet of those vessels!

Nelson Lee almost shuddered when he thought of the terrible possibilities. The present "reign of terror" would be as nothing compared to the state of the country if the Circle really did possess a fleet. Ordinary aeroplanes would be helpless against them; they would be able to move about freely, and scatter death and destruction broadcast.

In all probability the authorities knew nothing whatever of the existence of the new machine. It was possible that they would scoff at Lee when he reported the adventure. Yet the detective had not been mistaken. There had been nothing vague about the experience; the strange aircraft had been seen distinctly by both Lee and Nipper.

With skilful judgment, Lee brought the machine to earth as gently as a feather, the moonlight enabling him to gauge his height to a nicety. Having landed, he "taxied" towards the hangars.

Dowell, as it happened, had not gone yet. Truth to tell, the man had been somewhat uneasy, and had decided to remain until Lee returned. He came out to meet the detective now, with two young officers of the Flying Corps.

The latter were more or less famous, although they were but twenty-two years of age—one, indeed, was only just over twenty-one. But they were clever and

daring pilots, and were experienced night flyers. One had gained the V.C., and the other the D.S.O., for their splendid courage in fighting Zeppelins. Lee was acquainted with both.

"Glad you've got back all right, Mr. Lee," exclaimed Dowell, as the detective stepped to the ground. "You made a splendid landing."

"Oh, it's possible to do anything with this machine," laughed Lee. "Hallo, you fellows," he added to the two officers. "Are you going up to-night?"

"Not that I know of," replied one. "We may get orders, but I don't think so. Everything's quiet. It's my opinion we've seen the last of the Zepps."

The aeroplane was wheeled into its hangar, and the men stood looking on for a few moments. Lee peeled off his overalls, and Nipper did the same. Then the detective lit a cigarette, and regarded the officers thoughtfully.

"Have you been up lately?" he asked. "After dark, I mean?"

"Only for a practice flight now and again, Mr. Lee," replied Lieutenant Vallance, V.C. "There's not much doing nowadays. You didn't stray far away, did you? But is anything wrong? You seem deucedly serious."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I am serious," he replied. "Look here, do you know anything of a new type of aircraft? Have you ever seen a machine which can hover in one spot indefinitely? A machine which can show a clean pair of heels to any ordinary aeroplane?"

"You don't mean a gas-bag?"

"No, of course not."

"A machine that can hover in one spot indefinitely," repeated Vallance. "Mr. Lee's having a joke with us, Chambers. No such machine exists."

Lieutenant Chambers grinned.

"Of course not," he agreed. "What's the idea, Mr. Lee?"

"I wish I knew," was the detective's reply. "But Nipper and I have had a most astonishing experience to-night. I'm not joking. And I think you know me well enough to feel certain that I wouldn't exaggerate the affair."

And Nelson Lee explained exactly what had occurred. Dowell and the two young officers listened incredulously.

Clearly they were in complete ignorance of the existence of the mysterious

craft which Leo and Nipper had encountered.

"I say, are you really serious?" asked Dowell doubtfully.

"Deadly so."

"But it's a bit tall, you know," went on the instructor. "It's impossible for an aeroplane to hover over one particular spot. You know as well as I do, Mr. Lee. What you saw must have been a dirigible——"

"My dear man, could a dirigible travel at that speed?"

"Well, no. I don't suppose it could."

"Then it was a machine of a totally original type," said Lee. "I mentioned it because I thought you might know something about it. As you don't I think it would be wise to say nothing."

"Oh, we won't talk," said Lieutenant Vallance. "I dare say we should be laughed at, anyhow. If any other man but you had told the yarn, Mr. Lee, I should have called him a liar. But you wouldn't fake that story up, I know. By Jove! I should like to see that machine!"

Lee knew that his listeners were sceptical, but he had thought it wise to speak of the subject, in case they had experienced any similar adventure. As they knew nothing, the detective warned them to keep the thing quiet.

When Lee and Nipper left they were both thoughtful and uneasy. The Circle of Terror, possessing that amazing aircraft, was altogether more formidable than it had been hitherto.

Lee decided to inform the authorities without delay, and the very next morning the great criminologist went round to the Hotel Cyril. That famous building, situated in the Strand, was now the headquarters of the Air Ministry. At the Hotel Cyril Nelson Lee sent his card up to a man he was well acquainted with—Sir Reginald Medwin.

In fact, Sir Reginald was a friend of Lee's, and the detective felt sure that he would grant an interview if time would allow. And the baronet was a high official of the ministry.

Within ten minutes Leo was ushered into the lift, and escorted to a comfortable suite of rooms on the third floor. As the detective had anticipated, Sir Reginald Medwin had found time to see him at once.

The official was a slim, austere-looking man, with a grizzled moustache and

a head which was comparatively innocent of hair, except for a fringe round the back. But he was a genial man, and he greeted Lee warmly. After they had exchanged greetings, Sir Reginald looked at Lee inquiringly.

"I suppose you've come bothering me for some definite reason, eh?" suggested Medwin smilingly. "You're not the kind of man to waste time in idle calls, Lee. What is it? Do you want to know how many new aeroplanes we're putting into the services per week? Do you want to know all sorts of things which I can't possibly tell you?"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"I expect you get plenty of people of that sort, my dear Medwin," he replied. "No, I'm just going to report a rather singular incident which occurred last night. My young assistant and I ran out to Hendon, and we started on a two-hours' flight, having, of course, obtained permission from the right quarter."

"Last night, you said?" repeated Sir Reginald. "I suppose you mean last evening?"

"No. We didn't start out until after dark."

"Oh, so you're going in for night-flying, are you? What's the idea of that, Lee?" asked the official. "Just pleasure, I suppose."

"Not exactly. You've no doubt heard of the Circle of Terror?"

Medwin frowned.

"Who hasn't?" he growled. "I've followed up the whole thing carefully, Lee, and it strikes me that those infernal scoundrels are going to cause a lot more trouble before they are laid by the heels. That affair at Lippingill's place, for example. By George! What dastardly scoundrelism!"

"By the way, that machine hasn't been traced, I suppose?"

"Traced!" repeated Sir Reginald, with a snort. "The infernal thing simply disappeared into thin air. Several of our young chaps went up, but it was like looking for a needle in a haystack. The public, of course, complain that our air-service is inadequate, and all that sort of nonsense. The man in the street doesn't know what an impossible task it is to locate a fugitive aeroplane once its got a clear start."

"I hope you don't include me in that class," suggested Lee, with a smile. "I appreciate the difficulties very fully, Med-

win, and I know that our brave fellows are absolutely wonderful in every way. But, to resume my story. Nipper and I started off from Hendon at a height of about six thousand feet, and made our way over a portion of Essex. I didn't mean to stray too far, you know, but I loathe being confined to the restrictions of an aerodrome. There's no fun in circling round and round over the same spot. Well, we were some little distance from Chelmsford, I believe, when Nipper happened to spot something in the sky. It seemed to be an aeroplane of some description, but it was perfectly stationary. —"

Sir Reginald Medwin started.

"Stationary?" he repeated sharply.

"Yes. The thing just hung in the sky."

"Dear me, that was extraordinary, wasn't it?" said the other. "Go on, Lee. I'm getting quite interested."

Nelson Lee told Sir Reginald in clear words precisely what had occurred. The baronet listened with compressed lips, nodding now and again, and regarding Lee intently. When the detective had finished there was a short silence, broken, at last, by Sir Reginald.

"The machine simply hung in the sky, you say?" he asked.

"It was quite stationary."

"But it wasn't an airship?"

"Of course not," replied Lee, rather impatiently.

"Was it silent?"

"I couldn't say. My own engine, you see, was going at full power, and the noise of that drowned all other sounds."

"H'm! What do you think the strange machine was?" asked Medwin bluntly.

Nelson Lee bent forward.

"I believe it to be a new type of aircraft developed and perfected by the Circle of Terror!" he replied grimly.

"I believe it to be a flying machine of a type hitherto unknown in the science of aviation. The Circle of Terror is in possession of the secret, and unless drastic steps are taken—at once—they will build scores of the machines, and institute a reign of terror in Great Britain which will lead to death, disaster, and revolution!"

"That's a pretty picture you've painted," remarked Medwin drily.

"Think of the possibilities, my dear fellow!" said Lee. "With machines

like that one I saw at their disposal the Circle of Terror——”

“You’re wrong, Lee. I’m thankful to say,” interjected Sir Reginald, with a smile. “That thing you say doesn’t belong to the Circle of Terror——”

Lee looked at his companion sharply.

“How do you know that?” he asked.

“Well, it happens to be one of ours, that’s all!”

“What?” ejaculated Nelson Lee amazedly.

“From your description I realise that you happened to come across the Brigham Hovering Aeroplane. It was probably out for a trial flight,” said Sir Reginald, gently tapping the back of his bald head. “It is with genuine pleasure that I assure you that there is no need for alarm. The Circle of Terror are quite ignorant of the existence of the Brigham Hoverer—as the thing is called.”

Nelson Lee slapped his knee.

“This is splendid news, Medwin,” he exclaimed heartily. “I am intensely relieved. The machine which Nipper and I saw, then, was one which is being made and tested by the British Government?”

“Exactly,” replied Sir Reginald, with a smile. “Jove, it’s a good thing your fears were groundless. Strictly speaking, I ought not to have told you anything, Lee. The whole matter is being kept a close secret. But as you know so much, I don’t see that it would be wisdom on my part to affect ignorance of the thing. You’ll treat all I tell you as strictly confidential, won’t you?”

“You have my word for that.”

“Then I’ll give you a few details——”

“One moment. You must allow me to repeat this to Nipper, my assistant.”

Sir Reginald Medwin laughed.

“Nipper, of course, is included in the secret,” he replied. “We can trust Nipper, can’t we? The lad would be safe with State secrets, I am sure. Well, Lee, the aeroplane you saw is the invention of one of our Flying Service men—Squadron-Commander Brigham, D.S.O. Only a young man, but amazingly clever. Some months ago he placed certain designs and plans before the Air Minister, and it was at once realised that Brigham’s ideas were sound and of tremendous value. Secret experiments were made with models—experiments which

were successful beyond all our calculations.”

“The secret has been well guarded. Previous to seeing the machine last night, I had no idea of its existence,” remarked Nelson Lee.

“We know how necessary it was to work with exceptional care,” said Sir Reginald gravely. “The machine under construction was not merely a new type of aeroplane; it was something which is, I believe, destined to revolutionise the whole science of aviation. At all events, Brigham’s trials have been astoundingly successful so far, and there is every reason to believe that he will overcome all difficulties.”

“There are still flaws, then?”

“One or two. But they are really of minor importance,” replied Sir Reginald. “His aeroplane is constructed in the most novel manner—I cannot, of course, go into details—and it is capable of hovering for an indefinite period over any chosen locality. It is wonderfully silent, and has attained a speed of a hundred and sixty miles per hour in still air. Last night, evidently, Brigham was out with his machine, and you just happened to spot it.”

“This information has lifted a considerable worry from my mind,” said Lee, with a smile. “I feared that the Circle of Terror was connected with the affair. To find that Squadron-Commander Brigham is the ‘culprit’ is gratifying.”

“Brigham has been putting the machine through its trials for some time past now,” went on the official. “Naturally, it was impossible to fly in broad daylight, for comment would have been caused, and widespread curiosity aroused. Therefore, Brigham has been flying after dark, and he has kept within the Essex boundaries. I may as well tell you, Lee, that this new machine is being constructed on Melsey Island.”

“A splendid place for secrecy, too,” commented Nelson Lee. “Years ago I cruised round Melsey Island on a little sailing yacht. It is not exactly a hundred miles from the Blackwater, is it?”

Sir Reginald smiled.

“Leave off the final nought of the hundred, and you will be nearer the mark,” he replied. “Melsey Island is admirably suited to the purpose in hand. Just off the Essex coast, it is lonely and isolated. The country round about is

nothing but marshland, and villages are few and far between. Brigham can do practically anything he likes without anybody being the wiser. Now and again, however, he ventures further afield—as he apparently did last night.”

“I should be keenly interested in that wonderful aircraft,” said Nelson Lee. “It seems to me that it has a splendid future. When it is perfected it will be duplicated, I suppose?”

“By the hundred,” agreed the other. “Just as soon as the machine is brought to perfection—and that will probably be within the next few weeks—the design will be standardized. Brigham, of course, is in sole command, and he has his own men working under him. The Government has given him carte blanche in the whole matter.”

At that particular time, as it happened—while Nelson Lee and the Air Ministry official were talking in the Hotel Cyril—a somewhat unusual happening was taking place on Melsey Island, off the Essex coast.

The island was only a small place, and it was situated in a particularly desolate portion of the coast. On this particular morning the sun was shining gloriously, and the sea looked superb. Just off the island a small, old-fashioned torpedo-boat lay at anchor. She was there on guard, a unit of the British Navy. Small though she was, and of little use for active service, she was, nevertheless, fully capable of affording protection to the island and its wonderful secret.

There was also a military guard.

The island itself was small, being scarcely a mile across at the broadest portion. At the northern end the workshops were situated, and there was a good deal of activity. Squadron-Commander Brigham lived upon the island, pro tem., and his quarters were rather comfortable. A substantial hut had been erected, and Brigham occupied this, together with two officers. This hut was adjoining the workshops and hangars.

For, in addition to the new invention, there were two aeroplanes of the standard type on the island, and two seaplanes also. Every day or so Colonel Liverby visited the workshops, to receive Brigham's reports and to attend to any requirements. Only highly responsible officers were allowed on the island. Commander Brigham's men were all trustworthy, but they were never allowed

to cross to the mainland. They had volunteered for the work, and had understood thoroughly beforehand that no leave would be allowed until the new machine was completed.

Colonel Liverby was the commanding officer of the big unit of troops training on the mainland, within ten miles of the island. And Brigham's little community, of course, was supplied through the same channels as the larger body of troops.

At about the time Nelson Lee was talking with Sir Reginald Medwin the new aeroplane—the “Brigham Hoverer,” as it had been nicknamed—was within its great hangar. The doors were folded right back, and several mechanics were busy on the work, with Brigham himself superintending.

The young D.S.O. was clean-shaven and healthy-looking. A cigarette was between his lips, and his curly hair protruded in an unruly fashion from beneath his service cap. He was in his shirt-sleeves, for the morning was warm, and he was in an excellent temper.

The previous night's flight had been a tremendous success. Only a few adjustments were necessary, and absolute triumph would be achieved. The aeroplane itself was an extraordinary-looking affair, totally different in design from anything that had hitherto been constructed.

Originally the experts had laughed scornfully at Brigham when he had displayed his first working model. After seeing the model perform its amazing evolutions, however, the experts' opinion had been greatly modified, and the construction of a full-sized machine had brought gratifying success.

Brigham had his back to the sunshine which streamed in at the open doors, but he became aware of a loud buzzing in the atmosphere. After a while, the young flying officer turned, and glanced up into the sky, shading his eyes with one hand.

“Who the deuce can this joker be?” he remarked wonderingly.

High in the heavens a tractor biplane had just shut off its engine, and was now descending in a steep spiral volplane.

Commander Brigham went outside, and stared at the visitor.

“Jove, he can handle that old bus, anyhow!” thought the officer.

The descending biplane was one of the usual service type, with two circles painted upon the under surfaces of the

wings. It was dangerously near to the ground before the pilot "flattened out," and for an instant those watching thought that an accident was imminent. Then the machine neatly attained an even keel, and dropped to the grass as lightly as a bird.

"Neat!" commented Brigham admiringly. "A fine piece of work, that landing! But who can the fellow be? He's certainly not one of our chaps!"

He walked towards the now stationary aeroplane, and arrived just as the pilot jumped to the ground. The latter was a youngish man, and he was attired in the uniform of a lieutenant.

"Just the man I wanted to see!" exclaimed the stranger easily, unbuttoning his tunic. "I believe I'm addressing Commander Brigham—what?"

"You believe right," said Brigham smilingly. "That's a decent machine you've got there!" he added, eyeing the ~~biplane~~ with professional approval. "What make is it? I know most 'buses by sight—"

"Oh, it's one of the new Moles-Joyce machines," said the new-comer. "Brought her over from Larkhill yesterday. She's a beauty. My name's Davis, —Lieutenant Davis. Glad to meet you, Brigham."

"Just a joy-ride?—" asked Brigham, shaking hands with Davis. "I'm from Northminster Camp, just on the mainland. I've brought an important dispatch from Colonel Liverby. You're to accompany me back."

"Oh!" said Brigham. "Anything up?"

"Not that I know of."

The commander took a sealed letter from Davis, noticing that his name was upon the envelope. He tore it open, and glanced over the few words which were written upon the sheet of official note-paper. The writing was Colonel Liverby's well-known "scrawl," and Brigham nodded as he refolded it.

"Right you are!" he said. "I'll come at once!"

"Good!"

The dispatch, as Lieutenant Davis had called the communication, was merely a request for Squadron Commander Brigham to accompany Lieutenant Davis to Northminster Camp with as little delay as possible. The Air Minister himself was in camp, and he had important in-

structions for Brigham. Therefore it was imperative that Brigham should go. The dispatch being from Colonel Liverby in person, it was obviously in perfect order.

The young D.S.O. ran back to the hangar, cheerily called out to another officer that he wouldn't be away above an hour, and then he dived into his quarters. When he emerged a minute later, he was in full uniform.

Brigham walked to the waiting aeroplane, and at once climbed into the observer's seat, remarking incidentally that he'd try the machine himself later on if he got the opportunity. The observer's seat was just in front of the pilot's cockpit in this machine, and so Brigham was in front.

Two minutes later the biplane was off, Lieutenant Davis handling her with a display of skill which was much admired by those below. The biplane soared aloft rapidly, circling and banking with wonderful grace. For some reason, Davis circled over the island until he had attained a height of fully four thousand feet. This was surely unnecessary, for on that bright morning the ten minutes' trip to Northminster could have been accomplished at a thousand feet easily, and without any danger, for the country was absolutely flat. Regarding safety, in fact, the aeroplane need only have got up to four hundred feet.

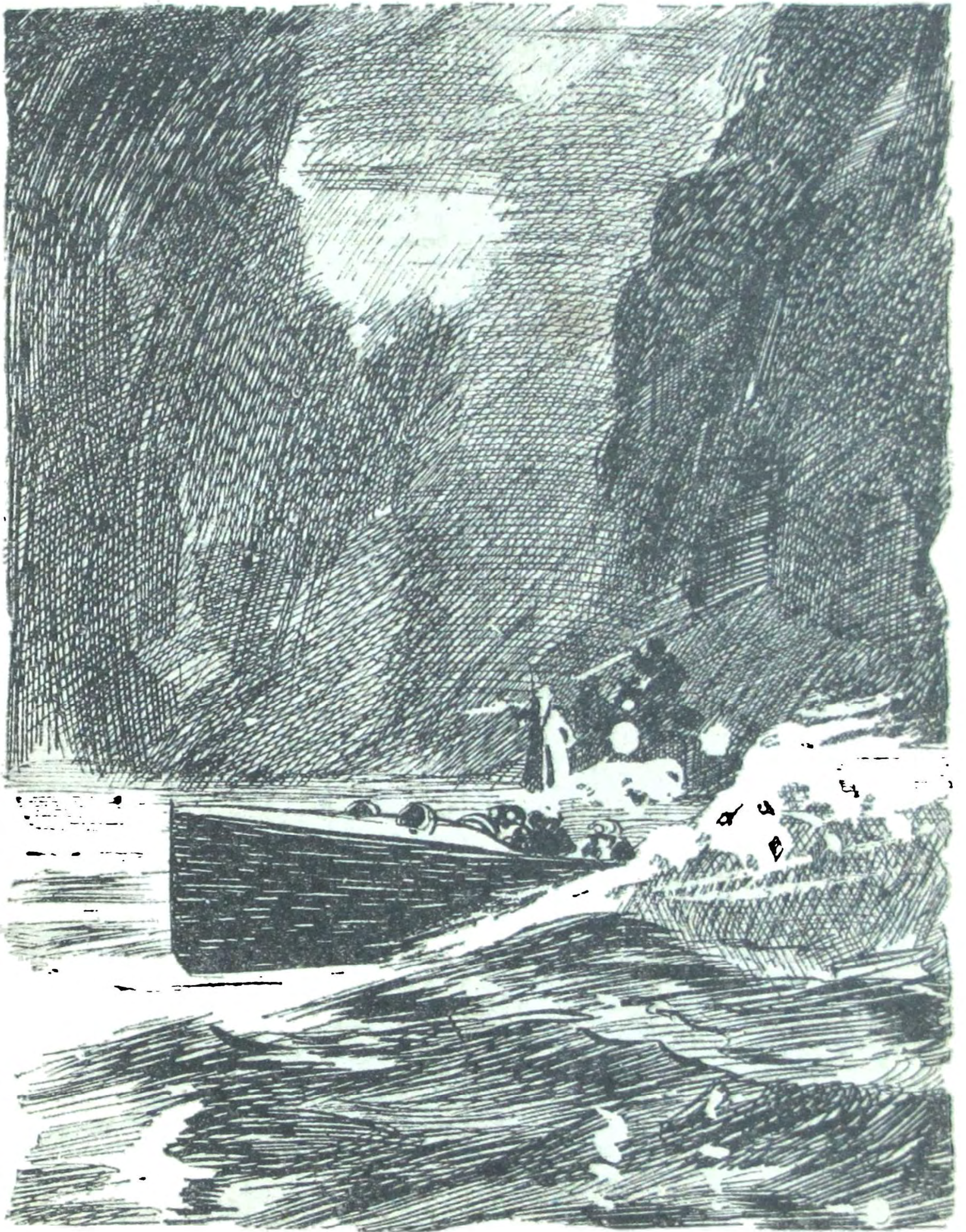
But at last the pilot turned at the southern extremity of the island, and flew straight towards the workshops. Several workmen and an officer were watching, and they saw something drop from the biplane and come swiftly to earth.

Before it reached the ground, the aeroplane was speeding directly away to the north-west—quite the wrong direction—its engine roaring with tremendous power. And the falling object struck the ground fifty feet from Brigham's hut. The officer was quite close, and he at once picked the thing up.

It was a canvas bag, weighted, and tied at the top. Wonderingly, the officer cut the string, and brought to light a crumpled card—a card with gilt edges—and printed upon it was a beautiful purple circle!

"The sign of the Circle of Terror!" gasped the officer amazedly.

Looking up, he searched the sky for the biplane in vain. It had completely vanished, carrying away Squadron Commander Brigham!



Bullets came spattering upon the water round the boat.—(See p. 29.)

CHAPTER IV.

THE CIRCLE'S DEMAND—THE STRANGE INCIDENT IN HOLBORN.

"WELL, I call that rather rich!" said Nipper, with a grin. "We thought that the giddy machine belonged to the Circle of Terror, and that all sorts of horrible outrages were about to be committed, and all the time it was a new contraption of the Government's! Thank goodness for that, guv'nor!"

"Yes. I am greatly relieved, Nipper."

Nelson Lee lit a cigar, and sat down at his desk. He commenced opening his morning's correspondence, for he had neglected this earlier, having run round to the Air Ministry the very first thing.

He had been back about a quarter of an hour, and had explained matters to Nipper, who was duly impressed. Lee had obtained Sir Reginald Medwin's permission to let Nipper into the secret, for, on principle, Nelson Lee had no secrets from his trusted young assistant. Such a thing would have been distasteful in the extreme, for the pair worked together always.

Nipper was very pleased to hear the news, for it was doubly welcome. It proved that the Circle of Terror did not possess the added power Lee had feared, and it also proved that the British Air Ministry was thoroughly wide-awake. This wonderful new aeroplane would be an immense asset to the British air service.

"I wish it had been a brighter night, sir," observed Nipper, somewhat regretfully. "Then we'd have seen the machine more distinctly. I say, it must be a ripping invention!"

Nelson Lee smiled as he looked up.

"The British Government is waking up, young 'un," he said. "In fact, I think we may say that it is thoroughly aroused from the lethargy which once threatened to involve the nation in disaster. But this isn't the time to discuss politics. See who that is, my boy!"

The telephone-bell had rung.

"Hallo!" said Nipper, jamming the receiver to his ear. "Eh? Yes, this is Mr. Nelson Lee's office. Oh! Sir Reginald Medwin! Just one moment, sir!"

Nipper turned to his master, who had heard the name.

Nelson Lee took the instrument rather wonderingly, and spoke. He was inter-

rupted at once, and noted that Sir Reginald's voice was urgent and agitated. Evidently there was something wrong.

"Can you come back here at once, Mr. Lee?" asked Medwin hoarsely.

"I think so. Is anything the matter?"

"I cannot discuss anything over the 'phone," said Sir Reginald. "Please come at once, Mr. Lee—without a second's delay!"

Nelson Lee looked across at Nipper keenly. A sudden suspicion had come into his head. Was this a trick of the Circle's? Was it an attempt to get him out of the house for some evil purpose? The voice sounded like Sir Reginald's, but it was hoarse and strained. Lee, since his campaign against the Circle of Terror had opened, had automatically got into the habit of suspecting anything and everything. Precaution cost nothing.

"Yes. I can come at once, Medwin," said the detective quietly.

"Then hurry, Lee—hurry!"

"One moment, please," said Lee. "I have to be very cautious these days, Sir Reginald. You will understand. Attempts are sometimes made to trick me; the telephone is a favourite method of attack. Will you please tell me what I said to you just before we parted, half an hour ago?"

Nipper grinned.

"That's jolly cute of you, guv'nor!" he murmured admiringly.

Nelson Lee heard an angry exclamation over the wires.

"Are you mad, Lee?" came Medwin's voice. "I am Medwin. Can't you recognise my voice? Do you think I should attempt to trick—Oh, I think I realise your meaning. Yes, yes; of course. Perhaps you are wise to be careful. I understand your motive now. You want me to repeat your parting words to me? Why, you said that you'd probably run against me one evening this week at the Wayfarers' Club, in Piccadilly."

"Thank you, Medwin," said Lee calmly. "I'll run round at once!"

"For Heaven's sake don't waste any more time!"

Nelson Lee hung the receiver up, and reached over for his soft hat.

"Something seems to have happened, Nipper," he said briskly. "Medwin is certainly agitated. It was just as well to be on my guard. We can't be too

careful in these strenuous times. I expect I shall be back before long."

And Nelson Lee hastened to the Hotel Cyril. Arriving there, he was escorted up to Sir Reginald Medwin's suite of offices without delay. He found the baronet pacing the floor of his room with short, rapid strides. Medwin's face was grave and troubled.

"You've been quick, Lee," he said, shaking hands. "That was a good idea of yours to make me repeat something you'd said while you were here before. You had an idea the Circle of Terror were after you?"

"Well, my life had been attempted more than once," said Lee quietly.

"The Circle of Terror!" exclaimed Medwin furiously. "Just after we had been talking about the scoundrels, too! They've struck, Lee! They've managed to get hold of Brigham!"

Nelson Lee pursed his lips.

"I thought something bad had happened," he said smoothly. "Can you let me have the details?"

"News of the abduction came through to me from Melsey Island only a few minutes after you had left me," said Sir Reginald. "I was thunderstruck. And then I thought of you, Lee. Can you help us? Something will have to be done, at all events. The position is simply impossible. This infernal society is becoming positively a national menace!"

Lee was given the details, as far as Medwin knew them. A strange aeroplane had landed upon the island, and had brought a forged despatch for Squadron Commander Brigham. And Brigham, having no suspicion of treachery, had entered the aeroplane, which had then flown off. No trace of it had been found, but the gilt-edged card which had been dropped clearly proved that Brigham had been kidnapped by the Circle. The strange biplane had vanished with its captive.

"The whole thing was audacious in the extreme," said Nelson Lee, "and because of its audacity it succeeded. Brigham, of course, occupied the foremost seat in the aeroplane, so he was quite at the pilot's mercy. But it is rather uncertain why he has been abducted. I should have thought the Circle would rather seize the aeroplane itself—Brigham's machine, I mean."

Sir Reginald laughed harshly.

"That is their intention," he replied. "They couldn't very well get hold of the new machine, because it is so closely guarded. And so they have adopted this ruse. And, between you and I, Lee, I don't see how we can frustrate them. It seems to me that we are completely helpless. The ruffians—the dastards!"

The baronet picked up a sheet of notepaper.

"This—this was delivered five minutes after I got the news," he went on angrily. "It was brought by a special messenger, who, of course, disappeared. Not that we should have been any better off if he'd been detained."

Nelson Lee took the sheet of notepaper, and recognised it at once. It was a communication from the Circle of Terror. The detective had seen other communications of a precisely similar nature. There was a neat purple circle at the top, and the letter itself was printed. It ran as follows:

"Headquarters.

"To the Officials of the Air Ministry,

"Hotel Cyril, Strand, W.C.

"Gentlemen,

"By the time this communication is delivered, it will probably be known to you that Squadron Commander Ernest Vincent Brigham, D.S.O., is in the hands of the Circle of Terror. He will come to no harm provided our instructions are carried out.

"We have come to the conclusion that the 'Brigham Hoverer' is necessary to us in our own peculiar sphere of work, and we have therefore secured Commander Brigham as a hostage. Any attempts to trace him will only end in disaster—for Brigham.

"Please carefully note the following orders:

"To-night, the 12th inst., Melsey Island is to be left totally unguarded. The torpedo-boat is to be removed to a distance of not less than twenty miles. The military guard is to be removed to Northminster Camp. The island itself is to be left absolutely deserted. The 'Brigham Hoverer' must be left within its hangar, with everything in readiness for immediate flight. The engine must be in perfect running order, and the petrol tanks filled.

"If by eleven p.m. these instructions have not been carried out to the letter—if these instructions are ignored—we shall be reluctantly compelled to put our

prisoner to death. And the loss of such a promising young officer as Squadron Commander Brigham would be highly unfortunate. In the event of the orders being obeyed, Brigham will be immediately set at liberty.

"THE CIRCLE OF TERROR."

Nelson Lee handed the communication back to Sir Reginald Medwin with a grave expression upon his strong, resolute face.

"They mean it—every word," he said quietly.

"You seriously think they'll murder Brigham in cold blood?" asked the baronet uneasily. "Perhaps it's only a threat, Lee—"

"Don't count on that for a moment!" interjected Nelson Lee. "Remember how utterly ruthless the Circle has proved itself in the past. If Melsey Island is not totally unguarded by eleven o'clock to-night—then I would not give a fig for poor Brigham's life."

Medwin nodded gloomily.

"What on earth is to be done?" he asked. "The chief is worried to death, almost. You will understand the terrible nature of the position, Lee. There are vast issues at stake—it is a matter of national safety. It would be foolish to ignore this letter; it would be fatal. Something must be done before to-night. The Circle of Terror is a very real menace, and it is better to be under no false impression as regards that point."

"You are sensible, Medwin," said Nelson Lee. "Other men have raved furiously, and allowed things to go on. That course is impossible. And this particular affair is quite different to anything that has hitherto occurred. I have advised people to give in to the Circle—to obey the demands. But such a course is obviously out of the question in this case. To hand over the Brigham aeroplane to the Circle of Terror is unthinkable."

"And, if we don't, Brigham dies," exclaimed Sir Reginald. "Good heavens! What a situation! We are in a cleft-stick, Lee—we are helpless. Even if we adopted a ruse, and pretended to leave the island unguarded, Brigham's life would be forfeited. And we need Brigham urgently; he is the only man who thoroughly understands the new machine. To sacrifice him is too awful for consideration. Yet it is equally impossible to sacrifice the machine itself. Once in the Circle's hands it would be duplicated, and they would have a weapon in their

hands which would leave the country at their mercy!"

The position was, indeed, appalling.

There was no way out. By refusing to obey the Circle, Commander Brigham's life was sacrificed; and by obeying the Circle, the precious new aircraft was lost for ever. Both courses were not to be thought of. Yet what was the alternative? The whole affair was disastrous; the problem simply bristled with difficulties.

Nelson Lee thought hard. Whichever way he looked at the question, he could find no solution. The Circle of Terror, by kidnapping Brigham, the inventor of the aeroplane, had scored a triumph. It would have been foolish to deny that the trump card was held by the enemy.

The sinister brain of Professor Cyrus Zingrave was behind the plot. The High Lord had planned this tremendous coup. And, so far as could be seen at present, Zingrave would score. For, rather than let Brigham die, the Government would certainly allow the aeroplane to go.

Nelson Lee grimly suspected that Brigham would not be released in any case. If the Circle obtained possession of the "Hoverer," they would keep Brigham a prisoner and force him to work for them—finally killing him just the same.

Although the affair was so appallingly serious, Lee could not help realising how simply the coup had been accomplished. The Circle of Terror, by a ruse that was, after all, merely commonplace, had placed the Air Ministry in a difficulty which was practically incapable of solution.

What was to be done?

Brigham had disappeared, and there was no starting-point for an investigation. All the ordinary channels of procedure were closed. Sir Reginald Medwin felt like a man caught in a quagmire; there was nothing to do but await the inevitable end. Action was impossible.

"Well, Leo? What is to be done?" asked the baronet, after a short silence. "I am thunderstruck—I am stagnated. Can you suggest anything? You have been fighting this Circle of Terror for many weeks. If any man on earth can avert the disaster, it is you. I am convinced of that."

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"I must have time to think," he said gravely. "Look here, Medwin, I am going back to Gray's Inn Road. By three o'clock this afternoon I will communicate with you, and let you know the

result of my schemings. Don't despair—difficulties were made to overcome, you know."

"There's no time, Lee—there's no time!"

"That is the Circle's method always," said the great detective grimly. "They do not give their victims an opportunity of planning counter-moves. But we may think of a way out, even yet. I'll see you again at three o'clock."

A few minutes later Nelson Lee was walking up the Strand towards Kingsway. He turned up Kingsway, and then, finally, arrived in High Holborn. With a very thoughtful expression, he directed his steps towards Gray's Inn Road.

How could the Circle of Terror be defeated?

Lee had promised to see Sir Reginald again at three o'clock, and had told him not to despair. Yet, if the truth be told, the great detective was dangerously near to despairing himself.

He could not for the life of him see how the Circle of Terror was to be check-mated. If he had had the slightest clue regarding Squadron-Commander Brigham's whereabouts, the difficulties would not have been so appalling. But there was nothing to work on—nothing whatever.

As Nelson Lee walked, he turned over many ideas in his mind. Surely there was a weak spot in the Circle's armour! The only trouble was, Lee did not know where to look for that weak spot. Once having found it, he would soon act.

"If such a thing were possible, we might clip the Circle's wings by threatening a reprisal," mused Lee. "There is Edmund Cross—in gaol. He was one of the Circle's most important men before his arrest. We might even threaten to kill him if Brigham is killed; but such a threat would be hollow. Zingrave would know that, of course, and would act accordingly. Upon my soul, I am in a dilemma."

The detective was sorely puzzled, and for once he allowed his mental condition to find a reflection in his strong, keen face. Lee was worried—and he looked worried. Matters had to be extremely grave for this condition to exist.

"It is time I want," he told himself. "If only a delay could be caused——"

Nelson Lee's musings were interrupted by the extraordinary actions of a man who happened to be just in front of him. Lee had not noticed the fellow until now;

but he would have been blind had he not observed the stranger's singular antics.

He was a well-dressed individual, clean-shaven, and of wiry build. His age was perhaps forty, or forty-two, and he had the appearance of a prosperous businessman. Lee saw this at a glance.

The man had suddenly forged ahead of Nelson Lee, and was only a yard in front of the detective. Nobody else was near by at the moment, for this little strip of pavement was quiet.

And Nelson Lee was astonished to see the wiry man stop suddenly in his stride. He twisted right round, so that he was facing Lee; and the latter was struck by the look of agony and alarm in the stranger's contorted face.

For just one second he remained perfectly still; then he fell writhing to the pavement, choking sounds coming from his throat. He lay there, right at Nelson Lee's feet, a pitiful spectacle.

"By James! A fit!" muttered the detective.

He bent down hurriedly, and noticed that other people were now coming up. If the poor fellow actually was in a fit, prompt action would be necessary. Lee grabbed the man's wrists.

"It's all right—nothing wrong with me—only pretence!" the stranger exclaimed in a hurried whisper.

"Why, what——"

"Listen, Lee! I'm Montague Todd—Nipper will know. If you want to rescue Brigham go to Stoke's Farm, three miles north of Yalemore, in Suffolk. Go there to-night—Brigham's there."

Nelson Lee pretended to force the struggling man down.

"You are acting straight?" he asked sharply.

"Straight as a die, Lee!" muttered the man. "But I can't warn you openly—you understand. That's all."

As he finished speaking he went into a fresh paroxysm, and writhed convulsively, exactly as though he had really been the victim of a sudden fit of epilepsy. Lee, of course, knew that it was purely a piece of clever acting, and he was struck by the thorough way in which Todd performed the fake.

There was no time for thought. People were crowding round curiously and eagerly. Two or three men helped Lee to hold the struggling man down; but he started up after a moment or two, and gazed round him dazedly.

"It's all right," he said thickly. "I

often have these infernal bouts. I'm all right now, thanks. Let me get up."

"Better not try, old man," said one gentleman.

"I'm better, I tell you," muttered Todd. "Don't want a crowd!"

He struggled to his feet, swayed a little, and then shook himself. There was an expression of vacancy and relief in his eyes; and, without a word, and without a glance at Nelson Lee, he pushed his way through the staring crowd, and got on to a motor-bus that happened to be passing.

The incident was over, and the crowd melted.

Nelson Lee walked on towards Gray's Inn Road, his mind now occupied intently with the curious affair which had just taken place. What did it mean? Squadron-Commander Brigham was being held a prisoner at Stoke's Farm, near Yalemore, in Suffolk!

Was that statement of Montague Todd's true?

Nelson Lee had never seen the man before in his life, but, as Todd had said, Nipper would understand, at least. Lee understood just as perfectly. For Nipper had told his master every detail concerning a certain exciting adventure which the lad had experienced only a few weeks before.

It had been during the great detective's previous encounter with the Circle of Terror; Nipper had unfortunately fallen into the hands of the Circle—and Montague Todd had been "told off" to finish Nipper's existence.

Nipper, however, was decidedly opposed to that proceeding. And he had managed to struggle with Todd as the latter was attempting to hurl him over a bridge into a swiftly running stream. In the darkness the Circle agent had toppled over the bridge parapet himself!

It happened that Todd could not swim, and Nipper had heard his would-be murderer cry wildly for help. Nipper's wrists had been bound at the time; but the lad, without a moment's hesitation, plunged to the rescue.

Nipper's efforts had been successful, and Todd had been saved. The man was undoubtedly grateful, and he had sworn to Nipper that he would repay the debt some day. A short time afterwards a note had been delivered at Gray's Inn Road, from Montague Todd, in which the man again proclaimed his allegiance.

Was he now fulfilling his promise?

Nelson Lee was certainly impressed,

and when he arrived back at his rooms he related to Nipper all that had occurred. The lad was greatly startled when he heard that Brigham had been kidnapped by the Circle of Terror.

But Nipper became quite excited when his master told him of the affair in Holborn. The lad's eyes sparkled.

"It was the straight tip, guv'nor," he exclaimed eagerly. "Although Todd's a member of the Circle, I believe he's a decent enough chap in his heart. Of course, you'll take advantage of the information, won't you?"

"Was it information, Nipper?"

"What do you mean, guv'nor?"

"The whole thing might have been a trap—that's what I mean," was Nelson Lee's grim reply. "We must not forget that the Circle of Terror is on the watch all the time. They know that I have been to the Air Ministry; and I am vain enough to believe that the Circle fears me. Therefore, an effort is to be made to get me out of the way. If we go to Stoke's Farm we shall run into a trap."

Nipper shook his head.

"I don't believe it!" he declared stoutly. "I'm sure that the tip was genuine. Why did Todd pretend to fall in a fit?"

"That was merely part of the ruse."

"But he said that I should understand," persisted Nipper. "That means that he was repaying the debt, as he called it. I tell you, guv'nor, this business is all right. Todd's true blue. I shouldn't be surprised if he turns out to be a regular traitor to the Circle. He's in with us."

Nelson Lee stroked his chin.

"We don't know," he said thoughtfully. "It will be risky, Nipper—it will be exceedingly dangerous. Is it a trap, or is it a case of genuine gratitude? You undoubtedly saved Todd's life, and he may be grateful. But he's a member of the Circle, Nipper—and a member of the Circle cannot be trusted."

"Then we're not going to Suffolk?" growled Nipper gloomily.

"I didn't say that."

"Oh! You intend to chance it, sir?"

"Exactly. We shall go to Stoke's Farm this evening," said Lee quietly. "There is a train from Liverpool Street which will land us at the village at Yalemore at about seven o'clock."

"Good business!" said Nipper heartily.

"That all depends," remarked Nelson Lee. "It may turn out to be a bad business, young 'un. But, dangerous or not,

"we'll undertake the journey. It is a direct line to work upon—and, in any case, I think you and I can take care of ourselves if it comes to a scrap."

Nipper agreed upon that point thoroughly. And the pair commenced making their preparations for the trip to Suffolk. Later on they caught the train from Liverpool Street—after Nelson Lee had communicated with Sir Reginald Medwin. Lee had not been precise, but he had told Medwin not to worry.

How would the affair end?

CHAPTER V.

IN THE ENEMY'S HANDS—THE SURPRISE—
THE ESCAPE.

STOKE'S FARM was an old deserted ruin, and it lay just over three miles from the village of Yalemora. Any of the country labourers who lived in the neighbourhood would have told an inquirer that the farm had been burnt down six years before, and that it had been a ruin ever since.

The farmhouse itself really did not exist; there were only several half-demolished walls, scarred and blackened. The lapse of time had altered the ugly aspect of the place, however, and creepers covered the grim ruins.

About a hundred yards from the ruin there stood a barn. This had not been affected by the fire, but it had stood deserted and empty for the whole six years, and was now in a state of decay. Holes gaped in the wooden walls, and the thatched roof was rotten through and through.

The worthy Mr. Stoke, after whom the farm had been named, had built a new home for himself at the other extremity of his property—and this was nearly two miles away, and nearer to the village. It was, in fact, the nearest house to the old ruin, except for a couple of tiny cottages a mile distant.

The place was therefore desolate and deserted.

Even during the day the only human beings in the district were the workers on the fields round about. There was no important road within three miles—Yalemora, in fact. A tiny rutty lane ran past the old buildings, and traffic along this could be gauged fairly accurately by a glance at the surface of the road. It was grass-covered except where the wheels of

farm carts passed, and where the horses trod. Stoke's Farm, in fact, was right out of the track of things.

After darkness had set in the ruin was as isolated as a desert isle. It was, undoubtedly, an ideal spot for the imprisonment of a kidnapped man. The Circle of Terror had been well aware of the peculiar advantages of the place before they had engineered their coup.

As Nelson Lee had told Nipper, the train from London drew into Yalemora a few minutes after seven o'clock. It was still quite light, of course, and the detective and his young assistant were in no particular hurry.

Yalemora was only a little village, and it lay within half a mile of the station. But there was no necessity for Lee to enter the village, for Stoke's Farm lay in the opposite direction.

There was a little inn near the station, however, and Nelson Lee and Nipper entered the cosy bar-parlour of this establishment, and ordered a substantial high tea. They had not tasted food since mid-day, and it was now necessary for them to "lay in a good stock," as Nipper put it. There was no telling when they would get their next meal.

They were both hungry, and they piled into the good country fare with a will. Nipper really excelled himself, and was still eating after Lee had finished and had strolled out into the bar.

The great detective asked no pointed questions of the landlord, but when he returned to Nipper he knew precisely in which direction Stoke's Farm lay, and how the old ruin could be reached. Lee had had just a suspicion that the place was a myth—that Todd's information had been deliberately faked—but the landlord's ready information was quite in order. Stoke's Farm was no myth.

Lee and Nipper lingered at the inn until darkness had fallen. Then they set out upon the three-mile walk to their destination.

The farm was reached without incident of any sort; the pair did not see a soul during the whole walk, and only knew that they had arrived at the ruin by the dim sight of a gateway set a little back from the road.

Nelson Lee came to a halt.

Everything was perfectly quiet. Not a light showed in any direction, and there were high trees on every hand. The farm, too, lay at the foot of a hollow, and was protected from the wind. Both Lee

and Nipper gazed round them cautiously, and interestedly. The detective had his hand upon his revolver-butt.

"Not a giddy soul——"

"Hush, lad!" interjected Nelson Lee.

"Not a sound!"

"But there's nobody here, guv'nor," said Nipper.

"I sincerely trust there is somebody here," murmured Lee grimly. "If not, then we have come upon a fool's errand. Now look here, Nipper. We had better stick together, in case of emergencies. I suggest that we——"

Even while Nelson Lee was talking there was a sudden patter of feet. All in a second the roadway and the weed-grown farmyard became alive with dim, indistinct figures. Lee whipped his automatic from his pocket.

"Look out, young 'un!" he rapped out curtly.

But before the detective could defend himself, he was seized from behind. Nipper, at the same second, was rendered helpless. It was obvious to Nelson Lee, in a flash, that an ambush had been prepared.

There had been no inkling of the projected attack: cautious as Lee had been, it would have been a matter of impossibility to guard against this onslaught. Both he and Nipper were bowled off their feet in a trice.

Three men piled on to each of the victims, and they were rendered helpless almost before they realised that they were in the enemy's hands. With their faces held down into the dust of the road they could not very well shout—and, even if they had shouted, their cries would have been futile.

Their hands were bound behind them, and their feet tethered in such a manner that it was possible to shuffle, but not to walk. Then, thus rendered quite helpless, they were jerked to their feet. No attempt had been made to gag them. And Nelson Lee knew why. Stoke's Farm was so isolated that these scoundrels could do just as they liked with impunity.

"Neat—very neat!" exclaimed a sneering voice. "My dear Mr. Nelson Lee, you are really quite a simpleton at the detective game. Although you were quite prepared for trouble, you fell into the trap like a veritable novice."

"You—you treacherous rotter!" exclaimed Nipper furiously.

Truth to tell, the lad was simply boiling over with wrath. And Lee, although

he did not display any emotion, was equally bitter at heart. His original suspicion was well founded!

He and Nipper had ventured upon this expedition, and had simply walked into the enemy's trap. Nelson Lee censured himself severely for being so rash. What a fool he had been to trust to Todd! He might have known that the Circle agent had been merely setting a trap!

It was a disastrous business altogether, and there was no telling how it would end. Lee and Nipper were outnumbered, and quite at the mercy of the Circle of Terror. Their project was a total failure, and the rescue of Squadron-Commander Brigham was now impossible. Lee bitterly realised that Brigham was probably a hundred yards away from this spot.

Without further ado the prisoners were hustled along towards the old ramshackle barn. The door seemed to be in good repair, for it opened easily. There was a light burning within, but the gaping holes in the wooden sides of the building had been temporarily blocked up.

Lee and Nipper found themselves thrown upon a heap of rotting straw, and they observed that the light came from an old stable lamp. The six men who had attacked the prisoners stood looking on with sneering smiles. And a seventh man—the one who had spoken—was apparently the leader. For he was quite well dressed, but a heavy mask concealed his features.

He spoke to his men in a low voice, apparently giving them orders. Nipper heard a few of the words, and knew that the men were being sent back to their posts—on guard.

The masked individual remained behind, and he closed the door tightly after the others had left. Then, calmly selecting a cigar from his case, he lit it, and regarded his prisoners with a curious smile showing round the corners of his mouth.

"You fools!" he exclaimed loudly. "Did you think that you would trick the Circle of Terror? You will never leave this place alive!"

"That threat is becoming somewhat stale," remarked Lee drily.

The masked man looked round him quickly, and then suddenly strode forward, jerking his mask up at the same moment.

"I was watching for you!" he exclaimed, in a low, changed voice. "My name is Todd—I am anxious to help you, but this binding business was necessary

for the sake of appearances. I am glad you came, Mr. Lee—tremendously glad. It has shown me that you understand that I am not your enemy."

"Why, great Scott!" gasped Nipper, bewildered. "I—I thought——"

"Never mind what you thought, Nipper, there's not a moment to waste," interjected Montague Todd hurriedly. "This is not a sample of further trickery, Mr. Lee—for Heaven's sake don't think that. I am your friend, and the Circle of Terror's enemy."

Nelson Lee was quite calm.

"Then why are we bound and helpless?" he asked.

"The men who are here with me think that I am heart and soul with the Circle," replied Todd. "If they guessed the truth my life would not be worth a toss. But I have changed since Nipper saved my life. I have grown to loathe the Circle and all its grim power. If I can help without endangering my own life, I will gladly do so. You believe me?"

The man's voice was earnest and full of concern. As Nelson Lee looked at him the detective knew positively that the man was not lying. He was, indeed, friendly, and this piece of trickery had been worked up by him so that he should not be suspected of treachery.

Lee could well understand Todd's position. He had probably been drawn into his present mode of life by the evil influence of friends. For some time he had worked with the Circle without realising the villainous nature of his position. Lying dormant within him there had been the element of true honesty, but he had entered whole-heartedly into the scoundrelly affairs of the Circle.

Then he had found it necessary to commit murder; Nipper had to be put out of the way, and it had fallen to Todd's lot to perform the dread task. The man had plainly revealed to Nipper on that occasion that he detested his task, and he had only attempted to carry it out because he knew that his own life, probably, would be forfeited if he failed.

He had failed, and the fact that his intended victim had saved his life at the risk of his own apparently changed Todd's nature and character completely. Presumably, he had been punished for his negligence in allowing Nipper to escape; but that punishment had not been so severe as Todd had suspected at the time.

"You believe me, Mr. Lee?" repeated the man anxiously.

"Yes," replied Lee quietly. "I

thought that you had led me into a trap—but I now know differently. You have acted with superb cleverness in this affair. But be careful. Your men will take matters into their own hands if they discover the truth."

Montague Todd laughed grimly.

"I know that only too well," he replied. "But we are safe for a few minutes. Those minutes are precious, for I must explain my plan. When I became a member of the Circle I had no idea of the vile enterprises it was contemplating. To leave the Circle openly is impossible—unless I wish to die. And so I must do all I can secretly. It was for that reason I gave you the tip in Holborn this afternoon. If heaven helps us to-night the Circle will be prevented from gaining possession of the Brigham aeroplane. I don't know the full plans, but Brigham is here, and I am anxious for you to effect his rescue."

And then, in short sentences, the newly explained how he had "worked" everything so that the detective could gain the upper hand. Todd, too, would not be suspected of treachery to the Circle and would receive no punishment. The man was obviously genuine, for he was going to great trouble and risk to assist Lee and Nipper in their enterprise.

In exact truth the prisoners had not been prisoners at all—their capture had been merely part of the scheme. It would have been impossible for Todd to speak with them in secret. But here, in this barn, it would be assumed by the other Circle men that Todd was merely indulging in a few sneers.

And that which happened afterwards would be put down to sheer misfortune; and although Todd would probably be "called over the coals," he would not be suspected of having had a hand in Nelson Lee's escape. And Todd, it seemed, was anxious to show his gratitude to Nipper—and, incidentally, Nelson Lee. He sympathised with them in their great campaign, and stated openly that he would have given ten years of his life to be a free agent. He was bound to the Circle, however—to leave it would mean death. And Todd declared that he would be of more use to the community alive.

His plan was simple.

"I will just tell you the facts, Mr. Lee," he said quickly. "Brigham is in the farmhouse cellar—a small place beneath the ruins. He is guarded by two men, who are at present playing cards."

There is a cowshed at the rear of the ruins, and in that shed is a motor-car."

"Ah! I understand your plan," said Lee. "Well?"

"If you follow this lane for two miles you will strike a highway," continued the other. "The first turning to the left leads you straight to the coast, five miles away. You will come out at Simson's Gap. You can't make a mistake, for the road leads straight to the beach. On the right there is a cliff, with a small cave visible. In that cave is a motor-boat. If you are smart, and meet with no mishap, you will be able to get Brigham away."

"And what of you?" asked Lee sharply.

"Leave me to my own devices," was Todd's crisp reply. "I shall come to no harm. A wiggling, perhaps, but nothing more. Within an hour one of the High Lord's confidants—a man named Hampson—will be here. The Circle's further plans I don't know. But you must act at once if you mean to rescue the prisoner."

"I am ready this minute," said Lee pointedly.

"Right! Then we will set the machinery in motion," declared Montague Todd. "By ginger, I'm glad to be striking a blow at the accursed Circle at last!"

"You're a brick, Toddy!" said Nipper enthusiastically. "Why the dickens are you doing all this?"

"Because I owe you my life," replied the other simply.

He rapidly unfastened the prisoners' bonds, and handed Nelson Lee the mask he had been wearing himself.

"It will be useful," he said. "The men in the cellar, you know."

Lee nodded shrewdly. He gazed at Todd, and saw that the man's face was glowing with subdued excitement and enthusiasm. There was nothing false about this man, Lee decided. He was a square peg in a round hole—he should have been openly fighting the Circle, not assisting in its villainous schemes. As this affair was proving, however, Todd was doing his utmost in a difficult situation.

Nelson Lee thrust out his hand.

"You are splendid, Todd," the detective exclaimed quietly. "Without your aid I should have been helpless. Perhaps some day you may be able to come over to our side boldly and openly. I sincerely hope so."

"Amen to that, Mr. Lee," said Montague Todd, with great feeling. "But we must act at once," he went on. "Keep close to the wall which skirts this barn; it will lead you straight to the ruin. The cellar will then be visible."

"But what of you?" asked Nipper anxiously.

"Don't worry about me—I'll take things up all right."

Lee and Nipper left the barn by means of a little door at the back. They found themselves in the darkness, and they crept along towards the ruined farmhouse, close against a rickety stone wall.

They had only proceeded half-way when they heard a series of low, furious cries from the barn. Then came the sounds of a struggle, and fierce oaths. Both Lee and Nipper came to a halt.

"They've bowled old Toddy out!" gasped Nipper. "I say, guv'nor, we'll rush back——"

"Wait!" commanded Lee. "It may be a piece of trickery."

In strict truth, it was trickery!

There were two men stationed within fifty yards of the barn, and they heard the sudden scuffle in the old building. They hastened to the barn, and burst open the door. Everything was black, and there came the sound of groans and oaths from the centre of the floor.

"Get a light. Harker!" snapped one of the men.

An electric-torch flashed out—and revealed Montague Todd lying on the floor, his face blackened, his clothes torn. He staggered drunkenly to his feet, and pointed unsteadily at the open door.

"You fools!" he muttered thickly. "Didn't you see them?"

"Great glory! Where are the prisoners——"

"Gone — gone!" snarled Todd. "Didn't you hear, you dolts? That infernal rat of a Nelson Lee got free somehow, and sprang on me. They've gone—the pair of them. They went towards the road. Follow them, you staring idiots!"

Todd himself led the chase—and he led it in a totally wrong direction. The man's acting was superb, and not for a second did the others suspect that Todd himself had engineered the prisoners' release.

Meanwhile, even as Todd was leading the false chase, Nelson Lee entered the cellar of the farmhouse—which was about the only part of the old building still intact. The detective was wearing

Todd's mask—and, in case of necessity, he held his automatic ready. Nipper was waiting outside, anxious and eager.

Lee found the cellar to be a small, dry apartment. There was a candle burning on a little bench, and two men were playing cards and smoking. Squadron-Commander Brigham lay upon an old mattress, securely bound. He was quite comfortable, however, and suffered no particular discomfort. He seemed to be decidedly bored by the whole affair, and was certainly not alarmed.

In a voice which was startlingly like Todd's, Nelson Lee bade the two men go to the barn, and when they protested he affected to be angry and impatient. They left the cellar with a bad grace, and Lee heard them stumbling up the stone steps.

The detective turned to Brigham.

"More threats, my friend?" asked the D.S.O. calmly.

"Not this time. Please be perfectly quiet, and don't ask questions," replied Lee. "I am here to rescue you—and with luck we shall get away. My name is Nelson Lee—"

"Do you expect me to swallow—"

Lee cut the other's bitter remark short by ~~blasting~~ ^{flashing} through his bonds. Within a minute Brigham knew that rescue really had come, and he was as excited as a boy. Together Lee and the commander left the cellar, and they met Nipper outside.

Within another five minutes the motor-car was hauled out of the cow-shed, and it was found to be in perfect running order. Todd's information had been correct to the last detail.

And then, just as the car was got running—just as it turned into the lane—two spots of light were seen, and shouts were heard. Nelson Lee opened the throttle, and jammed the clutch home.

The other Circle agent had arrived—Hampson—and there was not a second to lose!

CHAPTER VI.

THE CHASE—THE ARRIVAL AT MELSEY ISLAND—NELSON LEE'S VOW—FINIS.

THE rescue had only been effected in the nick of time.

Even as matters were, it was a matter of grave doubt whether the fugitives would make good their escape. Zingrave's confidential agent, Hampson, had arrived, and he had come in a big racing-car, but it was not

That a chase was certain only made the adventure more exciting. Nipper was thoroughly enjoying himself, and the rescued airman was almost equally as enthusiastic. This rescue had been about the last thing in the world he had expected—and it was, therefore, all the sweeter.

"By George! We'll trick the hounds yet!" he exclaimed heartily.

But Lee was not so sure. The car was only a small one, and the other automobile was a racer. And the Circle men had jumped to the truth. Todd had found it impossible to prevent the discovery being made, for Hampson had arrived some little time before he had been expected.

And that made all the difference.

Even as Nelson Lee jammed in the clutch the pursuing car roared forward; and it was obvious in a moment that escape would be hopeless unless something was done to delay the enemy.

In a few seconds the two motor-cars were speeding along the narrow lane. Nelson Lee was a superb driver, and he sent the little car forward at a tremendous speed, considering the narrowness of the road.

"Try and get one of the tyres, Nipper," Lee rapped out.

The lad needed no second bidding. He was in the front seat, beside his master, and Brigham was clinging to the step—for the car was only a two-seater. As Nipper turned he heard a sudden crack, and saw a tiny spurt of red fire.

"Right-ho, my beauties!" Nipper muttered. "You've opened the ball, so you'll have to take the consequences."

The two cars were travelling at a good speed, and the pursuer was gaining rapidly. If it came to a close fight the fugitives would stand no chance at all, for it was certain that they would be greatly outnumbered.

Nipper jerked out his own little revolver, and took rapid aim. Crack! The automatic spoke, but there was no sign that the bullet had found its mark. Again Nipper pulled the trigger.

Even in that tense moment the lad was irresistibly reminded of a cinema picture he had once seen. A chase very similar to this had been depicted on the screen, and he had heard two staid picture-goers declaring that such things simply couldn't happen in real life.

This affair was real enough, Nipper told himself, and unless he potted the enemy pretty promptly there would be a

had ending to the adventure. Once recaptured there would certainly be no chance of escape a second time.

A bullet whizzed past Nipper's head, but he took not the slightest notice of it. These agents of the Circle of Terror, he knew, were shooting to kill—that was the Circle's little way. But Nipper had no such intentions.

Commander Brigham crouched down, watching with eager interest. He had good sense enough not to interfere, although he would dearly have liked to have a pot-shot at the pursuers himself.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Three times in succession Nipper's automatic barked. And, right on the heels of the last report, there came the sound of a long, droning hiss. The Circle of Terror car was now within twenty yards, but it seemed to slow down abruptly.

"Got him!" roared Nipper triumphantly.

He knew what that hiss had been caused by. One of the lad's bullets had pierced the offside front tyre, and the latter had burst. Progress was, of course, now impossible—although the man at the wheel attempted to keep the automobile still running.

Within half a minute the racer had been left behind, and a curve hid it from view altogether. For the time being, at least, the Circle had been defeated. The escaping trio were granted a breathing space.

"Good for you, Nipper!" chuckled Brigham. "That was what I should call a direct hit. The beggar's winged right enough. He won't be of any further use until he gets a new tyre on—but that won't be so very long. They're sure to have a spare wheel on board—and wheels can be changed in two ticks nowadays."

"Yes, but we're not exactly crawling ourselves!" gasped Nipper.

Lee, in fact, was sending the little two-seater forward at a break-neck speed. The great criminologist knew full well the urgency of the matter, and he was taking permissible risks. The car rocked and swayed and tossed. But it kept to its wheels, and soon arrived at the highway Todd had referred to.

Nelson Lee intended following Todd's directions to the letter. If only the fugitives could get away on the motor-boat there would be little to fear. Once on the open sea they would be almost safe from pursuit.

And so the two-seater was headed straight for Simson's Gap. But the racing-car would soon be on their track, and it was a question whether they would arrive in time. It would, indeed, be galling to fall into the enemy's hands again when success was actually within their grasp.

Indeed, if the pursuing car appeared before the Gap was reached, Nelson Lee intended abandoning the car and taking to the open fields. The darkness would conceal them, and they would, perhaps, elude pursuit. But it would be far better to get away in the motor-boat.

That was certainly the end to aim for.

And the great detective, knowing full well how much was at stake, drove the little car along the road with every ounce of speed possible. Corners were taken without slackening down, and on one or two occasions an accident seemed inevitable. But Lee, by dint of skilful driving, avoided disaster.

At last there were signs that the journey was almost at an end. The country became flat, and marshes extended on either side of the road. And then, almost before the escaping trio knew it, they were at Simson's Gap.

As Montague Todd had said, there was no mistaking the spot. The road led straight down to the beach, and then curved round. A narrow gulley, however, led straight down to the sands. Nelson Lee sent the two-seater plunging giddily down the gulley, and it finally came to a stop with its wheels half-buried in sand and shingle.

"Topping!" declared Nipper enthusiastically. "We're still O.K.! I say, guv'nor, I always knew you were a ripping driver, but you've beaten all records to-night—"

"Never mind compliments at present, young 'un," rapped out Lee crisply. "Ah! That must be the cave," he added, pointing. "Come, Brigham, we must not waste a second now. Those Circle of Terror agents may be within half a mile of us."

Sure enough, a powerful little motor-boat was found within a tiny cave. As the trio lugged the little vessel down to the sea, Nelson Lee mentally registered a vow to repay Todd for the excellent service he had rendered. There was proof positive now, at all events, that the man was true and faithful.

The boat was floated, and then Lee and Brigham hopped aboard. Nipper, wading in to his waist, gave the boat a heavy

shove-off, and then hauled himself over the stern.

At the same second Leo managed to get the engine running.

As the propeller commenced churning the water two spots of light appeared at the Gap, and angry voices were distinctly heard. The escape had only been effected with a second to spare. Even as matters were, a dozen bullets came spattering upon the water round the boat.

But the range was a long one, and everything was gloomy; accurate aim was impossible. There was a loud ping as a bullet struck a portion of the metal-work, but that was the only hit.

Two minutes later the motor-boat was cutting briskly through the water, and heading for the open sea. The escape was a complete success—the Circle of Terror had been foiled at their moment of triumph.

“Melsey Island!” exclaimed Squadron-Commander Brigham, D.S.O.

As he spoke he pointed. It was still dark, but not pitchy. Lee and Nipper could see the dark bulk of the island just

ahead of them. Nelson Lee steered the motor-boat so that it would run aground opposite the aeroplane workshops.

The journey from the Suffolk coast had been accomplished quickly and without incident. The motor-boat had proved to be powerful and fast, and in splendid order. Todd was undoubtedly a splendid ally.

But the night's excitement was not over even yet.

Both Nelson Lee and Nipper were feeling comfortable; they imagined that the adventure was finished. But, as the motor-boat headed for the shore, they were amazed and startled to see a vivid flash of light. This was followed by a dull, booming explosion. Immediately on its heels there came two others.

“What the deuce can be the matter?” exclaimed Commander Brigham in alarm and amazement. “Why, great heavens! Look up there; the island is being bombarded by an aeroplane! The infernal Huns must have got wind of my machine!”

The island was undoubtedly being bombed by an aircraft. But Nelson Lee

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had his own opinion as to the explanation. He grimly realised that this was the work of the Circle of Terror. Failing in their own efforts, the Circle had decided to exact revenge!

Professor Zingrave was displaying his ruthless power!

By the time Lee and Nipper and Brigham landed the raiding aeroplane had vanished. And it had left a wake of fire and destruction. The sheds and hangars were completely demolished and ablaze.

Poor Brigham was nearly frantic.

"My machine!" he panted hoarsely as he leapt into the shallow water. "The fiends! They've wrecked it—after months and months of work——"

But the D.S.O. was interrupted by a sudden challenge from the foreshore. Looking up he saw that several men had come running down.

"Hands up!" exclaimed a sharp voice.

"Colonel Liverby!" said Brigham huskily. "It's all right, colonel—it is I, Brigham. These gentlemen are Mr. Nelson Lee and his assistant. I suppose those devils have finished the job pretty thoroughly?" he added bitterly.

The colonel gave a delighted exclamation.

"Brigham!" he cried. "Why, my dear fellow, I am delighted to see you again. How in the world did you manage to escape?"

"Never mind that now, sir," said the airman-inventor concernedly. "What damage have those bombs done? Has the machine escaped injury——"

"It's not scratched, my dear Brigham," laughed Colonel Liverby. "Acting under my orders, your men removed the new machine to the other extremity of the island. Not a single bomb fell there——"

"Hurrah!" yelled Nipper enthusiastically. "The rotten Circle's diddled after all!"

But a grim surprise was awaiting the party.

While they were speaking there came an urgent shout from the darkness. Hurrying up, the little party found a young lieutenant hastening towards them from the other end of the islet. He declared that a surprise party of strangers had landed from a powerful motor-launch; the attackers had sprung upon the guards——

Nelson Lee and Brigham and the others waited to hear no more. They pelted away with all speed. And when they arrived they found the military guard in a bad way. They had been surprised in the darkness and silently attacked. Four men were wounded and two others stunned.

And even as the rescue party arrived they saw Commander Brigham's precious aeroplane soaring aloft. And there, high over their heads, it hung, hovering silently and serenely!

While the Circle's aeroplane had bombed the workshops, the landing party had seized the new invention! The Circle had acted with amazing cleverness and promptitude, and this attack on Melsey Island had been carried out with superb judgment.

In less than five minutes the "Hoverer" was completely out of sight. And a motor-launch was found deserted upon the beach. Commander Brigham had been rescued—but his wonderful invention was in the hands of the Circle after all!

Nelson Lee was chagrined and furious.

And, then and there, he swore to Squadron-Commander Brigham that he would regain possession of the lost aircraft within ten days. It was a calm, bold statement, but in no way savoured of a boast.

But would the famous detective be able to keep his word?

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!

"THE SHERIFF OF BLAZING GULCH."

Another Remarkable Episode taken from
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GRAND COMPLETE TALE.

For Little Tim's Sake.

The Story of a Britisher's Sacrifice,

By a Popular Writer.

THE 1st CHAPTER.

THE AILING CHILD—DESPERATION—THE COACH FROM FORT LORENZ.

THE sole light in the rough shanty was furnished by a floating wick which burnt evilly in a saucer of rancid fat; yet feeble though the flame was, it was more than sufficient to illuminate the interior of the little hut. It brought out clearly enough the two or three home-made articles of furniture, the revolver and rifle hanging from nails, and more especially it threw into relief a dark figure kneeling in one corner of the hut, where, on a rough bed of planks, lay a boy of about ten, his face drawn and pallid with suffering. "Dad," the boy whispered, "when's the things comin'? You know you promised 'em yesterday."

"You'll have 'em, boy," Grant whispered through his parched lips. "Reckon I'll be goin' ter look if they're comin' right now."

With feeble steps Grant went to the door of the shanty and looked away to his left. There lay the small mining-camp where Eli Grant had dreamed his golden dream, only to suffer a rude awakening, as many others had done—only to starve, and watch his boy dying when a few things bought at Fort Lorenz—a largish town ten miles away—might have saved him.

"Spare him," he groaned—"spare the little 'un!"

"Dad!"

The cry drew him back into the shanty, and again he knelt beside the bed, holding the boy's hand.

"Seen 'em coming' yet, dad?"

"No; but they cairn't be long," Grant answered, trying to speak cheerfully.

"Why, Harry ain't the sort to—"

The door of the shanty opened softly, and a tall man entered. He could not have been more than three or four-and-twenty, and his well-knit frame indicated a life spent in the open. Just now, how-

ever, his bronze face was drawn and haggard. The boy did not see him enter, but Grant did. He rose and passed quickly through the doorway, for the Britisher had not remained inside.

"What luck?" Grant asked quickly.

"None, pard!" Harry Freeman answered, with a groan. "I've been from end to end of the camp, and there's not a dollar in it."

Eli Grant passed a rough hand across his eyes.

"It means that the little'n's got to die—sure as death!" he groaned.

For a minute or two Grant knelt with his face between his hands, then he rose and crossed to the wall where his revolver hung. He unhooked it, and fastened the belt round his waist. His face was set and grim, his eyes were cold as polished steel.

"Bess still outside, Harry?" he asked in a steady voice.

"Yes," Freeman answered, wondering what the other was driving at.

"Guess you'll lend her to me for a spell?"

"Yes; but—"

Before Freeman could say more Grant was through the doorway. He unhitched the mare's bridle, swung into the saddle, turned her head in the direction of Fort Lorenz, and threw her into a canter. A queer smile was on his face, and his right hand rested on the butt of the revolver at his hip.

It was night now, and it was well for the horseman that he knew the road blindfold. For close on five miles he rode, never altering the mare's pace, then reined in behind a great clump of bushes which grew beside the track from the fort. From his neck he snatched his red handkerchief, slashed a couple of holes in it with his knife, forming a full mask, only the steel-grey eyes glinting through the two slits.

For an hour he sat like a rock upon the mare, his head thrust slightly sideways.

From a long distance away came the beat of hoofs, clear cut and regular. The coach from Fort Lorenz was loping along at a hand-gallop. Eli Grant smiled grimly, and raised his right hand to make sure that his mask was in its place. This done, he drew his heavy Navy colt and waited. Nearer and nearer came the hoof-beats, and Grant worked the mare sideways until she stood at the edge of the clump of bush.

"Up, up, up!" came the driver's yells to his mules.

And Grant, touching the mare's sides with the spurs, sent her leaping out into the centre of the track, right in the path of the mule-team.

"Hands up!" Grant shouted hoarsely.

With a jerk the team was flung back, and the heavy coach stopped. A pistol cracked, and the shot whistled past Grant. His weapon answered sharply, and the passenger who had fired from the box-seat dropped his gun as if it had been a hot coal, for he was winged through the fleshy part of the forearm. The rest of the passengers sat scared and motionless.

Pushing the mare forward, Grant drew close to the side of the coach.

"The first man es moves for his gun," he observed, speaking calmly by an effort, "dies—sure as death!"

He looked from man to man, his eyes resting last upon the one on the box-seat, who was nursing his wounded arm. This man was different from the rest of the passengers. In the first place, his dress was not that of an ordinary miner; it was too good, and it was obvious that he was one of the very new hands on his way to the mines.

"Your money!" Grant demanded, covering the passenger with his pistol. "Sharp!"

For an instant the man hesitated, then he drew out a pocket-book and tossed it to the horseman, who caught it.

"There's a matter of a thousand dollars in there," the man observed, in a quiet voice; "but I reckon you've earned it. Takes a bit of nerve to hold up a coach, doesn't it?"

Grant made no answer.

"A thousand dollars—a thousand dollars!" he kept repeating inwardly.

He forgot the rest of the passengers, remembered only that he now had the money to save the boy's life, and, with a quick jerk of the wrist, he swerved

the mare round and galloped away into the darkness. Three or four shots followed him into the night, but they all flew wide.

At the mare's full pace Grant rode now, a wild exultation tingling through every nerve of his body. The great strides of the mare burnt up the ground at a terrific rate, and in a marvellously short time Grant reined up before his shanty. Sliding from the saddle, and leaving the mare unfastened—she had been trained to wait—he thrust open the door of the shanty and hurried in.

"What luck, pard?" Freeman asked quickly, looking round as he stood beside the bed. "The boy's asleep."

Grant snatched the pocket-book out and thrust it into the Britisher's hands.

"A thousand dollars!" he cried. "Ride, lad—ride for your life to Fort Lorenz. You know the things to buy. The mare's still as fresh as paint. Don't spare her, for the sake of the little 'un!"

Freeman walked swiftly to the door, but stopped on the threshold and looked back.

"How did you get this, Eli?"

For a moment Eli Grant lowered his eyes, then he raised them, and looked the Britisher straight in the face.

"What I have done was for the boy," he answered simply. "Go!"

CHAPTER II.

THE AVENGER'S FATE—THE BRITISHER'S SACRIFICE—A REAL FRIEND.

AN hour had passed, and Eli Grant still knelt beside the bed on which Tim slept uneasily. From time to time he turned his head and glanced towards the door, but as yet there was no sign of Harry Freeman. Grant knew that it was impossible for him to return so soon, but he could not keep his eyes from continually turning to the door.

At last! The beat of hoofs came sharply to the man's ears, and he leapt to his feet. One step he took towards the door, and no more. The beat of hoofs was getting plainer, and he realised that a dozen horses, not one, were being ridden rapidly towards the shanty.

What did it mean? Possibly it was only a party of men riding by, bound for Fort Lorenz. And the noise drew close to the shanty, stopped abruptly, and the door was thrust open. A tall, fierce-

looking man strode in, and nearly a dozen crowded in after him. In the hand of every one was a revolver.

"Hands up!" the tall man cried. "Reckon we've got the drop on you, Eli Grant."

"Larraby!" Grant gasped. "What's the game?"

"Hear him, boys!" Larraby said savagely. "Wants ter know what we're here for."

"Best tell him," another man growled.

"It's jest this, Eli Grant," Larraby said savagely. "A matter of near two hours back you held up the coach from Fort Lorenz, an' robbed a certain Britisher—who reckons to be along here when his arms hes been tied up—of a thousand dollars. That's the ticket. Got anything to say?"

A wild idea flashed through Eli Grant's brain. What was there to condemn him? The money was not in the shanty, and Freeman was out of harm's way.

"It's a lie!" he said hoarsely. "Search me."

Larraby quickly ran his hands through the man's pockets, while some of the others searched the hut. They found no money, but something else was lighted upon—a red handkerchief with two holes cut through it. The man who found it gave vent to a yell of triumph, and handed it to his leader.

"What d'you say now?" Larraby roared. "Ain't you guilty—you skunk?"

The noise had roused the boy, and now he looked round with wild, frightened eyes. Eli Grant did his best to soothe him, then turned his face, pallid and hard, to his accusers.

"Pard," he whispered, drawing as far away from the bed as he could so that the boy might not hear, "you've fair got it on me; but don't let the little 'un know. Best do it outside; there's a tree mighty handy."

Without a word, Larraby and another

man led Grant from the shanty, the others following in a crowd. They made straight for the tree, and Larraby pointed coolly at a branch which stuck out at right angles from the trunk, a matter of twelve feet from the ground.

"Get the rope over it, boys," he said.

Over the branch swung a stout lariat, ready noosed, and Eli Grant placed himself beneath it. He was like a man in a dream, and he only dimly realised all that was taking place. Death had drawn near to him before, and he was not afraid to face it now. He had sinned to save his boy, and he was ready to pay the penalty of his failure.

The noose was dropped round the doomed man's neck, and half-a-dozen eager pairs of hands gripped it.

"Let her rip!" Larraby cried.

With a rush, a solitary horseman dashed into the midst of the group and flung himself from his horse. A large bundle was fastened to his back, and he was panting for breath after his desperate ride.

"What's this?" he demanded through his set teeth.

"Guess you're jest in time for the picnic," Larraby answered with a grin. "This yere is the skunk what held up the coach from Fort Lorenz to-night."

Harry Freeman looked sharply at Eli Grant, then his eyes turned to the shanty.

"It's a lie!" he cried fiercely. "I'm the man!"

Staggered by this statement, the men holding the rope let go their hold, and no one attempted to stop the Britisher when he stepped up to Grant.

"It's to save the little 'un, Eli," he whispered hoarsely. "The things are in the parcel there. I'd be no good except in this way."

"I won't do it, lad," Grant answered huskily; "you sha'n't give your life, even for the little 'un."

"I shall," Freeman said doggedly, and dragged the noose from the man's neck.

"Boys," he said calmly, "I'm ready."

Larraby and his followers still stood motionless, evidently in doubt. Freeman saw that, and dragged the stolen pocket-book from his pocket.

"See here!" he cried. "The money!"

At last the men were convinced, and Larraby strode forward. Eli Grant, pale as death, still stood beside the Britisher,

(Continued overleaf.)



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and watched the noose dropped round his neck.

"You sha'n't!" he gasped.
"You---"

For the second time since the men had stood beneath the tree a solitary horseman dashed up. This one clambered slowly from the saddle, for his right arm was in a sling, and he had lost a good deal of blood. He walked swiftly to where the Britisher stood with the noose round his neck; then he staggered back.

"Harry!" he gasped.
"Dick!"

"What does it mean?" the wounded man demanded hoarsely.

"It means thus yere, Mister Richard Cunningham," Larraby growled; "thet's the skunk what stole your dollars, an' he's goin' ter swing for it!"

For a moment Dick stood motionless, then he turned to Freeman, a chum whom he had lost sight of for years.

"What does it mean?" he whispered huskily.

"Just this, Dick," Freeman answered coolly, in a low voice. "I did not rob you, but I've got to die for it. You were robbed by a man who did it to save his child from death, and I'm not going to see him fail now."

With a fierce gesture Dick Cunningham turned upon Larraby and his gang.

"Men," he said harshly, "who of you has been robbed to-night?"

"None," Larraby growled—"only you."

"Then I refuse to let this man be hung—he is my friend."

"A mighty fine friend!" Larraby sneered. "An' I guess we're ruinin' this yere circus."

Cunningham dropped his left hand and drew a revolver. His arm went up, and he covered Larraby.

"Get!" he said hoarsely. "This matter lies between me and my friend. So sure as you make a move—any man Jack of you--to draw a gun, I shoot you dead on the spot. Go!"

For fully a minute Larraby and his men hesitated, then, set the example by their leader, they turned to their horses, mounted, and the three men were left alone.

Tim is a big boy now, and his three guardians, for they all seem to regard themselves in the light of his father, are thinking of taking him to England, having made their pile in a fresh camp.

THE END.

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