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THE HOVERING PERIL;
OR, THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING MINIATURES
ANOTHER ADVENTURE OF NELSON LEE v. "THE CIRCLE OF TERROR."
BY THE AUTHOR OF "**THE SECRET OF MELSEY ISLAND,**" ETC.

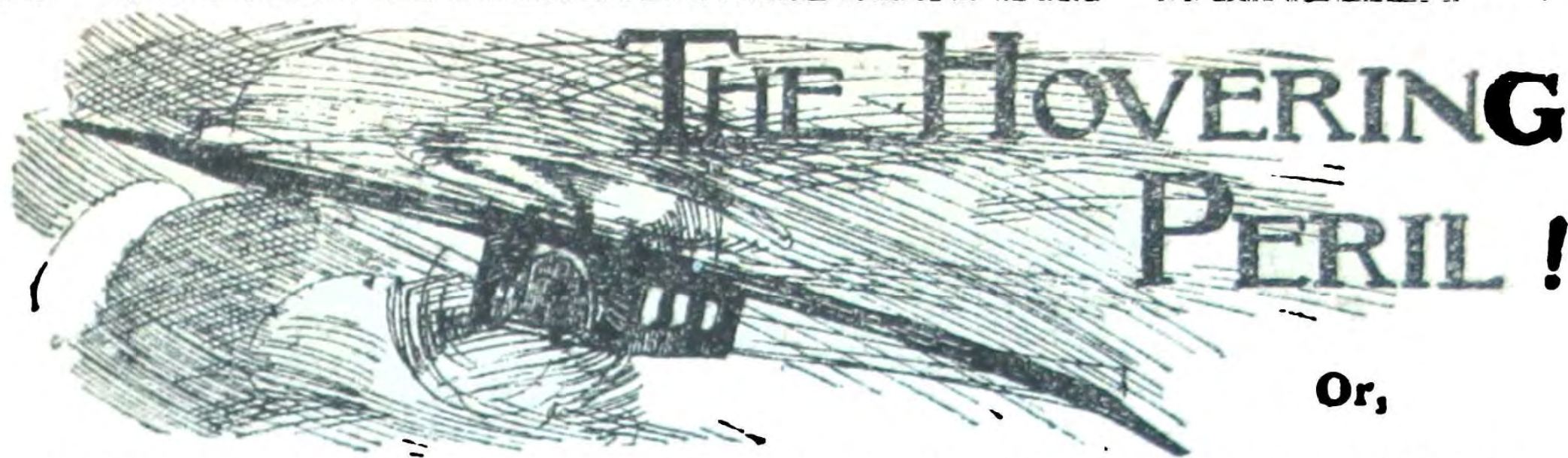
“A Case of Extradition”

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Being an Account of the
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SEXTON BLAKE and
TINKER, and the BLACK
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THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING MINIATURES.

Another Adventure of NELSON LEE versus "THE CIRCLE OF TERROR."

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

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING MINIATURES.

THE DUKE OF AMBERLEY stood before the window of his library at Amberley House, Hampton Court. His face was wreathed with smiles, and he was gazing upon a miniature with keen approval.

"Splendid!" he murmured enthusiastically—"simply superb!"

The miniature was indeed a wonderful work of art, and the Duke of Amberley appreciated it for its full worth. He appreciated it to such an extent, in fact, that he moved across to a massive side-board and poured himself out a glass of whisky. This, with a dash of soda, he swallowed with enjoyment, his gaze still upon the miniature.

"Perfect!" he exclaimed, smacking his lips.

It was not quite certain whether he was referring to the whisky or to the little painting. Probably they were both perfect, in their different ways. The duke crossed to the window again, and allowed the brilliant summer sunlight to play upon the face of the miniature.

For fully five minutes he remained gazing intently upon the painting. It was in water colours, and upon ivory. Doubtless the thing was a wonderful work of art, and worth quite a large sum of money. But most people would have glanced at it for a few moments only.

The Duke of Amberley was different, however.

For years his hobby had been that of collecting miniatures and similar art

treasures. His collection, no doubt, was one of the finest in the world, and his greatest delight was found in purchasing a new treasure.

Being immensely rich, he could easily afford to humour his hobby on all occasions. And he never, under any circumstances, purchased a miniature which did not possess a famous history.

This particular picture he was now admiring so intently was practically the gem of his collection. He had only procured it the previous day, and was consequently in a seventh heaven of delight.

The duke was a slim, distinguished-looking man with a keen, clean-shaven face. Being clean-shaven, it was difficult to guess his age, but most people suspected him of being at least sixty. He looked younger.

His eyes were of that type which express unbounded geniality and joy. To gaze upon him, to look into his face, was sufficient to make most people genial in a moment. They were infected by the duke's charming personality.

"The man was a fool!" murmured his Grace. "I really cannot understand why he let the thing go. So cheaply, too! I have never made a more satisfactory purchase!"

Considering that the noble duke had paid three thousand pounds for that little picture, no one but himself would have considered that he had made a satisfactory purchase. Yet he had not paid exorbitantly.

This particular miniature was of great renown, and the Duke of Amberley was overjoyed to secure it for his collection.

Once or twice people had attempted to

pass off spurious imitations upon him, but he was too old on hand at the game to be caught napping. He possessed some of the most famous art treasures in the world, and there was not a single one among them which was not genuine.

The hobby was the very joy of his life.

His miniatures adorned the walls of his library, of his massive dining-room, of his superb drawing-room. They were everywhere. But the most famous—the elite—found a place in the library.

There was no room for fresh ones upon the walls—not without spoiling the symmetry of the others—and when a new painting was purchased the duke would spend perhaps a whole day deciding which picture should be banished in favour of the new one.

On this particular occasion the duke had no difficulty in deciding, for the miniature he now held in his hands was far and away more superior to many of those upon the walls.

As his Grace turned away from the window with a little sigh of satisfaction there came a tap at the door, and the next moment a tall man entered. He was in uniform—the uniform of a major.

"Hallo, pater!" he exclaimed. "Still engrossed?"

"My dear Bob, I really cannot keep my eyes from this delightful painting," exclaimed the duke with enthusiasm. "It's a pity you don't take more interest in these miniatures, my boy."

Major the Marquis of Leatherhead smiled.

"Haven't got time for that sort of thing, pater," he replied lightly. "A man in my regiment is rather keen on them, though. He's told me that he'd give anything to look over your collection."

The duke beamed.

"You must bring him along one day, Bob," he replied. "You know that I shall be simply delighted to welcome anybody who is appreciative. I'm afraid you're too rough and ready, my dear boy."

"I'm a soldier—that's all!" was the major's smiling reply. "Soldiers don't find much enjoyment in looking at these tin-pot little paintings—"

"Bob—Bob! How dare you?" demanded his father.

They both laughed, and then Bob condescended to examine the little painting which his father still held. He eyed it critically, and then handed it back with a chuckle.

"Not bad!" was his opinion.

"You're—you're hopeless!" declared the Duke of Amberley. "Not bad! And that is all you have to say regarding one of the most famous miniatures in the world! I sincerely hope the friend you speak of has a keener appreciation of true art. Who is he, anyway?"

"Oh, a fellow named Armstrong—Captain Armstrong," replied the other. "One of the best men going, pater. You'll like him, I know. His father's Sir David Armstrong—quite a decent family."

The duke changed the subject after a few moments, and the pair were soon talking of other matters. These two, father and son, were very attached to one another, and his Grace was delighted by his son's presence.

The major was home on leave from the front, and would remain in England for another week. He was a man of thirty-five, and, like his father, looked younger. He was always rather amused at the duke's enthusiasm regarding miniatures, but simply could not share that enthusiasm himself.

That night the Duke of Amberley returned home from his club—where he had bored everybody to the point of tears with his eulogies regarding his latest possession—and at once retired to the library to worship the painting afresh.

He had not been seated at his desk long when his butler appeared. The duke hadn't heard the man tap at the door, but he looked up as he heard a discreet cough.

"Oh—er—what is it, Burton?"

"A gentleman has just called, your Grace—"

"I can't see anybody now, Burton," interrupted the duke, waving his hand impatiently. "It is past ten o'clock—Who is he, anyhow?"

"Captain Armstrong, your Grace."

"Armstrong—Armstrong?" repeated the duke. "I seem to have heard that name—Why, of course," he added to himself, "Bob was talking about him only this morning. Armstrong. Why, yes. Show Captain Armstrong in at once, Burton," he added aloud.

The butler withdrew, and his Grace sat back in his chair and gently rubbed his hands together. One of his greatest grievances was that so few people really understood miniatures. By what his son had said, Captain Armstrong was a true enthusiast. And, as such, he was heartily welcome.

If he had come after midnight he would probably have been gladly received.

A minute later Burton returned and escorted into the library a jovial-looking young man in the uniform of a captain. He was slightly nervous, and was certainly not prepared for the hearty welcome which was bestowed upon him.

"My dear sir, I am delighted to meet you!" exclaimed the Duke of Amberley. "Of course, you have come to see my miniatures? My son was telling me about you. We shall soon see what sort of an eye you have, eh?"

Captain Armstrong smiled.

"I'm afraid it's an awful piece of impertinence on my part, coming to you, sir," he said tentatively. "I'm a bit of a duffer at most things, I know. But I'm jolly keen on these sort of things," he went on, waving his hand towards the walls. "Jove! That's a fine Holbein you've got over there!"

The duke beamed delightedly.

"I see you've detected one of my finest masterpieces already," he exclaimed. "Come and look at it, my dear fellow. Just come and look at it closely!"

There had really been no introduction at all. These two were completely engrossed in less than a minute. They were both enthusiasts, and there was a mutual understanding between them.

From picture to picture they went, and each art gem was duly praised and criticised and commented upon. The duke was not long in discovering that Captain Armstrong was a connoisseur in this type of painting.

They were in the library, and it was here that the duke's most precious treasures were hung. His Grace halted before a beautiful portrait of a young girl, and he pointed to it with pride.

"Did you ever see such exquisite workmanship, my dear fellow?" he asked. "I wouldn't part with that painting for ten thousand pounds!"

"I don't wonder," said Armstrong. "It's just magnificent!"

And then, all in a second, a most amazing thing happened. Armstrong glanced at his watch, and noted that the time was half-past ten exactly. The chiming of a clock on the mantelpiece had told him of this, but he had consulted his watch to see if the clock was correct.

The Duke of Amberley had his hands behind him, and before he could know what was happening his visitor slipped a pair of curiously designed handcuffs over his wrists, and snapped them to.

"Why, what in heaven——"

His Grace got no further. As he was on the point of turning, the amazed question on his lips, Armstrong pulled his scarf off, and clapped it over the elder man's mouth. Then, with a rough jerk, he pulled the scarf tight, and bound it securely. A muffled, gurgling cry came from the duke.

"Neat, eh?" said Captain Armstrong briskly. "You couldn't have fallen in with my plans better, my dear sir. I thought the job would be easy, but this is simply child's play. Don't attempt to cry out—you can't. And I don't mean to harm you, anyhow!"

As he spoke, he pushed his Grace into a deep chair, and quickly bound his ankles. Thus, in the simplest manner possible, the duke was rendered absolutely helpless. Not a sound had been made during the process.

The visitor stepped softly across the room and turned the key in the lock of the door. Then from his tunic he produced a thing which looked like a big square of fine canvas.

He shook it out, and it resolved itself into a carefully made bag. It was very large, and two handles were fixed at the top.

The Duke of Amberley was staring at Armstrong dazedly and with rising fury. What was the meaning of this astounding outrage? For the moment the duke was completely bewildered. He couldn't make any sound above a muffled gurgle, and there was no chance of attracting attention.

Armstrong was moving about coolly and calmly, puffing at his cigar with perfect sang-froid. And he commenced to take down the miniatures from the wall. One by one he placed them in the big canvas bag.

The duke nearly choked in his fury.

The man was a thief—a common burglar! He was on the point of stealing the priceless miniatures!

The duke's treasures were being stolen before his very eyes!

Armstrong glanced across at his victim as he heard the sound of scuffling, and he smiled cheerfully.

"It's all right," he said. "I'm only borrowing them. You'll get them back in due course, you know. Just a little matter of business, my dear duke. You'll understand later on."

What the Duke of Amberley would have said in answer to that remark, had he been able to speak, was not difficult to guess. For his look was deadly, and

he went purple in the face with anger and impotence.

His priceless paintings were being stolen!

That was the only clear thought which filled the duke's brain for the moment. He was incapable of realising the full meaning of this audacious affair. But after a while he forced himself to think.

Who was this man?

It was appalling to think that a captain in the Army would descend to such base methods— Oh, no! The fellow was an impostor, of course. He wasn't Captain Armstrong at all. He was a bogus captain.

His Grace came to that conclusion quickly, his eyes watching the intruder's movements with painful intentness. What a fool he had been to admit the man! And what a double fool he had been to accept him without question, and to allow him to gain the upper hand in this way!

The duke bitterly realised that he had simplified matters to a degree for this burglar, and it angered him treble-fold when he told himself that he was mainly to blame for the whole disastrous affair. He had been totally off his guard, and had taken no steps to prevent such an attack.

But who could have suspected such extraordinary methods?

A burglary at half-past ten in the evening, while the servants were still up and about the house!

Yet, when the Duke of Amberley came to consider, this was the only way in which the robbery could have been perpetrated. The dastardly scoundrel evidently knew the house well; for at night, when all were asleep, the library, and every room, in fact, were closed and locked.

Patent burglar alarms were fitted—alarms that could not possibly be disconnected by any intruder, no matter whether he knew of their presence or not. An ordinary burglary was impossible.

And so the man had adopted this game. He had probably got confederates outside. They would disappear with their booty long before the duke could give the alarm. All the miniatures would vanish—

The thought infuriated the old man to a point of apoplexy.

But now he didn't struggle. He just sat still, and watched the other man at his work. Armstrong proceeded leisurely—at least, he seemed to be leisurely. As

a matter of fact, he was performing his task with great speed. But he was quite cool, and did not seem to be hurrying.

Two of the walls were already stripped, and the canvas bag was bulging. But it was capable of holding many more paintings. Armstrong turned, and looked at his victim again. He tossed his cigar-end into the fireplace.

"Don't know whether it's usual to have all these bits of art hung on the wall," he remarked. "They're handy for me, anyhow. The room looks a bit bare, doesn't it? You'll get 'em all back again, so you needn't worry."

Five minutes later the canvas bag was full up, and the stranger carefully secured the top. The bag was somewhat heavy now, and, vaguely, the duke wondered how the burglar was going to escape from the house with such a bundle.

But the helpless man was thinking of something else now. By working his chin, he had freed the scarf somewhat, and he knew that in another minute he would be able to get his mouth free.

Captain Armstrong laughed softly.

"That's about all," he said. "I can't take the lot, of course, but I've managed to pick out the winners. I'll be getting along now—"

The Duke of Amberley made a tremendous effort, and the scarf dropped.

"By George! I didn't see that game," began the intruder sharply.

"Help!" cried the duke frantically. "Burton—Burton! Help! Help! You vile scoundrel—"

The helpless man's cries were loud and shrill.

"Hang you!" grated out Armstrong harshly.

The mischief was done now, and he knew that it would be futile to remain. Indeed, there was a possibility that his carefully-laid plans would be frustrated. While tying the scarf so that it did not hurt the duke, he had foiled his own game—perhaps.

For the thief was still hopeful of getting clear away.

He slung the bag violently over his shoulder, and the Duke of Amberley nearly wept as he saw his beautiful miniatures being treated as though they were potatoes. The thief reached the door, unlocked it, and passed out into the great hall. As he emerged he saw Burton, the butler, hurrying towards him.

And an urgent cry came from the library.

"Stop that scoundrel!" shouted the duke. "Don't let him get away!"

"Good gracious me!" said Burton.

The stout, comfortable butler was flabbergasted. His cheeks turned red, and he trembled with nervousness. There was a look in the bogus captain's eyes which he did not like at all.

Nevertheless, Burton acted commendably.

"Where are you going?" he demanded. "His Grace tells me——"

"Out of the way, you fat idiot!" snapped Armstrong roughly.

Fat idiot! Burton had never been called that in his life before! For a moment he thought that the heavens were going to fall. And his indignation was thoroughly aroused now, and he forgot his nervousness.

He advanced upon Armstrong, although what he would have done was a question. Certainly he was no match for the desperate intruder. Before he could reach the man he paused.

For Armstrong had dashed suddenly for the stairs, and was mounting them two at a time, in spite of the heavy bag. The staircase was wide and well lighted. Armstrong was soon on the first wide landing.

Burton, heavy and staid, gasped with alarm and dismay.

"Have you got the rascal?" came in a bellow from the library.

"He's—he's gone upstairs, your Grace!" panted Burton.

"Then go after him, you fool!" roared the duke furiously.

Fool! And from his Grace himself! Burton positively expected the heavens to fall now! He moved towards the stairs as though in a trance, but was brought to his senses by the sound of footsteps behind him. Looking round quickly, he saw two menservants coming from the rear quarters.

Instantly the butler's wits returned to him.

"There's a burglar upstairs!" he rapped out with authority. "Go after him, Bedford! You, too, Simms! Don't stand there staring, you fools—he'll escape if you're not sharp! After him, you gaping idiots!"

Burton was getting a bit of his own back, he felt. And Bedford and Simms, both active men—although ex-soldiers, discharged from the Army—rushed at the stairs and bounded up them. On the whole, they displayed greater courage

than Burton had done. The butler heard them tearing upstairs, and then he hurried into the library to find out why on earth his master didn't come out into the hall himself.

Simms and Bedford pelted upstairs, and met a housemaid on the landing. She was on the point of fainting, and declared that a man in officer's uniform had nearly knocked her down, and had rushed at the upper stairs.

The two menservants rushed at the upper stairs, too, and mounted them rapidly. When they arrived at the top they heard their quarry panting up still another flight of stairs which led directly to the roof.

"He's gettin' on to the roof, Simms!" gasped Bedford.

"You two will stop down there!" grated a husky voice from above. "If you try to mount these stairs you'll drop—with a bullet in your carcase!"

"My goodness!" gasped Simms.

The two startled servants heard the door slam—the door which led direct on to the roof above. Then all was silence. Simms and Bedford looked at one another in a scared kind of way.

"You stay here, Simms," said the other man quickly. "He's on the roof—he can't get down, not without a ladder. I'm goin' to rush out and get the groom and other chaps to help me!"

"But, I say——"

Bedford didn't wait to hear what Simms had to say. He pelted down stairs, rather glad to get away, in fact. He didn't fancy meeting an armed burglar—and the scoundrel would probably try to enter the house again when he found that there was no escape from the roof.

In the big hall Bedford found the Duke of Amberley. His Grace was simply boiling with rage. He was free now, for Burton had found that the handkerchiefs were easily removable, although the duke couldn't shift them himself.

"Have you got him?" roared the old nobleman.

"He's—he's on the roof, your Grace!"

"On the roof!" thundered the duke.

"The miniatures as well?"

"I—I don't know——"

"You don't know!" snorted his Grace hotly. "You don't know anything! I never saw such a pack of dunderheads! Burton acted like an absolute idiot—he ought to have stopped the rascal!"

Burton nearly fainted. He was being

called an absolute idiot—before another servant, too!

"Why didn't you follow the scoundrel on to the roof?" asked the duke fiercely.

"He—he threatened to kill us with a pistol——"

"Us—us! Who was with you?"

"Simms, your Grace!"

"And where is Simms now?"

"Upstairs, your Grace—watching the top door!"

The duke rushed to the foot of the stairs.

"Simms!" he shouted.

"Yes, your Grace!" came a faint voice from above.

"Don't let that ruffian get down from the roof!" bellowed the duke. "Go up and lock the door, so that he can't get in again!"

"That's what I have done, your Grace!" came Simms's voice.

"H'm! Somebody's got some sense, it seems!" grunted the Duke of Amberley. "My paintings—my miniatures! Great heavens! The scoundrel has cleared the library of the gems of my collection! Upon my soul, Burton, have you entirely lost your wits? Why don't you move yourself? Go outside and see that the burglar doesn't climb down a ladder! Go outside at once!"

The staid butler gulped something down, and hurried away.

"Go and get some of the men together, Bedford!" he snarled furiously.

Burton, to tell the truth, was simply boiling with indignation. He privately held the view that if anybody had lost their wits, it was the duke himself. The butler couldn't understand all this fuss—over a few silly little paintings! But then, Burton was not an art connoisseur by any means.

The duke was wild with anxiety and alarm, and he hadn't displayed such temper or excitement for years and years. Indeed, Burton never remembered seeing his Grace in such a state before. It was—it was disgraceful—nothing less—for a duke to get into such an undignified state, bellowing and shouting and dancing about like a madman!

Under the circumstances, however, the Duke of Amberley was fully justified in being excited. But he had one consoling thought. The desperate thief had dashed up on to the roof in his mad effort to get away.

And the roof, although flat, was a

trap. There was no way down whatever. There was not even an atom of ivy on the walls of the mansion, and the roof, too, was surmounted by a high parapet. If Armstrong had got to the ground, he had got there by falling sheer—and that would mean his death. The door he had escaped by was the only exit, and Simms had had sense enough to lock that door.

So, upon the whole, the duke was relieved. The scoundrel was trapped completely. And even if he had a rope ladder fixed up, which was almost unthinkable, for he had evidently rushed on to the roof as a last resource, Burton and the others would be in time to prevent his escape. Armstrong couldn't possibly have got down by the time the butler reached the terrace.

The Duke of Amberley mopped his heated brow, and hastened to the front door. He passed out into the still summer night. It was as black as pitch. The sky was overclouded, and not a star was showing.

Low shouts came from the darkness, and the duke hurried round. He found that the mansion was surrounded. Burton had become active at last, and a cordon was drawn completely round the house. The burglar couldn't possibly get down from the roof without being seen. Besides, there was no sign of a ladder.

The duke hurried back indoors, went straight to the library, and procured an old-fashioned revolver. It was loaded, but the trigger went so stiffly that it was impossible to take any certain aim with it. The recoil, too, was appalling. But his Grace didn't think of these little defects.

He mounted the stairs, puffing and blowing, and found Simms at the top.

"Is that you, Simms?" panted the duke.

"Yes, your Grace. I don't know what's happened to the man," said Simms. "I locked the door, your Grace. And I haven't heard anything at all!"

"He's still up there—he couldn't have got down," said the Duke of Amberley.

"I'm going to shoot the rascal, Simms!"

"Shoot him, your Grace?" gasped Simms.

"Yes, if he shows fight! Go and unlock the door, Simms!"

"Yes, your Grace!"

Simms didn't like the task at all, but he couldn't refuse. He had a terrifying

feeling that as soon as he opened the door the burglar would spring out upon him and do awful things.

But when the door swung open nothing entered but a faint breeze. The door gave straight out upon the leads, and the wide expanse of the flat roof stretched out darkly and grimly.

"Hands up, you scoundrel!" thundered the duke sternly.

There wasn't a sound in reply. Simms, just behind his noble master, shivered perceptibly. He felt that it was better to face German shells in the trenches than face a desperate burglar in the darkness. Simms hadn't cared a toss for the Hun bombardments, but he was thoroughly unnerved now. There's nothing so startling as a surprise attack from the darkness.

"Shall—shall I strike some matches, your Grace?" asked Simms.

"Yes, of course. The man is hiding somewhere!"

Simms struck several matches, and he and his master explored the roof. The Duke of Amberley had been positive that Armstrong was there. How could he have got away? But Armstrong wasn't there! The roof was as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard.

"Great heavens!" gasped the duke.

He ran to the side of the roof, and leaned over the parapet.

"Burton—Burton!" he called hoarsely.

"Yes, your Grace?" came Burton's anxious tones.

"Have you got him, Burton?"

"Got him, your Grace? He's—he's up there, isn't he? He hasn't come down, I'll swear!" declared the butler. "He must be still on the roof."

But Captain Armstrong wasn't on the roof. He wasn't anywhere about the premises, in fact. He had vanished as utterly as though he had gone into thin air—and the priceless miniatures had vanished with him!

How had the miracle happened?

How had the bogus captain escaped? And how, above all, had he managed to get the bulky canvas bag away with him? It was preposterous to suppose that he had swarmed down a rope or a ladder. Servants had been watching the whole time!

The audacious burglar had vanished—he had disappeared as completely as through the very leads of the roof had opened and had swallowed him up!

It was an amazing mystery.

CHAPTER II.

NELSON LEE INVESTIGATES, AND FORMS A THEORY—THE £50,000 DEMAND!

MR. NELSON LEE, the celebrated crime investigator, shook hands warmly with Detective-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard. The worthy inspector had just been ushered up into the consulting-room by Nipper, who had found Lennard on the doorstep.

"You're an early bird this morning, Lennard," smiled Lee.

"Reason to be, too," said Detective-Inspector Lennard seriously. "I thought I'd give you a call, Lee. I was coming this way. Nipper came up as I was about to ring the bell, and he let me in."

Nipper, Nelson Lee's keen young assistant, grinned.

"I found him downstairs, sir," he said. "Mr. Lennard was looking like a boiled owl."

"I don't remember ever having seen a boiled owl," chuckled Nelson Lee. "But I gather your meaning, Nipper. You will really have to get out of the habit of using such slang. I think I shall have to make you beg Mr. Lennard's pardon for comparing him——"

"Oh, let the young 'un alone!" said Lennard, with a grin. "He can't help it, you know. Means well, I suppose. One of these days I'll take him in hand myself, as you don't seem to be able to keep him in order."

"You'd have your fists full," chuckled Nipper.

"I dare say I should," said the inspector, calmly helping himself to one of the great criminologist's choice cigars. "Don't mind me smoking, do you, Lee? These cigars are top-hole, as I know from experience. I say, I'm just off to Hampton Court."

"Going for a row on the river?" asked Nipper cheerfully. "Ripping day for an outing. That's the way these Yard fellows work, guv'nor——"

"Row on the river!" snorted Lennard. "You'll get a thick ear in a minute, my lad!"

Nipper grinned delightedly. He and the inspector were very old friends, and they understood one another perfectly. Chaff was generally flying about when the two met, and Lennard was a good-tempered man, as well as being a hard-headed, capable detective officer.

He sat down on a corner of Nelson Lee's desk.

"No, I'm not going to Hampton Court for an outing," he said, lighting his cigar. "I'm going to Amberley House—you know, where the Duke of Amberley hangs out. He's got about five mansions, I believe, being a man with pots of money."

"I've never met his Grace," said Nelson Lee. "He's a great collector of miniatures. Owns some of the world's masterpieces, I believe."

"He used to, you mean!" said Lennard grimly.

"My dear man, he wouldn't sell those miniatures for all the gold——" Nelson Lee paused, and looked at his visitor.

"Oh, it's that way, is it?"

"You've hit it. A clean job, too! Last night it happened."

"Burglars must be hard up, I should say, if they trouble about paintings of that sort," observed Nipper. "What's the good of pinching miniatures? How can the crooks get rid of 'em? They'd be spotted in no time! Those paintings are famous, and as soon as they were disposed of——"

"Oh, there are ways and means!" interjected Lennard. "The wiles of the professional picture thief are innumerable. I've had a taste of their methods now and again, young shaver."

"None of your 'young shaver,' Mr. Lennard!" granted Nipper.

"The duke's simply raving!" went on the inspector, smiling. "I don't wonder, from all I can hear of the burglary. It was a piece of infernal impudence from start to finish. But there's a mystery about the affair, and I'm going down to look into it. I dare say it's nothing much."

Lennard had heard a fairly accurate account of what had transpired during the previous evening, and he now explained matters to Nelson Lee and Nipper. They listened interestedly—especially when the inspector described how "Captain Armstrong" had seemingly vanished into smoke.

"I don't know all the details," went on Lennard. "But, so far as I can see, there's a pretty amazing mystery to be probed. If the man actually disappeared from the roof in that way—well, there's something uncanny about the business. Men can't vanish in that way—especially when they're lumbered up with stuff as

this chap was. There was no way of escape, yet the thief vanished."

"A flat roof, you say?" asked Nelson Lee thoughtfully.

"Yes, and fairly extensive. The grounds were watched, and nothing was seen," replied Lennard. "He didn't double back into the house—that's certain! There was a man on guard at the door which leads into the house. The door was locked, too. And there was no other way down except by swarming down a ladder or a rope."

"He must have done that. A rope ladder, probably," said Nipper.

"But, my dear lad, the grounds were carefully watched," said the inspector. "How could the man have got down? He was carrying a heavy bag, too! There's something queer about the affair, to my mind. I'm rather worried. The local police can't make head or tail of anything."

Nelson Lee was looking very keen and alert. Something had apparently occurred to him, for he was extremely interested in Lennard's story. The inspector was rather surprised, for he had not expected to find Lee particularly interested.

"You're going to Amberley House—now?" asked the great detective.

"Straight off!"

"Do you feel like taking me with you?"

"My dear Lee, you're as welcome as the day!" declared Lennard heartily. "I didn't think you'd care a toss, to tell the truth. Come, by all means! I shall be glad of your company."

"Well, fancy wasting time by poking about looking for some old miniatures!" said Nipper. "We shall waste the day, guv'nor——"

"Who said you were coming, young 'un?" asked Lee. "I've got other work for you. I couldn't think of wasting your day, Nipper!"

"Oh, stars!" groaned Nipper. "I asked for it, anyhow. I was an ass, wasn't I? I might have been on the river, taking some pretty girl for a row, while you were looking for the noble duke's pictures!"

"You young rascal!" chuckled Nelson Lee.

He took Nipper aside, and gave him some precise information. The lad nodded comprehendingly, and promised to report later on. Lennard, who wasn't

at all curious, toyed with his cigar until Lee was ready.

Five minutes later the pair started off, leaving Nipper to carry out the mission which had been entrusted to him. Lee and the inspector climbed into a taxi, and were soon bowling towards Hampton Court in the bright morning sunshine.

When they arrived at Amberley House, they found the duke restless and worried, and almost haggard. He was delighted to find that Nelson Lee had come, and shook the great detective's hand with warmth.

"You can see what has happened, Mr. Lee," he said, indicating the walls of the library. "All my most prized treasures have gone! If I don't get them back, I shall— But I must get them back!" he added. "I would willingly give ten thousand pounds now, this minute, to see those miniatures restored!"

"Have you found out anything about the man who did the job, your Grace?" asked the inspector. "Your son, I understand—"

"The ruffian was not Captain Armstrong at all!" said the Duke of Amberley hotly. "It was a scoundrelly imposture! My son was not to blame in the least, I have found. His friend Armstrong is entirely innocent, too. The man who came to me was an impostor. I was a fool to admit him."

Lennard's opinion was somewhat similar, but he didn't like to say so. It was quite obvious that the bogus Captain Armstrong was a clever professional crook. He had probably been in conversation with either Major Lord Leatherhead or Captain Armstrong, and he had brought off the coup by sheer "cheek."

Lee and the Yard detective were told the full story by the duke, and they listened intently. Then, having put a few questions, they decided to examine the roof as a beginning. Nelson Lee seemed very anxious to see the roof.

Burton ushered the pair upstairs, and at last they stood upon the flat leads, which were now hot with the sun's glare. The butler retired. He had by no means got over the indignities of the previous night.

In the broad light of day, the roof was completely in view. The flat portion was only a part of the roof of Amberley House, but it was quite impossible for a man to get from this section to the other. The leads stretched away before Nelson

Lee and Lennard without a break, right as far as a high wall which denoted the beginning of the other roof—the roof of that part of the mansion which was another storey higher.

And to right and left there were ornamental parapets. Behind, the door jutted up, and there was a clear space round it, with another parapet beyond. But there was no chimney stack protruding from the leads.

"H'm! Not much cover here!" remarked the inspector, with knitted brows.

He and Nelson Lee walked about for five minutes, scarcely exchanging a word. Lee was greatly interested in the parapet. He examined it with almost minute care, and not an inch escaped his scrutiny.

Finally, he turned to Lennard with a little nod of decision.

"That burglar didn't climb down the face of the building, inspector," he said.

"What d'you mean?" asked Lennard. "You think he was hiding up here all the while, and then sneaked down after —"

"No. He escaped before the Duke of Amberley reached the roof."

"But, my dear man, the roof door was locked!"

"He didn't escape that way, either." Detective-Inspector Lennard grinned.

"I suppose you're going to suggest that he sprouted wings, and flew away!" he suggested, with just a touch of good-humoured sarcasm. "There's no other way, Lee. If he didn't swarm down the face of the building, or double back through the house, he must have gone into the open air. As this isn't an age of miracles—"

"Look here, Lennard, this affair is more serious than I first supposed," interjected Nelson Lee quietly. "Yet I must admit that I suspected the truth as soon as you gave me the details at Gray's Inn Road."

"Suspected the truth?" repeated Lennard. "Why, we know nothing—"

"On the contrary, I know who instigated this extraordinarily daring crime."

"Who, then?" asked the inspector curiously.

"Our old friends—the Circle of Terror!" was Nelson Lee's reply.

"The Circle of Terror!"

Lennard gasped, and turned pink with wrath. The very mention of the Circle sent him into a rage. That grim secret

society—the most powerful criminal organisation in the world, probably—had been operating in Great Britain for some months past now, and the police were as helpless as babies. The Circle of Terror, in spite of many set-backs owing to Nelson Lee's activities, was as ruthless and determined as ever.

"Why do you think the Circle is responsible, Lee?" asked the Yard man huskily.

"Because of the singular nature of the burglar's escape," replied Lee. "And also, because of the very theft itself. His Grace gave me a hint, too, when he repeated the words of the scoundrel who carried the job through: 'They're only being borrowed; you'll get 'em all back again.' That's what the man told the duke. Those miniatures were stolen, Lennard, for the sole purpose of extorting money!"

"The Circle of Terror's pet game!" muttered Lennard grimly.

"Exactly! I shouldn't be at all surprised if the Duke of Amberley receives a communication to-day, calmly demanding the sum of so many thousands for the safe return of the paintings. The duke, of course, will jump at it—will pay any figure almost. These miniatures are his very joy of life. He'd willingly part with half his fortune to have his treasures restored to him."

Lennard nodded.

"It was cute," he said grudgingly. "No doubt about that! But you may be off the scent, Lee. I can't see how you connect the Circle of Terror——"

"My dear fellow, it's easy," smiled Nelson Lee. "That man—Armstrong we will call him—didn't escape from this roof by any ordinary means. He simply disappeared from the face of it, taking with him a bulky bag of considerable weight. How was it done, Lennard?"

"Hanged if I know!" growled the inspector.

"Well, the fellow wasn't a magician, and so there must be some logical explanation to the mystery," went on Nelson Lee smoothly. "You may remember, too, that Armstrong deliberately came upstairs after the duke had given the alarm. And from the manner in which he made straight for the roof, it is easy to surmise that he knew the house well, and already had his plans cut and dried."

"But look here, Lee! It was Burton who forced the thief to go upstairs——"

"Dear me! You seem to be getting rather dull, Lennard!" smiled Nelson Lee. "Just consider the thing! Would any self-respecting burglar pause for one moment at the sight of Burton? Would he change his plans just because Burton happened to be coming along the hall? From what I can see of the excellent butler, he wouldn't be able to stop a nimble child, let alone a desperate man. I can just imagine Burton standing in the middle of the hall, transfixed with alarm and nervousness. No, Lennard; if the thief had wanted to go out by the front door, he would have gone out. He came upon the roof deliberately, and naturally those in the house thought that he was trapped. In reality he probably escaped within one minute."

"But how?" asked the inspector irritably. "It's all very well for you to say that I'm dull, Lee. Hang it all, I know I'm dull! I can't get the hang of things at all! The fellow couldn't have jumped to the ground. He couldn't have been carried off by an aeroplane——"

"Ah! Now you've hit it!"

"What? An aeroplane?"

"Exactly!"

Detective-Inspector Lennard stared.

"I've never heard of an aeroplane that can pick a man off a roof and carry him off!" he exclaimed sarcastically. "I suppose you'll be saying next that the machine was circling over the house——"

The inspector paused quite suddenly and gasped.

"The Brigham machine!" he roared. "That affair on Melsey Island! By thunder, Lee, you're right, after all! What a blockhead I was not to think of it before! The Circle of Terror gained possession of the Brigham machine, didn't they?"

"Four days ago," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "And I shouldn't advise you to speak too loudly of that affair, inspector. The public know nothing of it as yet, and only a few members of the Criminal Investigation Department have learned the inner facts. The Circle of Terror scored its greatest triumph when it stole the Brigham machine, and I had been expecting some sort of activity."

Nelson Lee was looking very grim.

Only four days since, he and Nipper had passed through many exciting adventures while endeavouring to defeat the Circle of Terror. The infamous criminal society had, however, succeeded in making away with an aeroplane of a most extraordinary type. It was the invention

of a young man named Squadron-Commander Brigham, D.S.O. On its trials the machine had performed wonders, for it was a revolution in aircraft.

It had been termed the "Hoverer," because it was capable of hovering in one position for an indefinite period of time. Its engines were silenced to an astounding degree, and, upon the whole, the invention was an absolute triumph. The Circle of Terror had learned of the Hoverer, and had realised how amazingly the machine would assist their criminal schemes.

Professor Cyrus Zingrave—Nelson Lee's old enemy—was the High Lord of the Circle of Terror, and it was his keen, alert brain which had planned out the coup to the last detail. Zingrave took no part in the Circle's various plots—no active part, that is. He remained in his secret retreat, scheming and scheming, and watching the results as a spider watches a fly entangled in its web.

Nelson Lee had worked very hard in order to save Brigham's singular invention from being stolen. But at the last moment, through no fault of the great detective's, the aeroplane had vanished. It was now in the hands of the Circle of Terror.

Lee had promised Brigham that he would restore the aeroplane within ten days!

Perhaps that promise had been rather rash. Four of those days had passed, and Nelson Lee was still probing here and there for an opening which would lead him to his objective.

And now, rather by chance, he had definitely determined that the Brigham Hoverer had been at work only the previous night!

"The machine carried the burglar off?" asked Lennard blankly.

"Exactly! That is quite obvious," replied Nelson Lee. "That aeroplane was hovering immediately over the house, inspector, and a rope was probably hanging down in readiness for 'Armstrong' to grasp. A rope ladder, I should imagine. The thief stepped upon it, and he was at once hauled up, the aircraft itself ascending swiftly into the dark sky. Then, as it sped away, 'Armstrong' was lifted into the cabin, together with his booty."

Lennard took a deep breath.

"It sounds like a page out of a 'shilling shocker,' doesn't it?" he growled.

"But, then, everything the Circle of Terror does is simply staggering. But why hasn't the duke received a communication? The Circle usually sends a polite note, requesting its victim——"

"I fancy the duke has received that polite note," said Nelson Lee grimly.

Lennard turned as he heard a gasping cry, and found that the Duke of Amberley had ascended to the roof, and was now puffing and blowing with the exertion of climbing all the stairs. Apparently the duke was in a rage.

"The scoundrels!" he panted huskily. "The—the infernal rogues!"

Lee and the inspector crossed over the hot leads to the spot where the nobleman was standing, in the full glare of the sunshine. He was hatless, and the sun was beating down upon his head, while a couple of wasps were apparently intent upon alighting upon the bald spot in the centre. But the duke was too infuriated to take any notice of the energetic insects.

"The Circle of Terror!" he raved. "Those dastardly ruffians——"

"By George!" said Lennard. "Mr. Lee declared that the Circle was responsible for this burglary, your Grace. If you've got proof——"

"Proof—proof!" shouted his Grace. "Look at this, sir!"

He thrust a crumpled piece of notepaper into the inspector's hand, and Lennard and Nelson Lee read it together. They were both quite calm, and the duke was infected somewhat by their attitude: for he rapidly cooled down.

The piece of notepaper was of excellent quality, and in the centre, at the top, a small circle was neatly printed in rich purple ink—the sign of the Circle of Terror. And the text of the letter itself was printed—not typewritten. The words ran:

"Headquarters.

"Wednesday, the Twelfth.

"My Lord Duke,

"Your miniatures are quite safe in my hands. I have not yet had time to admire them, but I shall certainly be greatly interested, for I am a great lover of Art.

"The paintings will be returned to you on this day week—provided you comply with the condition stated below.

"On Monday next, the 17th inst., my representative will call upon your bankers. He will give the name of James Tyler. He is to be handed the

sum of £50,000 in securities or banknotes. Provided these details are carried out, your miniatures will be delivered at Amberley House on Wednesday next.

"If, however, there is any attempt made to arrest the man Tyler, or to trace the securities or banknotes, the miniatures will be at once destroyed—**DESTROYED**—and you will receive further attentions from the Circle. You have four clear days to make arrangements.

"THE HIGH LORD
"of the Circle of Terror."

Detective-Inspector Lennard whistled.

"Fifty thousand!" he exclaimed, in an awed voice. "Great Scott!"

"The High Lord is getting bolder," said Nelson Lee grimly. "This is the largest sum he has ever demanded. It is staggering, I will admit. And you will observe the manner in which he has emphasised the threat of destroying—"

"I shall pay the money!" declared the Duke of Amberley fiercely. "Great heaven above! This scoundrelly fellow actually threatens to destroy the miniatures. Do you realise what that means, Mr. Lee? Destroy some of the world's most famous masterpieces! I shall pay the money—I shall pay it at once!"

Lennard shook his head.

"They wouldn't destroy the paintings," he said.

"They shall not have the chance!" declared the duke.

"And I am not so sure, inspector," was Nelson Lee's comment. "The High Lord is a man of his word—I will say that. You remember the affair of the Mount-Bevon jewels? The High Lord gave me his word that if I recovered them by a certain time he would not persecute Lord Mount-Bevon again. I recovered the jewels—and the High Lord stuck to his promise. It will be the same in this case. Unless the Circle representative is treated courteously—"

"Why discuss this matter, Mr. Lee?" interjected the duke. "I shall pay the money—of course I shall pay it. And, what is more, I intend to make arrangement for the paying of the sum this very week—on Friday, to be exact."

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"That is really unnecessary, your Grace," he put in. "You have got until Monday. The miniatures are quite safe. Moreover, I don't see how you can act earlier, for the man Tyler will not present himself at the bank until Monday."

"I don't see it!" growled Lennard. "Fifty thousand! It's—it's monstrous!"

"I would willingly pay double that sum for the safe return of my paintings," declared the Duke of Amberley. "The whole thing is a national scandal, I am aware; but my miniatures are safe! That is the main point!"

Nelson Lee smiled slightly.

The duke, of course, was a man of enormous wealth. Fifty thousand pounds, although a vast sum, was comparatively trivial to him. Sooner than lose his precious miniatures he would willingly pay the price. Zingrave was cunning, and he had set his trap very cleverly.

The paintings, of course, were of no use to the Circle; they could never get rid of them profitably—at least, not without grave risk. But, by demanding a large sum of money for the safe return of the paintings, the High Lord had played a trump card. The duke was willing—eager, even—to "fork out."

He was so eager, indeed, that he wanted to rush the matter through straight away. But this would have been pointless, and perhaps impracticable. Nelson Lee was rather glad that the enemy had displayed their hand. It was easier, now, to get to work. The great detective turned to the duke.

"Go ahead with your arrangements, by all means," he said. "But, meanwhile, I shall do my utmost to recover the miniatures. I have four clear days, and I shall not be idle—"

"By gad, sir, if you succeed in recovering my treasures I will willingly pay you the sum these scoundrels demand!" declared the duke sportingly. "Every farthing of it! I should be happy—"

Nelson Lee smilingly protested.

"I am not asking for such compensation, your Grace," he exclaimed quietly. "I would not accept half the amount; indeed, I should hesitate to accept a quarter—"

"Stuff and nonsense!" snapped his Grace. "A quarter, Mr. Lee, at the very least. And the rest shall go to the Red Cross or some other war charity! By Heaven! If these dastardly Circle of Terror ruffians can be foiled I shall be overjoyed. But, frankly, I do not think you can do anything."

"We shall see," said Nelson Lee quietly.

They stood talking for some little time, and the inspector took charge of the

Circle's audacious communication. He was looking rather glum; for, as he remarked to Lee, things looked black. The Circle of Terror were to score another triumph. Four days! How on earth could the police do anything in that time?

But Nelson Lee wasn't thinking of the police; he had an idea that he, himself, would be able to get on the trail. He knew far more of the Circle's inner secrets than Scotland Yard dreamed of.

The Duke of Amberley was quite calm by the time the library was regained. A breath of his former fury returned to him as he gazed upon the bare walls, but he was consoled by the thought that his art treasures were not irretrievably lost. Even the payment of such a tremendous sum as £50,000 seemed of no importance compared with the other matter. Whatever happened, those miniatures must be restored!

Nelson Lee took his departure after a while, leaving Detective-Inspector Leonard to complete a few official inquiries.

And when the great criminologist arrived at Gray's Inn Road, he found a visitor awaiting him. That visitor was Squadron-Commander Brigham, and he was looking decidedly haggard and depressed.

CHAPTER III.

NIPPER'S DISCOVERIES—NELSON LEE ACTS
—A STARTLING MISHAP.

SQUADRON-COMMANDER BRIGHAM, D.S.O., was a young, healthy looking individual; a perfect type of British manhood. His hair was curly, and his eyes frank and open.

When Nelson Lee strode into the consulting-room Brigham was leaning against one of the windows, a cigarette drooping from his lips, and an expression of dejection upon his boyish, clean-shaven face.

"Oh, here you are, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed, turning with a slight show of eagerness in his manner. "I've been waiting about ten minutes. Hope you don't mind my worrying you like this —"

"You're not worrying me," interjected Lee. "What's the trouble, anyhow?"

"What's the trouble!" echoed the young airman-inventor. "I'm nearly off my head with anxiety—that's the trouble! What's become of my machine—that's the trouble as well. Haven't you any news for me, Mr. Lee?"

"Yes——"

"By Jove!" cried Brigham, with excitement. "Good news?"

"I'm afraid not—as yet," was the detective's reply. "But I have learned this morning that the Circle of Terror used your machine last night for the purpose of committing an audacious robbery at the Duke of Amberley's place——"

"A robbery!" echoed the other. "The—the dirty scum!"

"My dear chap, surely you expected this? The Circle appropriated your invention because of its astounding qualities—because of its recognised superiority over all other types of aeroplanes," said Nelson Lee. "I am glad the thing occurred, for we may now find an opening for investigation."

"You haven't any definite news, then?"

"Of the machine's whereabouts—no."

"I thought perhaps you'd be able to keep that promise of yours, Mr. Lee," said Brigham gloomily. "But you can't, of course——"

"Why 'of course'?" asked Nelson Lee. "I said ten days, my dear fellow. So far only four of those days have passed. Give me a chance! You must consume your impatience, and——"

The detective was interrupted by the door bursting open.

"News, guv'nor — news!" panted Nipper exuberantly

The lad paused as he saw that Lee had a visitor, but his flushed face was alight with excitement and eagerness. He entered the room, and closed the door. Both his master and Brigham regarded him interestedly.

"Well, Nipper?" asked Lee calmly.

"The Circle of Terror used the 'Hoverer' last night to commit a burglary at the Duke of Amberley's place at Hampton Court," said Nipper promptly. "The rotters did the job thoroughly ——"

"That's stale news, young 'un," growled Brigham.

"Sorry. I didn't think I should be late for the fair!" said Nipper, with perfect composure. "If you call again—say, on Friday—I dare say there'll be fresh news, Mr. Brigham."

This wasn't exactly a hint for the commander to take his departure—but it was pretty near it. And Brigham had a vague idea that Nipper wanted to speak to his master alone. The airman took up his service cap.

"I'm anxious, Mr. Lee," he said bluntly. "I'm deucedly anxious."

"Of course you are," was Lee's cheerful reply. "But don't worry needlessly, Brigham. I have an idea that great events are to take place very shortly. No, I can't say anything definite. Just have faith in me—and wait."

"By Jove, Mr. Lee, you make me hopeful!" said Brigham enthusiastically. "When shall I hear from you—and how?"

"Just as soon as I have positive information I will let you know," said Nelson Lee. "By telephone or telegram, or in person. Don't despair, and don't, above all, assume that the Circle of Terror are the masters of the situation. I assure you that I have a few surprises up my sleeve."

Squadron-Commander Brigham took his departure in a cheery mood, and as soon as he had descended the stairs, Nelson Lee turned to Nipper.

"Well, young 'un?" he asked crisply. "Your news—quickly!"

"Why, I told you!" grinned Nipper.

"What you told me was trivial—you have something of far greater importance in that shock-head of yours," smiled Lee. "Out with it."

"Well, I couldn't tell you in front of Brigham," said Nipper. "I didn't know he was here when I first broke into the room. Yea, guv'nor, I have got news—cheap, good news, too. My visit to the Cozy Cinema, Fulham Road, was tremendously fruitful. Guess who I met?"

"My dear lad, tell me—I don't want to guess!"

"Montague Todd!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Well, and what did Mr. Todd have to say?" he asked calmly.

Nipper sat down in a chair and grunted disquietedly.

"What's the good of bringing you startling news?" he asked. "You don't seem surprised in the least, guv'nor! That's you all over! If I told you that old Zingrave himself was outside, roped up hand and foot, you wouldn't wink an eyelid!"

"Sorry, Nipper," chuckled Lee. "But you ought to know me by this time. Wait until you have told me everything when I shall express my real opinion. You went to the Cozy Cinema, and you saw Todd. That's excellent—as far as it goes. But how far does it go?"

"A thundering long way," declared

Nipper. "There's no telling what'll come out of the discoveries I've made."

Nipper was elated. He had reason to be. Acting upon his master's instructions, he had visited a small picture-theatre in Fulham Road, known as the Cozy Cinema. It was quite a select hall, and was patronised by a good class of people.

But the picture-theatre had a strange significance for certain individuals—for the members of the Circle of Terror, and to Nelson Lee and Nipper. For the great detective and his assistant were fully aware of the cinema's secret.

It was, in short, the Circle's meeting place.

Yet it was not a meeting place at all—if such a contradictory statement is permissible. Agents of the great criminal organisation never met there; they simply entered the cinema for the purpose of receiving instructions.

These instructions were displayed upon the screen in full view of the audience; but only the Circle agent or agents who happened to be in the building at the time knew how to read those instructions. For they were written in a secret type of shorthand of Zingrave's own invention. The characters of this unique system were in the form of elaborate scrolls, and they were displayed to full advantage in the shape of a border round advertisement slides. Nobody who was not "in the know" could possibly guess that the scroll-work was, in reality, a hidden message.

Nelson Lee and Nipper had discovered this valuable secret some weeks before, and the knowledge had already been of great service to them. For Nipper was able to visit the cinema, and read off the instructions intended for a Circle agent, without the slightest difficulty.

And Mr. Montague Todd—the gentleman Nipper had referred to—was an important member of the Circle of Terror. He had failed in an attempt to kill Nipper, and Nipper had actually saved Todd from certain death. Truth to tell, Todd was not a scoundrel at heart—and he had already proved this.

For, at the time of the Meleey Island affair—when Brigham's "Hoverer" had been stolen, he had ably assisted Nelson Lee in effecting the commander's release from an old farm in Suffolk, where he had been kept a prisoner. Todd had proved, on that occasion, that he was "up against" the Circle in his heart, and would have preferred to wage war

against the society. But he was bound to the Circle, and death would have followed any sign of open hostility.

Nelson Lee had had a vague suspicion that the Circle of Terror was responsible for the robbery at Amberley House, and he had therefore sent Nipper off to the Cozy Cinema, to seek admittance as soon as the doors of the place opened to the public. Apparently, the detective had been wise in giving those instructions.

"I was one of the first in that picture palace, guv'nor," said Nipper animatedly. "I took care to alter my chivvy a bit, so that I shouldn't be spotted by any rotten spy. And I didn't have to wait ten minutes, as it happened."

"That was lucky," commented Nelson Lee.

"There were about twenty people in the place, I suppose—kids and their nurses, mostly," went on Nipper. "Not many people patronise the pictures as early as that. And, as a preliminary, a few advert. slides were shoved on."

"Ah!"

"The third slide was the boy I was looking for," said Nipper. "I spotted the shorthand in a tick, and read off the message. Then, when the lights went down, I scrawled what I'd read upon a scrap of paper, so as not to forget it."

Nipper handed across a crumpled piece of paper torn from a notebook. Nelson Lee easily read the following words:

"Megson & Grant's, Regent Street. No. 15 and No. 32, will carry the job through as arranged. Convey stuff to roof via skylight. Wait there. Conveyance will arrive 1 a.m. precisely."

Nelson Lee pursed his lips.

"This is indeed interesting, Nipper," he said sharply. "Megson & Grant's, Regent Street—the famous diamond merchants and jewellers. Obviously the Circle is intent upon effecting a big robbery there to-night, and the 'stuff'—meaning the 'swag'—is to be taken through the skylight to the roof. The burglars, Nos. 15 and 32, as they are numbered, are to await there until one o'clock, when a conveyance will arrive. Rather a queer place for a conveyance—eh, Nipper?"

"It means Commander Brigham's aeroplane, sir!" said Nipper eagerly.

"Undoubtedly." Nelson Lee's eyes gleamed. "This is splendid, young 'un. I can foresee—. But continue your report."

Nipper obeyed at once.

"Why, after about five minutes I left the cinema, and jumped on to a City-bound motor-'bus," he said. "I was just hugging myself with joy when somebody sat down beside me. It was Montague Todd."

"Ah! He had seen you in the picture hall."

"No, he hadn't. He saw me after I came out," went on Nipper. "He left the place just after me, and recognised my manly form as I jumped on to the 'bus. So he followed, just to have a word. It was safe there."

"Was he—cordial?" smiled Nelson Lee.

"He's true blue, guv'nor," replied Nipper seriously. "Not a doubt about that. Todd may have been a first-class rotter at one time, but he's as straight as a string now. He doesn't forget I saved his life—and he's grateful."

The detective nodded.

"At first I suspected Todd of treachery," he remarked. "But, after the affair at Stoke's Farm, when he helped us in Brigham's rescue, I cannot doubt that he is sincere. Well, what did Todd say to you?"

"Not much," answered Nipper. "He didn't think it safe to stay with me long—there are Circle spies all over the shop. But that message you've got in your hand—the orders for No. 15 and No. 32—is absolutely correct. The Circle's cracking a big crib this evening. The whole game's arranged to the last detail. The watchman at the jeweller's is 'squared,' and he's going to help the burglars."

"Is Todd himself taking part in the affair?"

"No, sir. He's busy on some other work, he told me," said Nipper. "But he knows all about it. The swag's to be carted on to the roof, and it will be taken off at one o'clock by the Brigham Hoverer—the men as well. Todd told me, too, that the Duke of Amberley's miniatures were carried away by air."

Nelson Lee nodded thoughtfully.

"This is extremely important, young 'un," he said. "There's no telling what will come of the affair. We shall have to act with great caution."

"Why? The game's all up now," said Nipper. "All we've got to do is to go to Megson & Grant's to-night and collar the two burglars—"

"No, Nipper, that would be too

crude," interjected the great criminologist, pacing the consulting-room.

"That plan wouldn't do at all."

"You're not going to let the burglary happen?"

"Yes, of course."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Nipper.

"What for?"

"A very excellent reason—an obvious reason," was Lee's reply. "If we blunder in upon the burglars and arrest them, a warning will be given. There will undoubtedly be spies posted in the neighbourhood, and these spies would see the raid. What would happen then? Why, the Hoverer would receive a signal, and would not approach the spot at all. And it is the Hoverer we are anxious to lay hands on."

"Oh, I see," said Nipper slowly.

"We must adopt more subtle tactics," went on Nelson Lee. "The best plan, I think, will be for two or three of us—just you and Lennard and I—to gain admittance to the roof of the jewellers' from some other roof. We shall wait there until the crucial moment, and then

— Well, then, we shall have to act in accordance with the circumstances. It is necessary for those on the aircraft to be tricked into believing that the plans have not miscarried."

Some little time afterwards Nelson Lee rang up Scotland Yard, and found that Lennard had returned. The detective-inspector was soon on his way to Gray's Inn Road, and when he arrived he was looking gloomy.

"Anything fresh, Mr. Lee?" he asked, without much hope.

"Yes. The Circle's got a big affair on—to-night."

"By George! How do you know?"

"Never mind that for the present—I do know," smiled Nelson Lee. "The Circle has planned to burgle the premises of Messrs. Megson & Grant, of Regent Street. And the booty is to be carried away by the Brigham aeroplane."

Lennard was as eager as a schoolboy in a moment.

"I say, how the thunder do you manage to get information like this?" he asked. "I suppose you're certain? It's not just a suspicion—"

"My dear Lennard, I never act upon suspicion," interjected Nelson Lee, rather curtly.

"I beg your pardon, Lee," said the inspector. "But, hang it all, I'm a bit startled. A burglary at Megson &

Grant's! This will be a set-back for the Circle—if we spoil the game."

In a very short time Lennard was told of Nelson Lee's plan of action; and he approved heartily. He added the suggestion, however, that another police officer should be present. And Lee consented to this plan. The two Circle agents might cause trouble unless they were sufficiently outnumbered.

Accordingly, at a late hour of the evening, a party of four shadowy individuals crouched upon the roof of a building in Regent Street. This roof was over a large drapery establishment, and was a considerable distance from Megson & Grant's. But it was possible to traverse the intervening roofs with comparative ease.

Those shadowy figures were those of Nelson Lee, Nipper, Inspector Lennard, and Sergeant Keene, of the C.I.D. They were well in advance of time, and were prepared for a long vigil.

The night was black, but quite still. And the air was delightfully warm, so the long wait upon the roof was not much to be dreaded. The party made their way across the leads and slates with extreme caution, going one at a time, with long intervals between each move.

And at last they arrived upon the roof of the jewellery establishment. Here they took up positions behind chimney stacks, Lee and Nipper being on one side, and Lennard and his man on the other.

Then, in complete silence, except for an occasional whispered word, the quartette waited. They were sure that the Circle spies—if there were any about—had not detected their ambush.

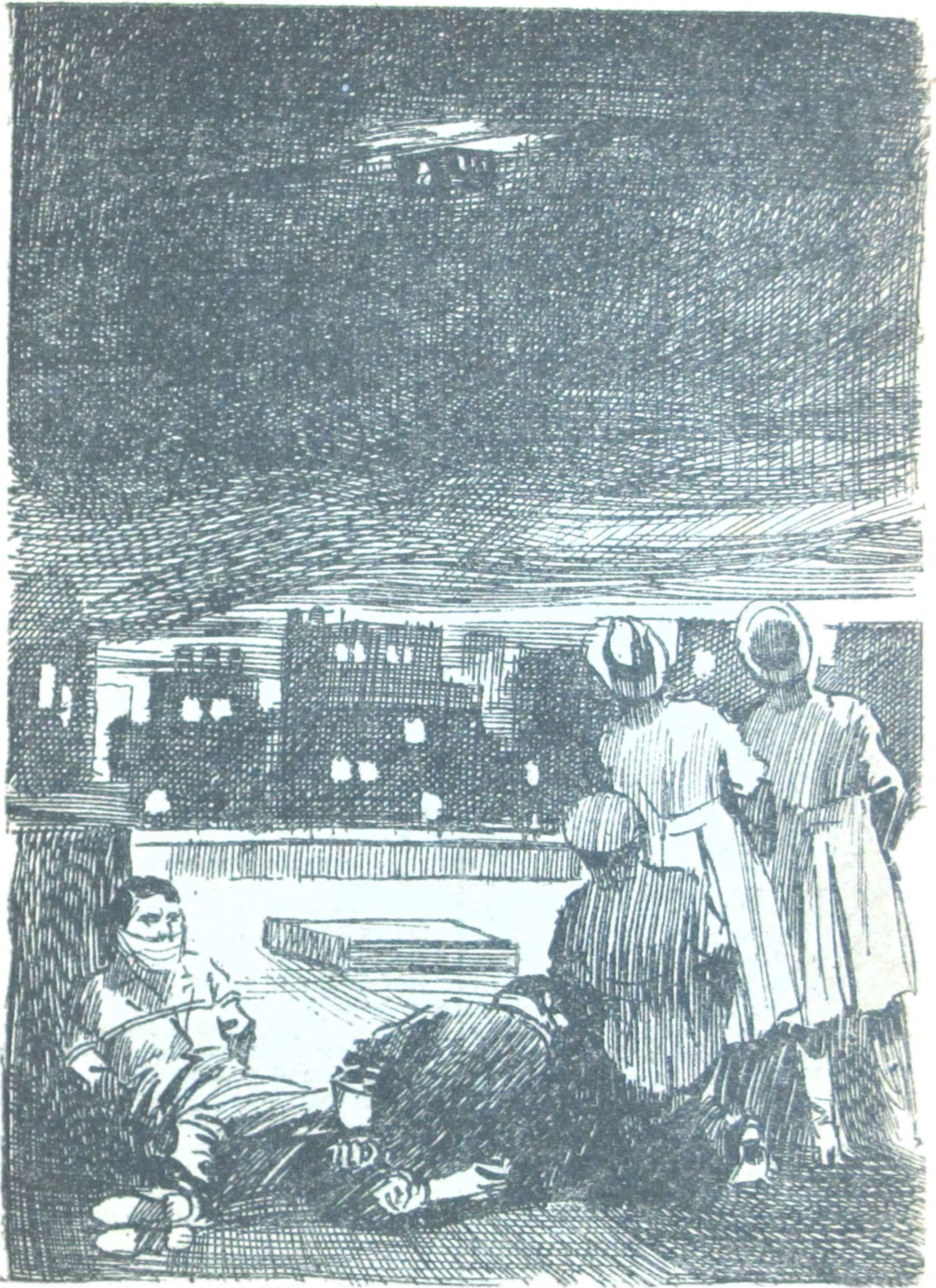
At midnight everything was quiet. Taxi-cabs and 'buses were continually passing up and down Regent Street, but these could not be seen. And by this time, probably, the burglary was proceeding. The cracksmen had, of course, gained admittance by the rear quarters, and they were being helped by the "faithful" watchman.

After another interval which seemed to cover hours, Nelson Lee glanced at his luminous watch.

"What's the time, guv'nor?" breathed Nipper.

"Quarter to one."

"I thought it was nearer a quarter to two!" mumbled Nipper. "My hat! When the dickens is something going to



Nelson Lee looked up sharply. Dead overhead was the "Circle's" aeroplane.—(See p. 18.)

happen? It's high time those burglar-merchants showed signs of——."

Even as Nipper was murmuring the words the skylight, which was situated in the centre of the leads which stretched between the two chimney stacks, slowly and silently rose. All four watchers saw it, and they nerved themselves.

A moment later two dim figures clambered on to the roof, carrying with them two bulky bags. Detective-Inspector Lennard did not wait longer; he softly snapped his fingers, and leapt out of cover.

Nelson Lee and the others followed suit, and before the burglars could make any attempt to resist, they were flat upon their backs, and their wrists were handcuffed. The capture was a complete success, and there had been no excitement. At least, Nipper declared that the whole thing was as tame as nabbing a sneak-thief.

And then, clearly in the night atmosphere, a dull throbbing sounded. This sound was not easily distinguishable, and if Nelson Lee had not been actually listening for it, he would probably have noticed nothing unusual. He would have unconsciously put it down to the traffic below.

But the great detective was expecting to hear that throbbing, and he looked up sharply. Nipper saw him, and looked up, too. The sky was clouded and dull, and almost black. But, dead overhead, there seemed to be a small patch which was even darker than the other darkness.

"Can you see anything, guv'nor?" asked Nipper quickly.

"Yes! The thing's right over us—and high up," said Nelson Lee. "By James! There is only one thing to be done. We must risk——"

As Lee was speaking something swished down and struck the leads with a dull thud. It was a rope—a rope from the sky! It swayed to and fro giddily, passed out over Regent Street, and then slowly swayed back to the roof.

Nelson Lee gripped it hard, and put his weight upon it. He now found that there were nooses placed at intervals of about four feet, and plenty of knots. These were for the convenience of the men who were to have been hauled up.

"Lennard!" rapped out Lee sharply.

"Hallo!" said the inspector. "What——"

"Grab hold, man—grab hold!" cried

Nelson Lee. "The only way is to get ourselves hoisted up in place of the real Circle men. We shall take the aircraft's crew by surprise, and can easily overpower them, Nipper——"

And then, even as the inspector was on the point of gripping the rope, Nelson Lee was suddenly hoisted from the roof. He swung clear, fully eight feet above the leads. Those below made frantic grabs at him.

"Drop!" gasped Lennard urgently.

For one second Nelson Lee thought of dropping; but, before he could release his hold, he rose higher and higher, and to relax his grip would have meant serious injury, if not death.

Those on board the Hoverer had scented trouble—and had acted!

Lennard and Nipper had been unable to prevent the disaster, and they were horrified. They saw Nelson Lee swing high above them, helpless on the rope. Then the detective swung clear over Regent Street, and his position was appalling.

Up and up he rose, until at last those on the roof lost sight of him.

He had vanished into the night!

CHAPTER IV.

NELSON LEE'S APPALLING PREDICAMENT.

NELSON LEE'S sensations were almost indescribable as he found himself soaring into the night sky, clinging to the knotted rope by his hands only. His position was not only precarious, but absolutely terrible.

Every second he expected to crash down to—death.

If it had not been for the knots in the rope he would certainly have been forced to relax his feverish hold. For the rope was whisked upwards powerfully, and Lee guessed that the "Hoverer" itself was soaring.

The knots prevented his hands slipping, but his arms were nearly torn from their sockets. There were nooses below somewhere. The rope trailed for ten feet below him, but it was loose, and jerked dizzily.

It is no easy matter to a man to slip his foot into the noose of a rope which is flying about freely beneath him. Again and again Nelson Lee made frantic efforts to find a hold for his feet.

And at last, when he was almost despairing, the toe of his right boot caught into a noose. He shoved hard, and the next moment his foot was secure. It was a moment of supreme relief, and he allowed his weight to rest upon his foot. Then, and not until then, was he able to breathe with any freedom.

"How long will this last?" he thought grimly.

The detective knew, instinctively, that the enemy above him were aware of his identity. At least, they were aware of the fact that he was not one of the Circle agents. Probably they believed him to be a police-officer—perhaps an ordinary constable.

And, naturally, there could be but one end to this dreadful adventure.

The Circle of Terror was ruthless, cruel, and decisive in its methods. Nelson Lee knew those methods only too well. There was no hope for him; no chance of deliverance. Lee had never before found himself in such a uniquely hopeless position in the whole course of his career.

Indeed, he was expecting to be cut adrift any second.

He wondered why he hadn't been cast off before this. One slash with a sharp knife would send him hurtling to certain death. The reason why this hadn't been done was probably because the men in the aircraft were uncertain of his actual identity.

Lee looked down.

Far below him lay London, a mass of subdued, shadowy lights. He judged that he was now fully a thousand feet above the house-tops.

A cold, chilling wind was roaring past with the force of an October gale. The air, however, was still. He was causing the wind himself, as he moved swiftly along. For the aircraft to which the trailing rope was attached was travelling at a high speed.

The rope, with Nelson Lee at the end of it, was swung out like the tail of an enormous kite.

Down below, on the ground, the summer night was mild and pleasant. But up here the atmosphere was almost icy in its coldness. Nelson Lee was wearing light summer clothing, and he had no protection of any sort.

He wondered how long this grim, ghastly farce was to last.

If he was not cut loose now, he would certainly be cast to destruction as soon

as his identity became known. He wore no disguise, and one glance at him would tell his enemies that he was their sworn foe.

There was no hope—not a breath of hope.

His hands were numbed, and his teeth chattered. He wondered whether it would not be better to relax his grip. What did it matter? He was doomed to certain death, and this wild career through the air was objectless. He might just as well finish the whole dreadful ordeal straight away.

But—Nelson Lee clung on.

Although he felt assured that death awaited him, his natural instinct made him cling to life.

And at last, when he really felt that he would positively be compelled to loosen his stiffened fingers, he became aware of the fact that the aircraft was slowing down. The bitter wind was less biting; the roar in his ears was subdued.

He looked down again; all was darkness. He was either over a common, or London had been left behind. Probably the latter. He was over the open country now. And the Brigham Hoverer slackened his pace and finally stopped altogether. The strange machine hung in the sky, almost motionless.

A jerky pressure on the rope told Nelson Lee that he was being hauled up. This, of course, was the last act. When the aeroplane's crew saw who he was, they would drop him to the ground, careless of where he fell. He would die—and that would be sufficient.

Somehow, Lee almost smiled as he considered the position. What a ghastly failure he had made of the whole business! Lee was rather unjust to himself. He had been the victim of circumstance, and should not have laid the blame on his own shoulders.

But, in spite of the danger, the detective was perfectly calm.

He smiled—but it was a grim smile, a bitter smile. What were the others doing? Poor Nipper! He would be almost off his head. What a good thing Nipper hadn't clung to the rope as well!

Lee felt within him that Nipper would carry on the work against the Circle of Terror. The lad, saddened, and wild with fury, would wage a war against the dastardly organisation—

But Nelson Lee checked his thoughts.

"I am not dead yet!" he muttered between his teeth.

Yet, in all conscience, there was no hope for him! He knew it, and was prepared for the very worst. His mind was quite settled, and the threats which his enemies might utter would leave him in no way horrified.

He looked up now, and was surprised to find that he was right beneath the extraordinary aircraft. It was of amazingly novel design, and Commander Brigham had planned his machine in a different manner to any other constructor. The usual wings were apparent; they were spread out on either side of the fuselage in exactly the same manner as an ordinary biplane. Yet they were totally different in their actual design.

The "hovering" apparatus was a masterpiece of clever mechanism; it was driven by the same 250 horse-power motor which drove the huge tractor-screw. But the machine had no tail as ordinary aeroplanes have. And right in the centre there was a small, covered-in cabin.

The machine was amazingly stable, and this was in a large measure due to a powerful gyroscope which was fitted beneath the cabin floor. The gyroscope was, in itself, novel. It was of Brigham's own design, and was so startlingly efficient in its working that aviation experts had been almost staggered.

Nelson Lee was genuinely interested in this most astonishing aircraft, and would dearly have loved to examine it at leisure. But this was denied him. He was a prisoner in the Circle's hands.

He was slowly drawn up, and at last he saw that he was being pulled up to a square window which was fitted into the side of the cabin. A subdued light glowed within the cabin, and the throbbing roar of the powerful motor was filling the detective's ears.

Yet so effectually was the engine silenced that he was fully able to hear the words which were being spoken by the men just above. By what Lee could hear, there were only two men in the cabin—as he had suspected.

"No, he's not one of our fellows," Lee heard, in a harsh voice. "An infernal policeman, I expect. Something went wrong on that roof, Hampson. The police spotted the whole game, I believe."

Hampson!

Nelson Lee had met that excellent gentleman before; he was one of Professor Cyrus Zingrave's intimate advisors

and lieutenants. He would know Lee in a second, and the detective could guess the result of that recognition.

At last the detective's head came on a level with the window, and he saw that the rope had been hauled up by a powerful winch contrivance, small in itself, but very efficient.

"Now, my beauty, who are you?" demanded a rough voice.

"Well, I am not the Kaiser of Germany," said Nelson Lee calmly.

"By Heaven! The fellow's got a nerve!" said the other. "This is no policeman, Hampson. What shall we do with him?"

"Find out who he is, and then—drop him!" said another voice.

Nelson Lee was able to grip the edge of the window-opening, and this eased his position wonderfully. He got his other foot into the noose, too, and was thus able to obtain a certain amount of rest.

Apparently he was not to be hauled aboard the aircraft.

"Show a light, Rayle—we don't want to waste time!" exclaimed Hampson curtly.

The strong rays from an electric torch were switched on, and the light fell upon Nelson Lee's somewhat pale, haggard face. But there was no sign of fear in his eyes—only a calm, determined expression of quiet contempt.

"Great Scott!" gasped Hampson. "Do you see?"

"Why, yes. He's no police officer—"

"Police officer! He's Nelson Lee himself, Rayle!" shouted Hampson.

"Nelson Lee!"

The two men were decidedly startled.

"I think we have met before, my dear Hampson," said Nelson Lee calmly. "I don't suppose we shall meet again."

"Not in this life!" exclaimed Hampson furiously.

"Nor in the next, I sincerely hope," was Lee's retort. "For, surely, your destination will be a different one to mine when you leave this earth? I am optimistic enough to believe that my spirit will travel in an upward direction when I die—which, I have no doubt, will be almost at once. But your spirit, Hampson, must surely take a swift downward course, to the very uttermost pit—"

Hampson leaned against the window nearest to Lee.

"I suppose you think this foolery is clever—what?" he sneered. "You are a cool customer, Lee, but you'll not discover any more secrets of the Circle of

Terror. You have had several narrow escapes, but this time you are doomed."

"I must admit that the prospect is black."

Hampson laughed.

"I am rather glad of this," he went on, without anger. "You are a fish worth catching on our line, Lee. So you were fool enough to suppose you could foil the Circle? You may have ruined that burglary affair in Regent Street—but that was a trivial incident compared to some of the coups which the High Lord is even now planning."

"Is it wise to take me into your confidence?" asked Lee calmly.

"What difference does it make?"

"I might make use of the information—"

Hampson laughed at the joke.

"You'll never step upon the earth again, you infernal meddler!" he said fiercely. "I could send you to your death this very instant if I chose. But I am inclined to have a word with you first."

"You are very kind," said Lee bitingly.

The detective was determined not to display the slightest sign of apprehension or fear, or even alarm. To have done so would have increased the devilish enjoyment of these monsters. Lee boiled within him to think that these men—Englishmen—were comparable only to Huns of the vilest class. There are good and bad in all nations, and this couple, apparently gentlemen, were reptiles of the pit itself.

"When you reach the earth again, Lee, you will be so much flesh and bone," said Hampson harshly. "You will be a mangled mass of humanity, unrecognisable and crushed. You will say that I am gloating over a helpless victim! I am! It does me good to gloat over you!"

"Drop him, and let's get on," growled Rayle, from behind.

"There's no hurry," said Hampson. "Mr. Nelson Lee has been a thorn in the side of the Circle for months past, and it is necessary that he should be told of the futility of his efforts. When you set your wits against the Circle of Terror, Lee, it was similar to a terrier-pup charging a brick wall."

"Exactly," agreed Nelson Lee. "But if that terrier possessed sufficient strength the brick wall would crumple. And, if I had been allowed to pursue my campaign, the Circle would very soon have shown signs of crumpling—"

"You are mad," snarled Hampson. "You were warned again and again to drop your efforts against us. You ignored those warnings, and you have only yourself to thank for the result. If I had found that the man hanging on the rope had been a police constable I should have been sorry for him—really sorry. But I am honestly delighted to find that you are the victim. I shall suffer no pangs when I allow you to drop to certain death."

"I can credit that statement," said Nelson Lee quietly.

"Perhaps you thought that you would discover the secret hiding-place of this aeroplane?" went on the other.

"I did not think so—I knew so."

"I did not think you were a braggart—"

"Not at all. I was stating a fact."

"You fool! You would never have found out the position of the secret hangar if you had searched for a dozen years. Perhaps you are curious—perhaps you would like me to tell you?"

Nelson Lee shifted the position of his hands a trifle.

"I am not interested—now," he said quietly.

"I suppose not. But when this machine is safely back in the heart of Hillingdon Wood, among the Surrey hills, you will be dead," sneered Hampson. "This excellent machine of Brigham's is very useful. Before so very long we are going to Romford—or, to be more exact, to a spot on the main road, a couple of miles on the other side of Romford—"

"Ah! Another little burglary?" suggested Lee calmly.

"Not this time. We shall merely take up a bundle from a waiting motor-car," said Hampson, with a laugh. "You will be interested when you hear what that bundle contains, Lee."

"No, I am quite indifferent."

"The Duke of Amberley's miniatures were taken to the wrong place last night," said the Circle man. "At least, the High Lord ordered them to be taken to headquarters without delay. And so we shall fetch them. The duke will never get those paintings, Lee."

"He is going to pay your scoundrelly demand—"

Hampson laughed roughly.

"Of course he is!" he replied. "We know that; the old fool would have paid even more—and he will, before we have done with him. But he won't get the miniatures. Can't you guess why the

High Lord wants them taken to his headquarters? Can't you guess why we are going to fetch them to-night?"

"Perhaps your Chief has taken a fancy to them himself?"

"Exactly!" chuckled Hampson. "That's the exact truth. I was talking the matter over with him, and we decided that the miniatures were too good to be handed over to the Duke of Amberley. So the High Lord is going to decorate his own home with them. Rather smart, eh?"

Nelson Lee did not reply. He could easily understand why Professor Zingrave was sticking to the paintings. The £50,000, of course, would be paid over by the duke, but he would never get his paintings back. Zingrave, although as vile a scoundrel as ever breathed, was a man of somewhat refined tastes, and the idea of decorating his own home with the miniatures probably struck him rather humorously.

Hampson laughed again.

"Scotland Yard is probably getting anxious about you," he went on. "So, perhaps, it will be as well to finish this comedy. Somebody will find your remains in the morning——"

He paused, then gave vent to his cruel chuckle.

"An idea—a really excellent idea," he exclaimed. "You remember that occasion when you were placed in a brass-bound box, Lee? That was the High Lord's idea. You were to suffocate, and the box was to be delivered at Scotland Yard, with your dead body inside it!"

"Something went wrong on that occasion, didn't it?" said Lee grimly.

"That is why I intend to go to a little amount of trouble now," snarled Hampson. "I mean to improve upon the High Lord's scheme. You shall be taken to Scotland Yard—at once. And you will be dropped from a height of two thousand feet, right in front of the famous police headquarters! You will be delivered to Scotland Yard—mangled and lifeless!"

"Hang it all, Hampson, that will mean a lot of trouble!" put in Rayle irritably. "I don't believe in this rotten business. Get it over, if it must be done. You are a cold-blooded brute——"

"That's enough, Rayle!" snapped Hampson. "I'm in charge of this machine, I will remind you. I shall do as I like. The High Lord will thoroughly approve of my plan. he will be delighted when I tell him of it. It is the very 'touch' he would have suggested him-

self. Lee will be delivered at the Yard—from the skies. By Jove! What a sensation in the morning's papers!"

"Get the horrible business over," muttered Rayle. "Cut the man loose now——"

"I have told you what I intend to do," out in the other harshly.

Nelson Lee understood why Hampson was willing to go to the extra trouble. Zingrave would be delighted when he heard the news, and would commend Hampson. And Hampson was anxious to be in the professor's best books. Probably there was a financial side to the question, too.

"Good-bye, Mr. Nelson Lee—we sha'n't have a chance of talking again," said Hampson jeeringly. "We're off now, and you'll resume your old position, a hundred feet below us."

Nelson Lee instinctively gripped the rope, and he was at once lowered until he hung far below the Hoverer. Hampson seemed to have overlooked one detail. His victim need not wait until Scotland Yard was reached.

He could drop at once if he chose.

But Nelson Lee did not drop. Death was certain, he felt sure. But it would, perhaps, be better if this dastardly plan was put into execution. The fury of the whole country would be aroused, and Nipper—poor Nipper—would be the more eager to avenge his master.

Two minutes later the strange aircraft recommenced its flight. Its nose was turned towards London again.

It was bound for Scotland Yard—to deliver Nelson Lee!

CHAPTER V.

BY THE MERCY OF PROVIDENCE!

LONDON was rather misty when the stolen aircraft passed over it again. Wreaths of white mist had arisen, and the great metropolis was silent and still in the small hours of the morning.

The time was even now only about two o'clock—a little before, if anything—and there were two or three hours of darkness left.

Nelson Lee's thoughts were bitter; his feelings were almost harsh. Why should this terrible thing happen? Was there no way of putting a stop to Hampson's horrible project?

But, even as he asked himself these questions, he knew that there was no

answer to them. If even he had possessed his revolver he might, with exceptional luck, have turned the tables. For he could have climbed up the rope, and shot the scoundrels in the cabin.

Nelson Lee would have shot them without compunction. It was his life or theirs, and he would be justified in——

But what was the use of speculating?

He had left his revolver on the roof of Messrs. Megson & Grant's jewellery establishment, in Regent Street. He had dropped the weapon as he was swung off his feet by the trailing rope. He had nothing but his bare hands.

Probably the rope was longer than Hampson had said; Nelson Lee, looking up, could see the Hoverer speeding through the air. It seemed to be at least two hundred feet above him.

The detective was chilled again; the rush of air was intensified, and the icy blast numbed his limbs. Somehow Lee thought that the night had turned colder. But perhaps this was his fancy.

Where would he fall, he wondered?

Just inside the wrought-iron arch, or before the main entrance of Scotland Yard? Or in Whitehall itself? Who would find his remains? Detective-Inspector Lennard himself, probably.

Lee hoped with all his heart that Nipper would not be present when the discovery was made—— Poor young Nipper! Nelson Lee clung to the rope fiercely. A wave of hot, blinding rage surged through him.

But, in a moment, he was calm again.

What was the use of getting into a fury? Nothing on earth could save him now, he felt. Fate had been cruel; this was the end of all things—for Lee.

The great detective just clung to the rope, dully conscious of the dim, subdued lights of London below him. Everything seemed more indistinct than before. The river wasn't visible, and the river would have been a certain clue to the whereabouts of Whitehall.

Perhaps it was on account of the mist; or, his eyes were getting dimmed with the rush of cold air. Surely it was time Scotland Yard was reached? It seemed to Lee that hours had passed since the journey began.

As a matter of fact, the hours were only minutes. The Hoverer was speeding, and had made short work of the journey. And Nelson Lee realised, quite suddenly, that the machine was slowing down.

The end was at hand!

Lee peered down into the void, but he could see nothing distinctly. The aircraft was travelling at about ten miles an hour now, and the rush of air was considerably lessened. Nelson Lee became almost interested.

He saw, too, that the dim lights on the ground were coming up to meet the Hoverer. At least, this is how it looked. The machine was descending slowly and deliberately. It was hovering now in one spot. And it could certainly not have been more than three hundred feet above the ground.

Nelson Lee, therefore, was less than two hundred feet from terra-firma. Why was this? He was to have been dropped from a height of two thousand feet. Of course, it made no difference whatever. Fifty feet would have been enough to kill him instantaneously.

Then the detective realised the truth.

Hampson and his companion were uncertain of their whereabouts; they were trying to locate their position. And, in order to determine the exact locality, it had been necessary to descend to a low altitude.

Nelson Lee was less than two hundred feet from the ground, and he could not see much. The mistiness below was growing thicker. The river was quite near, probably. But a fall into the Thames would be just as fatal.

The aircraft moved forward cautiously, and very slowly, still maintaining the same level. Hampson was striving to locate the position. The speed of the Hoverer was now merely a crawl.

Nelson Lee, in spite of his dreadful peril, almost smiled. All this extra trouble was being taken just for the sake of—effect. For him to be dropped outside Scotland Yard was, in Hampson's opinion, a really delicious event. It would be a kind of warning to the police. And Professor Zingrave would approve; it was just the "finish" he himself would have suggested.

Scotland Yard, however, was rather difficult to locate from above. It had been fairly easy to find Regent Street earlier, for the air had been as clear as a bell then. Now it was thick with mists.

Nelson Lee looked straight down upon the tops of houses, and then ahead. He reckoned that he was in the East End somewhere—probably Silvertown or

Millwall or Limehouse. It was impossible to tell exactly.

And as he looked ahead he stared.

The night was black, and it was almost impossible to distinguish the sky from the land. But there was a difference. The sky was a trifle less black; and, curiously enough, a kind of needle of blackness seemed to protrude into the lesser darkness of the sky.

It was fancy, of course—

Nelson Lee suddenly realized the truth.

That protruding "needle" was, in reality, a high factory chimney. It was dead ahead, and those in charge of the Hoverer had probably seen nothing of it. Nelson Lee, much lower, was able to distinguish it against the skyline. To Hampson and Rayle the huge shaft was merely a part of the general darkness. They were unaware of its proximity.

The Hoverer was travelling very slowly, and its course would carry Nelson Lee right towards the towering chimney. Indeed, it seemed to Lee that he would collide with the coping of the shaft as he was swung helplessly along.

In that case he would be battered to death at once. Well, it made little difference, the detective bitterly reflected. When the moment of collision came he could relax his grip, and thus avert needless injury and pain.

The shaft was probably one of those belonging to a great factory in the East End. Somehow, Nelson Lee was vaguely interested. Why, he did not know. He found himself gazing at the high chimney with almost painful intentness.

Yes, he would certainly collide with it.

But then, as he grew nearer and nearer, Nelson Lee changed his opinion. He was a shade higher than the shaft, which was, perhaps, a hundred and eighty feet. A lofty chimney, indeed. It seemed to the detective that he would pass over it, with about ten feet to spare.

Then, with an abrupt start, Lee made another discovery.

The top of the chimney was surrounded by masses of scaffolding. There were poles and planks and ropes. Obviously, repairs were in progress. The factory chimney was provided with a kind of wide-brimmed hat. This was the idea which suggested itself to Nelson Lee as he looked. The scaffolding was extensive, and formed quite a considerable

platform all round the top of the chimney.

Oh, yea, there was no doubt about it. He would pass right over the top of the chimney, unless the Hoverer abruptly changed its course—and there was no prospect of that. The Circle scoundrels in charge of the aircraft were blissfully unconscious of the fact that the high factory chimney was so near. To them it was merely nothing but a portion of the other darkness.

But from Nelson Lee's lower position the top of the chimney stood out quite clear against the dim night sky. It seemed to him as though he would be in touch with earth for just a moment.

Helpless as he was, doomed to an appalling death, it seemed strange that he should, for a few bare seconds, be quite near to something which was directly connected with the ground. He laughed with bitter irony—

"Great heavens!"

Lee muttered the words gaspingly. An amazing thought had come to him—a daring, reckless, desperate thought. Why shouldn't he drop while he was passing over the scaffolding?

Why shouldn't he take the desperate chance?

The mercy of Providence had surely directed the aircraft in this precise direction; this was not merely chance, Lee told himself fiercely. In one second he felt that hope was not yet dead.

There was a prospect of escape!

The great detective thrilled through and through with the thought. He knew well enough that the chance was appallingly slim. The odds were ten to one against success.

Death was certain if he let this chance slip by—absolutely, positively certain.

So what difference did it make?

At all events, there was a chance of life here, and if he died now it would, perhaps, be all the better. For, anyhow, he would have died while vainly attempting to save himself. And that was a better death than the one which Hampson had planned for him.

There was no time for speculation.

Even as Nelson Lee formulated his despairing plan, the scaffolding on the top of the shaft became absolutely near. It was right in front. Yes, and it was just below the trailing rope. Lee saw that he would only be about twelve feet above.

But twelve feet was an appalling dis-

lance in itself—under those circumstances. In all probability he would miss his mark, and would plungo straight down—down, nearly two hundred feet, to the ground below.

Or, if he didn't miss his mark, it was conceivable that he would even plunge into the chimney itself. This, indeed, was more desperately awful than anything else. But Nelson Lee could not afford to think of the risks. If there had been the slightest hope in any other direction he would not have taken this chance.

But, even as a drowning man will clutch at a straw, Nelson Lee clutched at this flimsy thread of hope.

He withdrew his numbed feet from the noose in which they were resting, and clung to the rope merely by his hands. And, as he did so, he heard the engine of the Hoverer increase its low purr to a soft roar. Hampson had increased the speed!

If the scoundrel had done that a minute before Nelson Lee would have been foiled. But the machine had no time to gather speed before the crucial moment arrived. Lee saw the scaffolding below him, and he dropped.

He dropped like a stone.

Just for one ghastly second the famous detective thought that he had overshot the scaffolding.

Then—crash!

By a miraculous chance he landed upon his feet. He landed with a jar which shook every bone in his body. The planking shivered and shook, and Nelson Lee was hurled forward by his own impetus.

He flung his arms out wildly and desperately. At first they grasped nothing, and he felt himself slither over the edge of the scaffolding. He went over the side and fell.

But then the toe of his boot caught, somehow, in a tangle of rope. It was as near disaster as anything could possibly have been. But the rope held, and Lee found himself hanging head downwards over sheer space. His great effort had been successful—but he might fall at any second!

The ropes would possibly disentangle themselves—

But then, as Lee swung, the fingers of his right hand gripped some planking. He held fast, and drew himself towards safety. In another moment his right

hand was grasping the woodwork, too, and he pulled himself in.

Inch by inch he felt his way, and at last, after what seemed an age, the detective found himself lying upon a secure stretch of boards. He had released his foot, and was—safe.

At that second Lee sent up a prayer to heaven for his deliverance. And he lay quite still, breathing heavily. He had been saved from destruction by an extraordinary stroke of chance.

He was bruised, battered, grazed, and sore—but he was whole!

CHAPTER VI.

NIPPER'S JOY—THE TABLES ARE TURNED WITH A VENGEANCE.

HAMPSON leaned out of the little window in the cabin of the Brigham Hoverer. He had found his bearings at last, and was now making straight for Westminster Bridge, following the course of the Thames.

Once the bridge was reached it would be easy enough to proceed immediately over Whitehall, and thus to Scotland Yard. The Hoverer was now travelling swiftly, and would arrive before many minutes had passed.

"I can't see the infernal——"

Hampson paused, and suddenly grabbed at the rope.

"Confound the brute!" he snarled furiously.

For the rope lifted lightly in his hand, and he needed no telling that there was no weight at the end of it. Nelson Lee had dropped! The great detective had gone to destruction!

"What's the matter?" asked Rayle, turning from the controls.

"Lee has dropped!"

Rayle grinned slightly.

"Well, it makes no difference," he exclaimed. "He's dead by this time—and a good thing, too. I didn't approve of that idea of yours, Hampson. It was horrible enough to have to kill the fellow at all; but to go to the lengths you were planning was a bit too devilish for my liking."

"I didn't ask for your opinion," snarled Hampson curtly.

"My dear fellow, you needn't growl at me," said Rayle, with equal curtness. "Perhaps you'll be satisfied now. I am. It's just as well that Lee is

finished with—he was a menace to us. I suppose you'll agree that he's killed?"

"Don't be a fool!" snapped the other. "Lee wasn't a bladder, I suppose? He couldn't float to the ground, could he? He's dead right enough—smashed to a jelly. I suppose he got tired of hanging on."

"You might have expected that," grunted Rayle.

He, at all events, was rather glad that Nelson Lee had dropped. He felt, somehow, that the detective had brought about his own death. To have deliberately cut the rope would have been horribly callous and cold-blooded. To give him his due, Rayle was not a murderer. A thorough scoundrel in most ways, but he respected human life. Hampson easily made up for this lack of callousness in his companion. Hampson was utterly brutal.

And he was angry because Lee had escaped before the time. Of course, he was dead—that was obvious. The machine had been fully three hundred feet from the ground, even when it had descended to the lowest altitude in the flight. Therefore, Nelson Lee must have been dashed to pieces when he struck the ground.

Neither Hampson nor Rayle had any idea that the factory chimney had been so close to them. They had seen nothing of it, and had detected no change at the moment of Lee's desperate jump.

Consequently the Hoverer proceeded on its way, its occupants quite at ease. As Hampson had so thoughtfully told Nelson Lee, the machine was now bound for its base in the Surrey Hills. At a given time it would start out for Romford; there was no object in remaining in the air during the interval of time.

The Regent Street affair had been a failure—but Nelson Lee was dead. And that was ample compensation. After the machine had returned to its base, it would take on a fresh supply of petrol, and would do the short trip to Romford.

And while Hampson and Rayle were speeding towards Hillingdon Wood, their minds at rest—Hampson, at least, was not troubled by conscience—the object of their villainy was making his way to the ground.

For Nelson Lee found that he was suffering from nothing more than grazes and bruises. He was jarred in

every bone, but was by no means put out of action. Indeed, there was more fight in Nelson Lee now than ever.

He was aroused to frantic action.

The scaffolding round the top of the factory chimney was strong and extensive. A small iron ladder led straight down to the ground—a permanent ladder. Nelson Lee found this after a short search.

The detective did not wait to examine his injuries; he was anxious to get to solid earth. Even now he could scarcely realize that he had escaped the positive death which had seemed inevitable.

The Brigham Hoverer had vanished into the night; but Nelson Lee was in possession of much knowledge—knowledge that had been given to him by Hampson free gratis. Lee smiled grimly as he thought it over. Hampson had not been rash, for he had been positive that Lee would die. Even as it was, the detective was convinced that Hampson and Rayle thought him dead. They were certainly under the impression that he had dropped to destruction.

It was a ticklish business, getting to the ground. A steeplejack, however, could not have been more nimble, or more clear-headed, than Nelson Lee. Stiff as he was, aching and sore, he descended the iron ladder with swift movements.

And, at the bottom, he found himself in the yard of a great factory. Everything was quiet, for no night work was in progress. Indeed, Lee suspected that the factory was temporarily closed. Possibly an accident had occurred, and that was why repairs were being effected.

The detective crossed the yard, and scaled a high fence. He found himself in a dingy, narrow street. Not a soul was about—But just then a burly, silent form appeared from a doorway.

"Now then, what's your business?" demanded a gruff voice. "What were you doin' in that yard—"

"By James! A constable!" exclaimed Nelson Lee gladly.

The next moment the policeman's bullseye was flashing upon him. The worthy member of the Metropolitan Police Force uttered a short cry. He recognized his companion. There were few constables in the London area who did not know Nelson Lee by sight. As Nipper had sometimes remarked, "the guv'nor was well known to the cops!"

"Why, it's Mr. Lee!" ejaculated the constable.

"I have not the honour of your acquaintance," said Lee crisply. "It is lucky that you know me, however—it will save trouble. Where am I, constable?"

The man stared.

"Where are you, sir?" he repeated.

"Yes. What locality is this?"

"Well I'm blowed! Don't you know?" asked the policeman. "This is rum, sir. I can't quite get the hang—"

Nelson Lee laughed, and wrapped his handkerchief round his grazed wrist while he rapidly explained things to the amazed constable. Lee didn't go into details; he just recounted the main facts.

And he learned, in return, that he was in the East End, quite near to the river. A police-station was within half a minute's walk. That was enough for the detective. He went straight to the station, had a word with the inspector, and rang up Scotland Yard.

Here he learned that Detective-Inspector Lennard had returned from Regent Street, but had now gone out with Nipper. Lee, with pursed lips, rang up his own address in Gray's Inn Road—and was successful.

Nipper answered the 'phone.

"Who's that?" came a dull, heavy voice.

"Cheer up, young 'un," said Nelson Lee genially. "I want you—"

"The guv'nor!" roared Nipper.

Lee smiled as he heard the shout of joy. In less than three minutes he had given Nipper orders, and had learned that Squadron-Commander Brigham and Inspector Lennard were with Nipper. The airman-inventor had been told of the disaster by Nipper, and he had rushed to Gray's Inn Road.

This suited Lee perfectly, and in a very short time the joyous trio were on their way to the East End. Lee, meanwhile, cleaned himself up, and patched the injuries to his skin.

As he came out upon the steps of the police-station, a big racing car loomed up, and came to a stop. Nipper simply hurled himself across the pavement.

"We thought you'd been killed, guv'nor!" he gasped huskily.

"I was near to death, Nipper," replied Lee. "But I will relate my adventures later on. At present there is work to be done—and we must not lose a second. Hallo, Lennard, you're looking queer!"

"Who wouldn't?" growled the in-

spector; but his voice was genial. "When we saw you lifted into the air, Lee, we thought—"

"Never mind what you thought," put in Lee. "There's a chance—a slim chance, I'd better add—that we may be able to regain possession of Brigham's machine to-night. At all events, we'll make the attempt."

Commander Brigham fairly danced with excitement.

"Do you know where it is, then?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes—in Surrey."

That was all Lee would say for the moment. But when the party had started off, with Nipper at the wheel, the detective roughly recounted his adventures. He was sitting beside Nipper, and the lad heard all. The others, crouching on the back part of the car, listened intently.

Nipper was overjoyed when he heard how Nelson Lee had been provided with the very information he needed more than anything else. Of course, Hampson had never dreamed that that information could be used. He didn't know, even now, that there was danger. For Hampson believed that Nelson Lee was dead.

Nipper drove like a demon. He was a magnificent car driver, and at present he stopped at nothing. The racer tore through London like a fire-engine, and it was lucky that the streets were deserted.

Hillingdon Wood, Lee had discovered, was a mile beyond Hillingdon village, and it was only a fairly short run out of London. The Hoverer's secret hangar was right in the centre of the wood, presumably in a clearing. The machine was able to rise direct from the ground, and so this hiding-place was admirable in every way.

Nelson Lee's racing-car roared on.

Would this venture be a success—or a failure?

"By Jove! Here we are!"

It was Squadron-Commander Brigham who whispered the words.

He and Nelson Lee and Nipper and Detective-Inspector Lennard were in the heart of Hillingdon Wood. They had been creeping through the dense undergrowth for a full half-hour.

Their racing-car was left upon the edge of the wood—and they were searching for the Hoverer's secret hangar. Now, apparently, they had been successful.

For, as Brigham spoke, they saw a small clearing right ahead in the gloom. In the centre of the clearing there was a roughly constructed wooden shed. The building was old, and had apparently been adapted to its present purpose.

Lee was exultant.

What a triumph if he could only defeat the Circle of Terror now!

If, indeed, the enterprise did turn out successfully, that triumph would be solely owing to Nelson Lee's energetic action. For in the morning the Circle would know that Lee was still alive. And, naturally, the stolen aeroplane would be removed to a different hiding-place.

By acting to night, Lee might be able to turn the tables.

And more. There were the Duke of Amberley's miniatures! Had the Hoverer started on its flight to Romford?

Lee and Nipper and the others were crouching down on the edge of the clearing, trying to pierce the gloom. Everything had been rushed amazingly to-night, and the time was only just after three o'clock even now.

And then, as Nelson Lee was about to creep forward, a voice came to him.

That voice belonged to Hampson!

The watchers heard, rather than saw, a door of the shed open, and two dim figures came out. Lee needed no telling that those figures belonged to Hampson and Rayle. The pair of rogues had got back from the flight over London, and the Hoverer, probably, was on the other side of the shed, hidden from view.

"... Plenty of time," Hampson was saying. "Ten past three now. Got to be at Romford... half-past... do it easily, old man. Won't be dawn... hour yet... Back here long before four."

The words were not all audible, but the listeners heard sufficient to tell them the truth.

"They haven't fetched the duke's miniatures yet!" murmured Lennard exultantly.

"This is where we act!" said Nelson Lee. "Half-past three at Romford! By James, we'll get the Hoverer, and we'll get the miniatures! This is a night of nights, Nipper! The Circle will remember this affair!"

Brigham quivered with excitement and anxiety.

"Better be quick!" he muttered. "They'll be up in no time! That engine starts at the first turn of the screw—"

"All right, Brigham—we'll surprise them!" whispered Lee. "Now, all together!"

The dim figures of Hampson and Rayle had disappeared round the building, and it was obvious now that the precious aeroplane was there. By all appearances, too, Rayle and Hampson were alone.

Nelson Lee and Nipper and the others reached the shed without mishap. Lee and Nipper went one side, and Lennard and Brigham the other. Then, creeping round, they saw the Hoverer. It was standing just in front of the building, and there was a small electric light gleaming in the cabin. Hampson was starting the engine.

Then came the surprise.

The four attackers lurched themselves forward at the same second. That rush took them over the ground long before Hampson and Rayle could prepare to defend themselves. The two scoundrels were completely taken off their guard.

They went over like ninepins, and in less than a minute they were handcuffed. Lennard saw to that. It was about the easiest capture the inspector had ever effected. But this wasn't surprising. The surprise had them absolute.

"Got 'em!" roared Nipper excitedly.

Brigham was examining his precious machine with anxiety and joy intermingled. He found that the Hoverer was intact and unharmed. Lennard stood over the prisoners for a moment, and then allowed them to rise. They were handcuffed in a curious manner—back to back, and fastened together. For them to make a rush was simply impossible. The pair were utterly helpless.

Suddenly Hampson gave a hoarse cry. He had seen a ghost, he thought.

"Nelson Lee!" came in a gasping croak from his dry throat. "Are you a man or—or a devil? How did you escape? By heaven, I'll—"

"You've done all you're going to do for quite a time!" interjected Nelson Lee easily. "Your information was very welcome, Hampson. I escaped by means— But I won't tell you that. You can guess. It will give you something to do!"

Rayle choked with fury.

"This is your doing, Hampson, you infernal fool!" he grated. "All through your babbling! If you hadn't talked—"

"Come on, if you're going to start a jawing-match, you'd better do it inside the hut," said Inspector Lennard.

genially. "What's the programme, Mr. Lee? I suppose I'd better remain with these gentlemen while you fetch those miniatures?"

Hampson and Rayle nearly foamed at the mouth with impotent fury. The miniatures! Nelson Lee had won all along the line—and he would get the miniatures, too! It was the last straw, and the two rogues almost collapsed.

As Lee had supposed, there was nobody else present. The hut was empty, except for a stock of petrol and oil, and other necessary articles for the running of the aeroplane.

"It was lucky that Brigham came with us," remarked the inspector.

It was, indeed, lucky.

For while Lennard remained in Hillingdon Wood with the prisoners, Squadron-Commander Brigham and Nelson Lee and Nipper soared aloft in the Hoverer, and made straight for Romford.

The young airman-inventor was in the seventh heaven of delight. His machine was in his hands again! The Air Ministry, too, would be overjoyed, and Nelson Lee's reward was likely to be substantial.

The Duke of Amberley's miniatures were secured with absolute ease.

Indeed, the whole affair was laughable from Nipper's point of view. Under Brigham's sure hand, the aircraft sped across country to Romford, and then proceeded outside the town, into the open country beyond.

At a certain point in the road—between Romford and Harold Wood—a tiny red light was seen. This was a signal, of course. The Hoverer slowed down, and came to a stop. Then Brigham lowered

it gently until it was only five hundred feet from the ground.

The rope was let down, and Nelson Lee, leaning out of the cabin, felt that something heavy was being affixed to the rope. Then he and the others distinctly saw a big motor-car moving off towards London.

The rope was hauled up—and on the end of it was a heavy bundle. It contained the Duke of Amberley's miniatures, and a large quantity of jewellery which had been stolen from a big establishment in the Strand a month before!

The situation was really humorous.

The Circle's agents, below, had actually handed over their booty into the care of the Circle's enemies! Owing to Nelson Lee's amazingly prompt measures, he had been able to achieve complete success.

The Duke of Amberley, of course, was overjoyed, and he kept his word regarding the reward. The Air Minister himself visited Nelson Lee the next day, and thanked him heartily for his incalculable service to the country.

What Professor Cyrus Zingrave thought could only be imagined.

But Hampson and Rayle—two of his intimate associates—were in the hands of the police. The Hoverer was lost, and the Amberley Miniatures had been restored to the rightful owner!

Professor Zingrave, the High Lord of the Circle of Terror, had ample food for thought in that eventful week.

In one blow Nelson Lee had kept his promise to Squadron-Commander Brigham, and had recovered the Duke of Amberley's paintings. It was the most decisive blow the great criminologist had yet struck at the Circle of Terror!

THE END.

Next Wednesday's Issue will contain
Another Stirring Episode from
"NIPPER'S NOTE-BOOK."
Written as a Long Complete Novel,
Entitled,

"The Ivory Seekers."

SEND A COPY TO YOUR SOLDIER CHUM.

You've No Idea How He'll Appreciate It!

"Big Davy's" Revenge.

AN AUSTRALIAN BUSH STORY.

By a Popular Writer.

THE 1st CHAPTER.

A LETTER FROM HOME—BIG DAVY'S GAME—"CLEAR OUT."

THE hour of nine had just struck from a neighbouring clock-tower, and the by-streets of busy, bustling Sydney were beginning to wear that deserted appearance so peculiar to Australian towns after sundown, as Larry Haywood let himself out of his dingy office, where from ten in the morning often to late at night he sat poring over ledgers and account-books which had not the slightest interest for him.

His heart was far away in the bush up in the great lone lands, where mile upon mile of endless scrub and spinifex grass rolled away to the horizon and far beyond, or, we might more truly say, to the edge of the scrub, where Old Man Haywood's little house in the clearing lay.

Larry was thinking of it now as he pocketed the key of the office door and walked briskly in the direction of his dismal lodgings.

It was home to him up there—or, to be quite correct, it had been once upon a time. Now, however, it was denied him, and all because he had stood in another man's path, and that man had done him a great wrong.

The veins on Larry's temples stood out like whipcords as the memory of the bitter past flooded into his brain. But there, what did it matter? He was out of it now, and one day perhaps the old man—"Dad," as Larry had loved to call him—might relent.

"Beg your pardon, I'm sure!" said Larry politely, as, turning into his gate, thinking deeply, he almost upset the genial postman on his last delivery.

"Nothing for me, of course!" he added laconically. "I never have letters." There was something quite pathetic in the utterance of these few words, and perhaps they touched some chord of sympathy in the postman's heart, for he answered genially:

"Well, young sir, for once you're wrong. You're Mr. Larry 'Aywood, aren't you?"

"I believe it's meant for me, if that's the inscription," laughed the boy.

And, with a nod and a few words of thanks, he took the letter and hurried to his little back room, his pulse beating with wild excitement.

"It's three years since I had a letter!" he muttered.

And then a cry of astonishment broke from him as he read the postmark—"Mainwaring."

"I know what it is," he told himself. "Dad's found out the truth at last. He's found out that the tale of theft his partner, James Blyth, trumped up against me to disgrace me in his eyes was false, and now he's written to ask me to return home—after turning me penniless from his door! But then, no; it can't be from dad. He'd never write like this."

Hurriedly tearing off the covering, Larry, with wondering eyes, read the strange, ill-spelt, but pregnant message:

"Kum to Mainwaring quickly. Old boss sik to deth. Big Davy paintin' township red, and 'as filled stok-'ouse with bad men. Big boss in illness calls for Larry. 'They want my gold!' 'o kries always. Kum!—(Signed) "Mowi."

"It's from Mowi, the native stock-hand and ex-tracker," Larry muttered, wiping the perspiration from his fore-

head. "'Big boss sik to deth!' That means that dad's down. And what's this about 'Big Davy painting the town red'?"

Larry's quick brain speedily grasped the position of affairs. His father was on a bed of sickness—perhaps bush-fever.

Big Davy, a reckless ne'er-do-well, had probably been taking an endless number of "two fingers o' pizen" at the local whisky store, and had conceived the idea—maybe in conjunction with others of his class—of "putting the old 'un's light out to git 'is pieces."

"I know dad's reputed to have put a lot of money by in gold," the boy commented thoughtfully, "and I shouldn't be a bit surprised if he's in real danger. Anyway, I'll stand by him if I have to sink every sovereign of the ninety I've saved. I leave Sydney to-morrow."

True to his word, Larry Haywood took train for the North, and then, having gone as far as the line ran, he purchased a reliable horse, a rifle, and a revolver, and set off into Queensland.

A hard ride of seven hours brought him to the Haywood homestead, a small, unpretentious, two-storeyed building, quite unworthy a man who was one of the biggest squatters in the colony, and possessed nearly a quarter of a million of money.

But Old Man Haywood was hard—hard to the core. Spend money, no; he woudn't spend a shilling to save another's life.

Larry knew this quite well, and it was uppermost in his mind as his eye caught in the darkness the glimmer of a light ahead.

A few minutes later he drew rein on the edge of the clearing, and dismounted, holding his rifle in his right hand.

"Co-ce! Co-ee!"

It was the bush call, twice repeated, and as the young fellow strained his ears to listen he heard the sound answered quite close to hand. Then, before he could make a step forward, he saw a couple of figures move stealthily across the clearing and make for the front door of the house. An instant later they were inside.

"That's queer!" the boy muttered. "Wonder what game's afoot? It's a strange home-coming for me, this."

Now you must remain here," he added, patting his horse's neck.

Like a shadow Larry crept up to the place and made for the window from which a faint light shone.

It was shuttered, and barred, too, but not so closely that Larry could not, through a handy chink, get a glimpse of what was going on inside.

A cry of indignation and amazement almost broke from him as his eyes took in the scene before him.

On a couch alongside the wall lay his dad, pale, emaciated, and worn, with the light of fever in his eyes; while bending over him, a heavy revolver in his hand, was Big Davy, the ruffianly stock-hand.

From his coign of vantage Larry could well hear what the roaring, drink-sodden bully was saying.

"Look 'ere, yew old fool. I'll giv' yer nary another chance! I've mucked about for a whole week tryin' ter get yer ter let on where yer keep ther gold, and yer won't. If yer don't tell me within five minutes, I'll drill yer clean full of 'oles!"

This was enough for Larry. He did not wait to slip round to the back, or to enter by the way Big Davy and his fellow-ruffian had done. With one heave of his great shoulders he sent the shutters splintering inwards, then, amidst a shower of falling glass, he pushed his rifle through the broken woodwork.

"Hands up, Big Davy!" he cried. "Hands up, I say, or you're a dead man in three seconds!"

There was no mistaking the frowning glint of the stern, set eye above the rifle-barrel, no time for Davy to use his own weapon. Sullenly his hands shot upwards, the pistol he held pointing at the ceiling.

To his great relief, Larry saw that the second man held no weapon.

"Now, Big Davy, fire away every chamber into the ceiling!" he cried.

A single movement of the rifle barrel was sufficient, and six reports rang out in quick succession as the weapon was emptied.

It was a dramatic scene—the sick man staring from his couch to the resolute figure which stood in the broken window covering Big Davy. Larry was playing a winning game, and he knew it.

"That's right! You'd best obey implicitly," the boy muttered. "Those shots of yours will bring a crowd here right now, which means, Big Davy, that before the sun's up you'll dance on air."

The ruffian's face turned a sickly yellow. Justice among the bushmen and stock-riders of Australia is very rough, but very just and very sure. Big Davy was aware of this, and his heart quailed at the prospect.

"Well, see here," went on Larry, "I'll temper mercy with justice. Promise you'll never show your face in Mainwaring again—you and your partner—and I'll lower my gun. Is it a deal?"

"It is!" Big Davy growled.

"Well, now clear!" said Larry.

And without another word Big Davy went, followed by his associate in crime. They turned out into the night, and, true to his word, Big Davy never meant again to put foot within the township.

But he had not forgotten, and in his heart there rankled a deep, a deadly, an undying hatred for the lad who had thwarted him.

"My time'll come!" he muttered hoarsely. "I'll be even with him some day. I know him. He's young Laurence Haywood, 'im as was sent away five years ago. One day, ay, and that before long—I'll have 'im in my power, and then——"

But the sentence was never finished. It died away in a savage, mocking laugh; died away into the silence of the bush-land.

THE 2nd CHAPTER.

OLD MAN HAYWOOD CHANGES—BIG DAVY'S REVENGE—MOWI TO THE RESCUE.

THINGS had changed at Old Man Haywood's homestead. There was an air of new life about the place. Work, honest and steady, was being done there. Big Davy's crowd had been cleared out, lock, stock, and barrel, by the new boss, who, during his dad's convalescence, had taken everything in his own hands.

It was two months since Larry's strange home-coming. The squatter was still but a shade of a man, for the sickness had gone hard with him; but, thanks to Larry's unremitting attention and devotion, he was fast regaining his health and strength, and would soon be able to get about again.

But what a change had come over him! He recognised in his son a true, upright specimen of young colonial manhood—not the rascal he had been induced to believe he was. Just a month before Larry received his message from the faithful Mowi, James Blyth had died, and on his deathbed had confessed that he had blackened Larry's character, solely with the hope of one day coming into Old Man Haywood's vast wealth. For, beyond Larry, it appeared the squatter had not a relation in the world.

The shock of this confession had stricken the father down, and then, when the sickness came, and with it Big Davy's wild threats, it seemed as if the sufferer were going right under. But a merciful Providence had opened the old man's eyes. Thus it came about that a bright morning in May he was sitting up in bed, with one thin white hand resting on the shoulder of his own dear boy.

"Larry, lad, I've wronged ye," he said, with a sob, and tears started to his eyes. "But you'll forgive me and forget, won't you, lad?"

"I will, dad," replied the boy, and his strong, brown hand grasped the other's in a grip that spoke more than words.

It was the reconciliation after three long, weary years.

"And now, dad," said Larry, "I'm going to ride over to Somer's place to see how he and the girls are getting on. Mowi's about, and I'll get you all you want. I shall be back by sundown."

And with that he hastened to the paddock, brought out his mare, and set off on his thirty-mile ride.

His way lay for nearly half the distance over rough bush-land, and then up in the hills, after which he would have to traverse a deep gorge. A straight ride of ten miles would bring him to the Somer's homestead.

Noonday found the solitary horseman picking his way over the boulder-strewn ground through a narrow defile known

as Horton's Gap. The heat of the day had somewhat fatigued Larry, and with his broad-brimmed hat pulled well over his head, he rode loosely in the saddle, leaving it to his sure-footed steed to choose her course. Suddenly Larry was awakened from the reverie into which he had fallen by the sound of a stern command:

"Hands up, Master Larry!"

Raising his head and blinking dazedly in the sunlight, the young fellow found himself looking down the barrel of a revolver, behind which was a black-browed, bearded man of gigantic stature, seated upon a horse. It was Big Davy.

"So I've got you at last!" he cried triumphantly. "Boys"—turning to a dozen villainous-looking companions—"this is the best hold-up I've had for a month. Here, Sims and Tomkins, seize the cub!"

At their leader's bidding, a couple of the ruffians rushed on the weaponless rider. Ding! Dong! Larry's fists, hard as yew, shot out right and left, and the two rascals rolled clean out of their saddles from the force of the blows.

But it was an unequal contest at the best, and Larry was speedily overpowered.

"Carry him to the den while I decide what's to be done with him!" roared Big Davy, smiting his thigh with satisfaction.

Accordingly the captive was hurried away into the hills, and by tortuous paths taken to the gang's hiding place. Meanwhile, the arch-ruffian's mind was busy working out a scheme of revenge.

At first there was some demur at Big Davy's proposal. The rest looked upon Larry as common property; but Big Davy was not the man to brook any interference with his own private affairs.

"He's mine, curse you!" he cried, flourishing his revolver recklessly. "And the first man that dares to dispute my authority will soon find himself trying to stop up bullet-holes. What he's got on him you can have between you—after that, he belongs to me."

Thus it came about that the black-hearted ex-stockman began his arrangements for carrying out his revenge.

With the sinking of the sun, Larry was seized roughly and put astride a

wild-eyed, fierce-looking brumby. Then his arms were tied behind his back, his legs were lashed by thongs of raw-hide to the horse's flanks. Secured in this position, and suffering excruciating pain from the tightness of his bonds, he was led down the mountain-side by Big Davy and two of his minions.

"Now see what I'm going to do with you. Yonder, across that wooden bridge, is the great scrub-land, a limitless arid waste, as you know, thousands and thousands of miles in extent. You're going to be turned loose there when I've finished with you," said the ruffian.

An instant later the great lash whistled through the air and circled cruelly round Larry's body. He winced under the pain, but set his lips firmly. Again and again the brutal performance was repeated, until at last Larry's head fell forward on his chest. Big Davy knew that his victim was beyond pain.

"You can clear back now," he said, turning to the two men. "I'm going over that bridge, and sha'n't be back for half an hour."

Then, taking the bridle, he led the brumby, bearing its unconscious burden, over the frail structure. On the other side he halted. Darkness was fast settling down over the earth, and the dismal waste looked ghostly, uncanny in the gloom.

"Guess I'll give the young cub just one chance of getting back, but it's a million to one he never will," muttered Big Davy, and, drawing his knife, the man cut Larry's hands free. Then, raising his whip, he loosed the brumby's bridle, and gave her one smart cut over the flanks. With a snort of pain the frightened animal reared up and then shot off like a bolt from a bow, into the darkness of the scrub.

A hollow laugh of triumph left Big Davy's lips as he retraced his steps to his haunt in the mountains.

Lost in the great lone lands. It was bright midday, with a hot glare of sun in the sky, when Larry Haywood opened his eyes and gazed wildly around him. He was lost in the lone scrub-land, where no water nor any sign of human life abounds. He succeeded in releasing his benumbed limbs from the cords which bound them, and then, parched with

(Continued overleaf.)

thirst and racked with pain, he threw his weary body to the ground, and crawling beneath the shelter of a loose boulder, lay himself down to die.

When Larry once more opened his eyes they rested upon familiar objects. He was back again in the old homestead, in his own little room. And Mowi and his dear old dad were by his side. But even then he did not learn by what strange cycle of events he had been dragged back from the grave. Nearly a week passed before he knew how Mowi, finding his young master did not return, had, with his wonderful natural instinct, tracked him into the scrub; and at last,

after a hunt of thirty hours, found him delirious. And what of Big Davy, you may ask?

On the very day that Larry and Old Man Haywood walked arm in arm down to the little gate by the paddock, they heard from one of the stockmen how five days before the bushrangers of Horton Gap had been broken up by the Queensland Mounted Police. In the fight that took place, six of the outlaws and a trooper were fatally shot. And amidst the sightless orbs that lay turned up that night to the southern stars were those of Big Davy. Nemesis, swift and sure, had marked him for her own.

THE END.

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