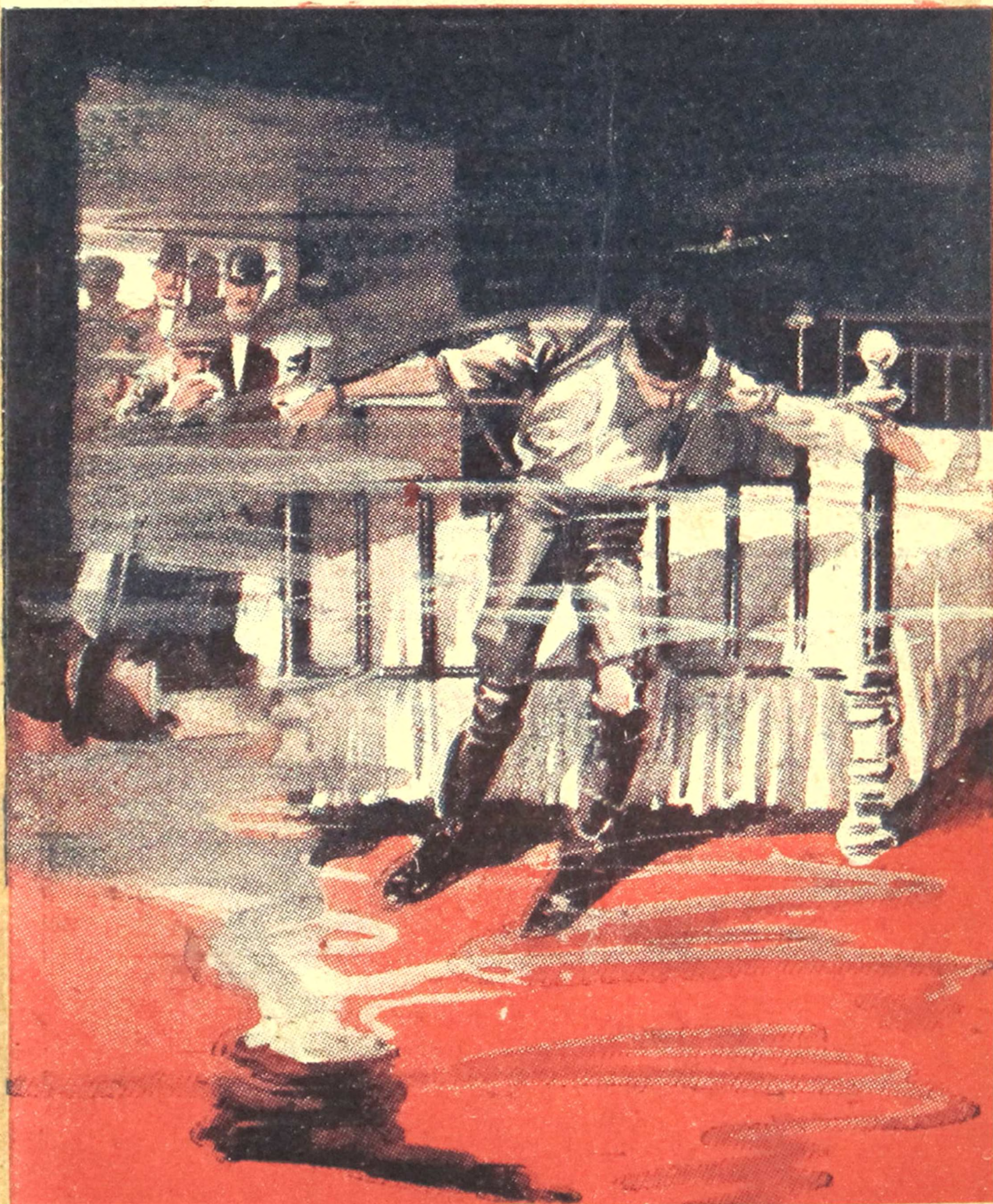


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CHAPTER I.

(Written by Nelson Lee.)

WHAT SIR FRANCIS HALESFORD TOLD ME—
A HOAX?—NIPPER'S ORDERS.

NIPPER crossed his legs lazily.
"If you ask me, guv'nor," he said, "the Circle of Terror's getting rocky on its pins. It'll collapse altogether before long."

I shook my head.

"You're wrong, Nipper," I replied. "You're completely wrong. Just because the Circle has not shown any sign of activity for the past few weeks, that doesn't mean to say that the Circle is rocky on its pins, as you aptly express it. On the contrary, in fact. It seems to prove that the Circle is gathering its strength for some extra special effort."

Nipper didn't agree with me. The young rascal had his own opinions, and sometimes they were singularly accurate. On this occasion, however, I was quite certain that he was wrong in his conviction.

"It's weeks since that affair down at Banham Towers," he went on, lifting his legs and coolly placing them on my desk. "We rescued Lady Marjorie Hilling from the Circle, then—a ripping, A1 girl, guv'nor. And we busted up Professor Zingrave's secret headquarters. Zingrave fled, and nothing's happened since. I believe that the Circle's going to die a natural death."

I selected a cigar, and lit it.

"Time will show, at all events," I remarked. "And, let me remind you, Nipper, that your boots do not improve the appearance of my desk in the slightest degree. You lazy young scamp! Don't loll about in that fashion!"

Nipper grinned, and shifted his feet.

I smoked in silence for a few minutes. I was thinking of my campaign against the Circle of Terror—that powerful organisation of criminals which had already brought off several amazingly successful coups. Other affairs had failed, and I think I can claim that I was the cause of their failure.

Professor Cyrus Zingrave, the High Lord of the Circle of Terror, was an old enemy of mine. And, after weeks of hard work, I had been successful in discovering the whereabouts of his secret retreat. The professor had vanished, and the Circle had been quiet since.

Freely I will admit that I was puzzled. I had expected personal attacks, but none had been attempted. The Circle of Terror had been inactive, so far as I could gather. By a curious chance, I was soon to be enlightened.

For, while Nipper and I sat in the consulting-room, we heard a ring at the bell. And, a few minutes later, Mrs. Jones appeared. She was bearing a card upon a tray, and I took it leisurely.

"Show Sir Francis up at once, Mrs. Jones," I said.

"Very good, sir," replied the house-keeper.

Nipper rose to his feet, and yawned. The day was rather warm and relaxing. The sun streamed in at the windows, and the insects were buzzing droningly.

"Who's coming, guv'nor?" asked the lad.

"Sir Francis Halesford."

"The doctor-chap?"

"The eminent throat specialist of Harley Square," I smiled. "It is hardly complimentary to refer to Sir Francis as a doctor-chap, Nipper. No, don't go away. I may want you to take some shorthand notes. It all depends upon our visitor's business."

A moment later the famous West End physician was ushered in.

"Ah, Mr. Lee, I am fortunate in finding you at home," he said, taking my hand. "I hope this visit of mine is convenient? I only decided to come to you an hour ago, and I was too worried to think of 'phoning for an appointment."

"I am quite at your service, Sir Francis," I said smoothly.

He sat down, and adjusted his rimless pince-nez. Sir Francis Halesford was a tall, distinguished looking man, with a carriage which may almost be described as military. He was straight and erect, and he wore a neatly trimmed moustache and a small beard. His hair was slightly grizzled, but perfectly groomed.

I could see quite plainly that Sir Francis was inwardly agitated. The anxious, almost alarmed, look in his deep grey eyes set me wondering as to what his trouble might be. But I was soon to learn.

"Some little time ago, Mr. Lee," he said quietly, "I read of certain exploits of yours in connection with those scoundrels who term themselves the Circle of Terror. You are, I presume, still pursuing your inquiries?"

"Whenever I get a chance," I agreed smilingly.

"I think you will have a chance—now!"

I glanced across at Nipper, and saw that the lad was looking on with wondering eyes. It was, indeed, somewhat remarkable that Sir Francis should have come to us just when we were discussing the Circle. And it looked as though Nipper's theory would receive a rude knock.

"From your words, Sir Francis, I gather that you have been selected by

the Circle of Terror for some special attention?" I suggested. "If that is the case, then you may rely upon my immediate assistance. For I am only too pleased to seize any opportunity of striking a blow at that scoundrelly organisation."

Sir Francis Halesford nodded.

"Will you please read this?" he asked. "It was delivered at my house this morning by a private messenger."

The baronet handed me a single sheet of notepaper—which was perfectly familiar to me. I had seen similar specimens on several occasions. It was a sheet of the superb notepaper used exclusively by the Circle.

At the top was a neatly printed circle in purple ink, and the letter itself ran as follows:

"Headquarters,

"The 14th Day of August.

"Sir Francis Halesford,—You will carry out the following instructions to the letter. Failure to do so will be followed by swift and harsh punishment.

"At seven o'clock this evening—August 14th—you will be at the foot of Cleopatra's Needle, on the Embankment. A gentleman will approach you, and you must do precisely as he commands. He will be wearing a tweed suit of a light check pattern, and will wear a Panama hat. In addition, there will be a small strip of plaster on his chin. You cannot fail to recognise him.

"Do not say a word to a soul concerning this matter. You are particularly warned against approaching the police. Such an action on your part will be followed by grave consequences. You cannot fail to have heard of the Circle of Terror, and its relentless methods. Take warning, therefore, and do precisely as you are bidden.

"THE CIRCLE OF TERROR."

Having read the letter through, I looked up.

"May my assistant see this?" I asked quietly.

"Of course—of course!"

I handed the letter over to Nipper, who took it eagerly, and then faced my visitor. He was regarding me gravely and anxiously.

"You have not gone to the police?" I asked.

"No, Mr. Lee. Under the circumstances, I thought it would be very fool-

hardly for me to approach the police," replied Sir Francis. "Some men, perhaps, would have torn this communication up with contempt. But I did not do so. I know only too well that the Circle is terribly powerful."

"That is why I am just a little anxious," I remarked. "It is quite likely, my dear sir, that you were followed to this house. Did you take any precautions?"

"Yes. I drove in my car to a big hotel in Kensington, and left it waiting outside," replied the great physician, with a slight smile. "I realised, you see, that my movements might be under observation. If anybody was shadowing me, however, I think I have shaken him off. For I left the hotel almost immediately by a rear exit, and jumped straight on to a passing motor-omnibus."

I nodded approvingly.

"That was very astute of you, Sir Francis," I smiled. "The chances are that you outwitted any possible shadower. Well, now, we must consider what we must do. What have you decided in your own mind? You don't intend to keep this imperious appointment, do you?"

Sir Francis looked rather helpless.

"Upon my soul, Mr. Lee, I scarcely know how to act," he replied. "And I really cannot understand why these ruffians should have selected me for their decidedly unwelcome attentions."

"They have taken good care that you are left in ignorance on that point," I observed drily. "You simply know that you have to meet an unknown individual at Cleopatra's Needle this evening at seven o'clock. If you fail to comply with that order, I am convinced that serious trouble will follow."

"Trouble?"

"Exactly. Your house may possibly be burnt down," I replied grimly. "Your motor-cars wrecked; a member of your family either injured or killed——"

"Good heavens, Mr. Lee!"

"I am not mincing matters with you, Sir Francis," I said quietly. "The Circle of Terror is aptly named. When their demands are questioned or refused, they immediately adopt a system of terrorism. They have perpetrated many ruthless acts, and there is every reason to believe that they are prepared to per-

petrate as many more. If a man thwarts them, he has to pay."

"You advise me, then, to keep this appointment?"

"If you will wait a few minutes, Sir Francis, I will give you the advice I consider the most suitable," I replied quietly.

I lay back in my chair, and thought deeply. There was nothing particularly startling or novel in this matter. The Circle had merely followed its usual procedure. I did not attempt to guess at Zingrave's reason for forcing Sir Francis Halesford to obey his will. It might be one of many things—robbery, blackmail, forgery—anything.

I was thinking in a different groove altogether. And I could see that here was a peculiarly favourable opportunity for striking a blow at the Circle of Terror. Suddenly I sat forward, and looked at Sir Francis Halesford keenly.

"By James!" I murmured. "It could be done easily—easily!"

Then I raised my voice.

"I want you to do me a favour, Sir Francis," I said crisply. "I want you to allow me to keep this appointment in your place."

"I assure you, Mr. Lee, that it would be no favour on my part!" said Sir Francis, with emphasis. "If you can relieve me of the task, I shall be everlastingly grateful—— But, my dear sir, the thing is impossible. The Circle has ordered me to go, not you."

"Exactly," I agreed. "And the favour I am asking of you is this: I want you to let me impersonate you. Your figure is admirably suited for the purpose; your face, your moustache, your beard—everything. It would be an easy matter for me to make up——"

"Good gracious!" gasped Sir Francis.

"How—how extraordinary!"

"It'll be risky, gov'nor," put in Nipper anxiously.

It set my lips grimly.

"This is scarcely a time to consider risks," I said. "By following such a course, Sir Francis, I may be able to achieve some very marked progress in my battle against the Circle. My idea is to take your place, to do precisely as the Circle man tells me, and to generally keep my eyes open."

"But—but what if you are exposed——"

"I am quite prepared to undertake

the risk," I interrupted quietly. "I have played the same trick before on more than one occasion—sometimes with success, sometimes with failure. It all depends upon circumstances. I merely want your permission and assurance that you will remain within your own doors until you receive word from me. Even if I fail, Sir Francis, no harm will come to you."

"Tut—tut! I wasn't thinking of my own safety," exclaimed my visitor. "I was somewhat appalled by the amazing proposition you have voiced, Mr. Lee. But I will, of course, do precisely as you wish."

"That is very satisfactory," I exclaimed. "Well, then, we will leave the matter for the present. Make a point of being at home at five o'clock, Sir Francis. I will visit you at that time, and we will discuss full details, and I will perform the little transformation in my appearance."

Halesford rose, and there was a look of relief in his eyes.

"I only trust, Mr. Lee, that nothing terrible will result from this affair," he exclaimed gravely. "It is my intention, now, to return to Kensington as I came, and to re-enter the hotel by the rear door. My car is still waiting at the entrance, and it will be thought, by any possible watcher, that I remained in the hotel the whole time."

A few minutes later the great specialist took his departure. I walked back into the consulting-room, and tossed my cigar end into the fireplace. Nipper was looking very grave.

"I don't like it, guv'nor," he announced abruptly.

"Don't you, young 'un?" I said. "That's a pity. Because I like it very much. I am quite keen, in fact."

"You'll be spotted in no time, sir," the lad went on, in concerned tones. "You'll be spotted before you can turn round. And then what's going to happen? Why, you'll be polished off straight away."

"You seem to have a very poor opinion of me, Nipper," I said. "Don't you think I am capable of impersonating Sir Francis—"

Nipper tapped the desk impatiently.

"It's not that, guv'nor," he said. "I know jolly well that you're the cleverest chap at impersonations alive. But just think of the dangers! You don't know

what Sir Francis is wanted for—you don't know anything. You'll be asked a lot of questions you can't possibly answer. And then you'll be twiggged. Oh, it's rotten! And where do I come in?"

"You don't come in—anywhere."

"That's rottener still!" grunted Nipper gloomily.

"I do not think there is any such word in the English language as you just articulated, my lad," I replied easily. "You must really get out of that habit of using such slang. But the more I tell you of it, you young rascal, the worse you become. Hallo! That's the luncheon gong, if I'm not mistaken."

"I don't feel like grub now, guv'nor," growled Nipper.

"Nonsense!"

And I took Nipper's arm and led him into our comfortable little dining-room. Mrs. Jones had prepared a very excellent meal, and Nipper's appetite recovered wonderfully once we had got started. This may have been because I told him that I might possibly find something for him to do in connection with the projected adventure of the evening.

We lunched leisurely, and it was well over an hour later when I strolled into the consulting-room and selected a cigar. Just as I was about to light it the telephone bell rang. I lit my cigar and then sat down.

"Yes?" I called into the transmitter. "Who is that, please?"

"I'm Halesford," came the reply. "Is that you, Mr. Lee?"

"Yes."

"I've got a splendid piece of news for you."

"Indeed?" I said with some surprise.

"Yes. That Circle letter was nothing but a hoax," came Sir Francis's statement over the wires, with an accompanying laugh. "A hoax, Mr. Lee."

"You astound me."

"I am astounded myself. Of course, there is no need for you to pursue the matter, is there?" went on the voice. "I want you to drop the whole thing, Mr. Lee!"

"I will—if it was a hoax."

"Just that and nothing more," replied Sir Francis lightly. "I am more relieved than I can say. And you, of course, will not find it necessary to pursue the course you mapped out to me."

"Of course not," I replied. "I am glad, Sir Francis. Good-bye."

I hung up the receiver, and then turned round in my swivel chair. I found Nipper looking at me very curiously.

"What's that you said about a hoax, guv'nor?" he asked.

"That Circle letter——"

"That was a hoax?" yelled Nipper.

"No, my dear Nipper—it was not!" I replied grimly.

"But—but you said——"

"Sir Francis Halesford just rang me up," I interrupted. "He tells me that the Circle letter was merely a hoax, and that there is no necessity for me to pursue my plans for this evening. But I don't believe it—I am quite convinced that the Circle letter was absolutely genuine."

Nipper stared.

"Then why the dickens should Sir Francis make out that the thing was faked?" he asked blankly.

"I don't know," I replied, reaching for my hat. "But I'm going to find out. There's something queer afoot, my lad. Vaguely, I suspect trickery. Telephones are uncommonly handy instruments for the transmission of false messages. The voice sounded like Halesford's—but I wouldn't swear to it."

"You think a Circle agent was talking, then?"

"I don't think anything," I replied crisply. "But a visit to Sir Francis will set all doubt at rest. Upon the whole, Nipper, I think I shall slip into the backyard and pass through into our neighbour's establishment, and so emerge that way. The Circle is getting busy, and we cannot be too cautious."

Two minutes later I had started. The occupants of the next house often allowed me to pass through their premises when I wished to get into the street without crossing my own doorstep. They had a side-door, which was very convenient.

But, although I kept my eyes well open, I saw no sign of any shadower. And I reached Harley Square without incident. Upon handing in my card I was at once admitted to the great physician's stately mansion.

Having been ushered into a comfortable waiting-room, I was left to myself for only a minute. Then Sir Francis entered with outstretched hand and laughing eyes.

"My dear Mr. Lee, I didn't want to

put you to the trouble of coming round," he cried. "You understood my telephone message, didn't you?"

I concealed my surprise.

"I am anxious to hear details," I replied. "The letter was a hoax, you say? I find it hard to believe that, Sir Francis. I have seen many of the Circle communications, and the one you received was identical in every respect——"

"It was cleverly done," laughed Sir Francis. "But it was a fake, Mr. Lee. A friend of mine played a foolish practical joke. Under ordinary circumstances I should have been highly incensed. But my relief is so great that I am capable of detecting a little humour in the situation."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Then there's nothing more to be done?" I smiled.

"Nothing at all. My friend, you see, met me and saw how greatly affected I was," said the specialist. "He then realised that his joke was not exactly in good taste, and so he told me the whole truth. It had been his intention to meet me at Cleopatra's Needle, and lead me a lively dance. It gives me great delight to tell you this very welcome news. The thing is over."

And, after a few minutes, Sir Francis bowed me out—previously offering me a cheque to compensate me for my loss of time. Naturally I refused. And when I arrived back at Gray's Inn Road I told Nipper what had occurred.

"Well I'm blessed!" said my young assistant. "I'm glad to hear it, anyway, guv'nor. I didn't care very much for the idea of your taking on Sir Francis's unpleasant work. But, it's jolly queer, all the same."

I nodded grimly.

"It's so queer, Nipper, that I am by no means satisfied," I replied. "I cannot quite imagine any friend playing such a foolish joke upon a man like Sir Francis Halesford. It doesn't fit in, my boy. And I detected a certain false gaiety in Sir Francis's manner towards me. He wasn't sincere."

"Then you don't think it was a hoax, after all?"

"I am not quite sure what I think," was my reply. "But I do know, Nipper, that there is more in this business than appears on the surface. And I have decided that you shall undertake a certain task this evening."

"I'm on!" said Nipper promptly. "What's the game?"

"You will don a disguise, and you will watch Halesford's movements during the whole of this evening," I replied slowly. "You will see if he keeps the appointment, and if any other incident occurs. I have an idea that we are on the verge of a fresh tussle with our old friend, Professor Cyrus Zingrave."

And, as it turned out, my prediction was not far wrong!

CHAPTER II.

(Nipper records certain events.)

IN WHICH I DO A LOT—AND YET DO NOTHING AT ALL!

IT was a bit off-side, the guv'nor starting this narrative of events; but it wasn't my place to grumble, and so I'm telling my bit now. I shall tell other bits later on, I expect.

It was the guv'nor's idea to open the yarn himself. You see, he tells his part, and then I tell mine—just as the events occurred. It's a good wheeze really, and I'm keen on it.

Well, my job was to keep an eye on Sir Francis Halesford.

It was jolly funny, to say the least of it. I'd seen the Circle letter, and it didn't look like a hoax to me. How the dickens could it be a hoax?

How could one of Sir Francis's friends fake up a letter to look exactly like one of the Circle warnings? I'd seen plenty of them, and they were all the same—precisely the same style. This one of Sir Francis was no exception.

But, if it wasn't a hoax, why should the doctor-chap have told us—or, rather, the guv'nor—to cease all his efforts? Had Sir Francis decided to keep the appointment, after all?

My task was to make sure of that. And, dressed up like a shabby errand boy, I took up my position in Harley Square, so that I could watch the physician's house with perfect ease—and yet remain hidden myself.

Just handy, round a corner, I had a bicycle—a rough, shabby old thing to look at, but a perfect flyer. Nobody would ever think of pinching it. But yet, really, it was about the finest jigger I'd ever ridden.

I took up my stand just before six

o'clock, so as to make certain of things. By shadowing Sir Francis on a bike I shouldn't cause any comment—and I was quite sure he'd never spot me.

I hadn't been in position ten minutes before the great man's motor-car appeared and stood waiting outside the house. Then Sir Francis came out briskly, stepped into the car, and it moved off.

"Visiting some patient or other," I told myself.

But I thought it would be advisable to follow. Motor-cars don't get up much speed in the London area, and it was as easy as winking to follow on my bike. I didn't have to go far, for the car stopped outside a tremendously swell mansion in a tremendously swell thoroughfare.

Sir Francis was there for about ten minutes; then he went off for another joy-ride of about half a mile. This time he pulled up outside a big house, and was inside for twenty minutes.

I could go on like this for a long while. For, to tell the truth, I found that Sir Francis was merely paying visits to a number of people—patients of his, of course. I knew the names of some of them, too. Lords and baronets and titled ladies, for the most part.

Finally, I became disgusted.

Seven o'clock came and went. At seven o'clock, as a matter of fact, Sir Francis was in the West End mansion of Lord Ferriemore, the great statesman. That didn't look as though Sir Francis was keeping the Circle appointment!

It looked as though the thing was a hoax, after all.

Anyhow, the throat specialist simply visited his patients, and nothing more. As a grand finale, so to speak, his car buzzed off to Richmond, and I had a fine old time, keeping up on my bicycle.

And when Richmond was reached the big car stopped outside a huge house which stood in its own grounds—another lord or duke, for a quid! I was just about tired by then; especially as I was kept hanging about at Richmond for pretty nearly an hour.

When Halesford emerged he got into the car, and drove—home!

It was getting on for eleven now, and I wended my weary way to Gray's Inn Road. I was tired and irritable. I'd been messing about the whole evening, and yet I'd done nothing!

To make matters worse, I found the

guv'nor lolling comfortably in the arm-chair, reading a book and smoking!

He looked round languidly as I entered.

"Hallo, Nipper," he said, yawning. "Got back, then?"

"No, guv'nor," I said sarcastically. "I'm still at Harley Square!"

"You seem irritable, young'un." "Wouldn't you be, if you'd been pottering about for hours?" I growled.

"Wouldn't you feel cross and tired if you'd been riding all over London for nothing? I'm just about fed-up, sir!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"From your remarks, Nipper, I judge that you have been unsuccessful," he observed. "Whenever you meet with failure, you never neglect to reveal the fact by your somewhat bitter opening remarks."

"Failure!" I echoed. "It's worse than failure, sir! I've done nothing at all, and I'm as tired as a dog!"

I sat down wearily.

"Sir Francis didn't go to the Embankment, then?" asked the guv'nor.

"He didn't go anywhere, except to his patients' houses," I replied. "It's just been that and nothing else—following his rotten car about, all over the show, and finally ending up at Richmond. He didn't do anything unusual—and all that business about the Circle of Terror must have been rot. I believe we've been wasting our time, guv'nor. At least, I have."

Nelson Lee looked thoughtful.

"I'm rather disappointed, Nipper," he said.

"And I'm fifty degrees more so!"

"It is certainly a thankless task to follow a man about for hours on a stretch, and finish up without having accomplished anything," said the guv'nor sympathetically. "But you mustn't grumble, Nipper. And I can't quite convince myself that all is right. You will have to watch Sir Francis again."

"Oh, crikey!" I groaned. "Do I get another dose?"

"Yes, to-morrow evening," replied Lee. "And the next evening, and the next, if necessary. You may strike lucky at the finish, young'un. Get off to bed now—you look dead-beat."

I not only looked it, but I was.

And the next evening I went through the whole pantomime again, with slight variations. But Sir Francis finished up,

as before, by visiting the mansion at Richmond. And I noticed that he arrived there at nine o'clock exactly.

This time he only stayed half-an-hour.

I didn't trouble to keep up with the car on the way back; I just ambled home. Nelson Lee was rather disappointed, but he told me to persevere. That was a fine old game! I was doing all the hard work, and he was sympathising!

The next night I met with just the same non-success. Richmond was visited as before, and at just the same time. I was a bit curious to know who this out-lying patient was. Somebody important, of course. A great man like Sir Francis Halesford wouldn't run right over to Richmond every evening unless he had an extra-swell patient to look after.

It was a Sunday, the next day, but I kept watch just the same. I was resigned to it now. I thought of getting my motor-bike on the job, just to make it easier. But a motor-bike would have been conspicuous.

On this Sunday evening, too, it was drizzling. Sir Francis didn't show up until half-past-eight. Then his car came round to the door, and he drove off. The Cedars, Ellismore Gardens, Richmond, was the destination—I knew the blessed address by heart.

I thought it a bit curious, though, that Sir Francis should visit this patient only. He certainly must have been an important person. I thought of a duke, or even a prince.

And, to set my mind at rest, I decided to find out for certain. I allowed the physician to go off home without attempting to follow. I was crouching under some overhanging trees on the other side of the road.

As soon as the big motor-car had driven off I noticed something a bit peculiar. A man came down to the gateway of the Cedars. He looked up and down casually, then went in, and I heard him locking the gate securely. There were high iron railings topping the moderately-high walls, and to get over was impossible.

And the gate had been locked as soon as Halesford had gone!

People don't usually lock their front gates, do they? But the incident wasn't even interesting. There was nothing extraordinary in a man locking himself in his own grounds—it was only peculiar.

I wondered how I should find out the name of the owner. Then I met with a piece of luck; about the first I'd had for days. I had wheeled my machine to the end of the quiet road when I spotted a police-constable. He was standing under a lamp in a little archway, out of the rain.

And I recognised him at once. Two or three months before he had been patrolling in the Gray's Inn Road district; apparently he had been transferred. I jerked my bicycle on to the pavement, and leaned it against the wall.

"Hallo, Reynolds," I said cheerfully. "How does this suit you?"

The constable peered at me closely.

"Who d'you think you are?" he said gruffly. "You're mighty free with my name, young shaver!"

"Why not?" I grinned. "Don't you know me?"

A bright flash of light illuminated my manly features; Robert had uncovered his night lantern. He took a good look, and then laughed.

"Why, it's Master Nipper!" he said.

"None other but the great Nipper himself," I agreed lightly. "Damp and muddy, but O.K. otherwise. I didn't know you'd wandered to this part of the world, Reynolds. Any nice, plump cooks round this quarter?"

P.C. Reynolds grinned.

"You always were a jokey one, sir," he said. "Sorry I called you young shaver just now. I didn't recognise you in that get-up. Anything doin' to-night? I suppose you're out on business?"

"Well, I'm not riding about in this rain for the mere joy of it," I replied. "This meeting, though, has relieved the monotony. And I want to ask you one or two questions."

"What about, sir?"

"About the Cedars, in this road."

"The Cedars?" said Reynolds, rubbing his chin. "That's just along on the other side of the road. Rather a rum place, Master Nipper. The gate's always locked and barred by ten o'clock every night—has been for several weeks past."

"Oh, only several weeks?"

"That's all," replied the constable. "That house has stood empty for nigh on a year, I believe. Then it was taken by a foreigner. He's got queer ideas about things, I dare say. No Englishman would lock himself up as he does."

I was interested.

"Who is he, anyhow?" I asked. "What brand of foreigner?"

"An Italian, I think, sir."

"Don't you know his name?"

"He's a count," said Reynolds. "Half a minute, sir. I've got the name on the tip of my tongue. Talmaggio—No, that's not it. Tamagno—that's right. Count Nicola Tamagno."

"Sounds rather grand," I remarked. "Ever seen him?"

Reynolds shook his head.

"He's an invalid, Master Nipper," he replied. "Suffering with some throat disease, I think. That's what I've heard, leastways. His servants don't seem to talk much. I heard that about the throat disease from the butler of No. 35—next door."

"I expect it's true," I said. "Sir Francis Halesford, the great throat specialist, comes over here every night to visit Count Nicola Tomato—or whatever you said. Tamagno, wasn't it?"

"That's right, sir," grinned the policeman. "How's Mr. Lee? He ain't after this foreigner, is he?"

"Love you, no!" I chuckled. "Fact is, Reynolds, I've found a mare's nest. There's nothing doing. Thanks for the information, though. It's set my mind at rest. The rain's eased a bit now, so I'll skid off."

"Right you are, Master Nipper. Good-night."

"By-by, old son," I said, shoving a leg over the saddle. "Mind you don't take root on that spot. Or perhaps you're waiting for a pie, and a bottle of beer to come over the wall?"

The constable chuckled as I rode off. I reached home in due course, and found Nelson Lee busy in the laboratory. It was rather wicked of him, making experiments on a Sunday evening, but he didn't seem to realise it.

"A frost, gov'nor," I said wearily, as I entered.

And I told him of my adventures.

"So you've done nothing except find out the name of the Richmond patient, eh?" smiled Lee. "Count Nicola Tamagno, and he's suffering from throat disease of some sort. Well, Nipper, there is one obvious conclusion to come to, from all this."

"What's that, sir?"

"Why, that the letter was a hoax, after all, and that you have been wasting

your valuable time," he replied. "That's the obvious conclusion—but it may not be correct. At all events, I don't see how any good purpose can be served by a continuance of your nightly expeditions. We must let the whole matter drop."

"Thank goodness!" I said feelingly.

And it was dropped.

But, exactly ten days later, we heard a startling piece of news, and events moved with terrific rapidity after that.

I'm not going to say what happened, though—the gov'nor's going to tell you that.

CHAPTER III.

(Nelson Lee takes up the thread again.)

A SURPRISING ITEM OF NEWS—I INVESTIGATE—DISASTER OVERTAKES ME!

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR LENNARD, of Scotland Yard, is a very old friend of mine. Therefore we shook hands warmly when we happened to meet in Ludgate Circus one afternoon.

"Hallo, Lee," said the inspector. "I didn't expect to meet you here."

"That's generally when you do meet me," I smiled. "You're looking fat and prosperous, Lennard. Things must be slack at the Yard."

"Don't you believe it!" grinned Lennard. "Busy for the minute? It's thirsty weather, you know."

And he looked straight across at the Punch Tavern, with a contemplative kind of air. I laughed.

"Five minutes, then," I chuckled.

We entered the saloon lounge of the Punch, and ordered drinks. Having received them, we sat down leisurely.

"Heard the latest?" asked my companion, as he lit a cigarette.

"About what?" I asked. "Our magnificent politicians?"

The inspector snorted.

"Give them a rest—they need one!" he said. "No, I mean something in our line. Somebody's disappeared."

"That's nothing unusual," I smiled.

"But this chap's a famous doctor—a West End pot," he replied. "Have you heard anything about it?"

"Nothing,"—I replied, looking at him curiously. "But I can guess who you mean."

"Go ahead, then. If you don't get

the right name in three times you'll have to pay for more drinks and hang the regulations!"

"All right," I agreed. "Guess No. 1—Sir Francis Halesford."

Detective Inspector Lennard stared at me.

"You've won," he said. "Halesford it is. How on earth did you know?"

"I didn't know. But when did he disappear—and how?"

"That's rather uncertain," was Lennard's reply. "But he went out last night, visiting patients, and he hasn't been seen since. I'm not handling the case—Morley's on the job. I don't know much about it. Sir Francis has vanished completely, without leaving a trace. And his motor car's vanished with him. Morley has an idea that he's deliberately slipped away for reasons of his own, but it looks to me like foul play."

I smoked in silence for a few moments.

Sir Francis Halesford had disappeared! All my thoughts went back to that letter, purporting to come from the Circle of Terror. Was the specialist's disappearance a development of that affair?

The facts were sinister, to say the least.

"Foul play, you said?" I exclaimed thoughtfully. "I believe you're right, Lennard. And I think I know who is responsible for his disappearance."

"The dickens you do!" ejaculated Lennard. "I shall have to set Morley on your track! Well, what's your theory, Lee? You don't make a statement like that unless you are pretty sure of yourself."

"I think Sir Francis has been kidnapped by—the Circle of Terror."

"Phew!"

The inspector whistled, and stared at me gravely.

"The Circle of Terror, eh?" he repeated. "It's a poor look out for Halesford if that's the case. But what makes you think so, Lee? This thing isn't altogether new to you, I can see. That guessing competition of ours was a fraud. You knew all the while!"

"No, I didn't," I smiled. "But listen to this, Lennard."

And I told him of the little episode which had occurred ten days back. The inspector listened interestedly.

"A hoax, he said?" was his comment.

"That wasn't a hoax, Lee. That letter really came from the Circle, and there's

a heap behind it all. Something happened to make Halesford change his tone. And yet you say young Nipper followed him about for two or three days, and discovered nothing? H'm! There's a mystery somewhere, that's certain. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet," I replied slowly. "But I'm not going to let it drop."

A few minutes later we left the Punch, and then parted company. Lennard went off on his own business, and I strolled up Fleet Street, thinking hard. It was late afternoon, and dusk was already falling.

I decided, after a little consideration, to visit Harley Square, and get hold of the details. I hadn't been commissioned to look into the case, but that did not deter me. I would investigate on my own initiative. The one point which rather worried me was the total absence of any sign from the Circle of Terror. As Nipper had said, the Circle seemed to be fizzling out.

Yet Halesford's disappearance was undoubtedly connected with the Circle. And I suspected that this quietness on the Circle's part boded ill for somebody or other. Zingrave was a cunning fox, and I felt sure that a big game was in the wind.

To tell the truth, I was uneasy. If I had received warnings, or if attacks had been made upon me, I could have understood better. But the inactivity of the Circle seemed very sinister, to my mind.

When I arrived at Sir Francis's house, I learned that Detective-Inspector Morley had just departed. Morley was a colleague of Lennard's, and a smart man. But he didn't know the Circle of Terror as I knew it.

I sent my card in, and was received by Dr. Howard Mason, a youngish man, with a troubled expression. Dr. Mason was Halesford's assistant, and he seemed pleased to see me.

"I've got an idea that you'll be able to do something, Mr. Lee," he said quietly. "The police are smart enough, but they stick to routine. Do you intend to look into this terrible business?"

"Well, it depends," I replied. "I don't wish to interfere, Dr. Mason. At the same time, I feel bound to make a few inquiries."

"I believe that the Circle of Terror have got Sir Francis!"

"Oh! What makes you think that?"

"Some days ago he received a letter from the Circle—you know all about it, don't you, Mr. Lee?"

"Yes—but Sir Francis told me the thing was a fake."

Dr. Mason shook his head.

"That's what he told me, too," he remarked. "It wasn't a fake, Mr. Lee. For some amazing reason, he told us that yarn, and wouldn't allow me to refer to it again. But he's been a changed man for days past—over since the receipt of that letter, in fact. And now he has vanished. I know, positively, that he did not go away of his own free will."

"When did you see him last?" I inquired.

"Last night, at about seven o'clock."

"He left in his motor-car, I understand?"

"Yes; to visit several patients," said Dr. Mason. "He told me that he would be back at about ten o'clock, and we were then going to make an experiment in the laboratory. I had everything in readiness, but he didn't return. By midnight I concluded that something was wrong, and I telephoned to several people. Lady Halesford was very anxious, too."

"And the result of your telephone inquiries?"

"Was not reassuring, Mr. Lee. I found that he had visited several patients, the last being Lady Cullmore. He had left her ladyship's house at about half-past eight, and should have gone on to Richmond. But he didn't go to Richmond, and he hasn't been seen since. It is extraordinary. The police have been unable to arrive at any satisfactory——"

"One moment, please," I interrupted. "You say he didn't succeed in getting to Richmond? Had he a patient there?"

"Yes. An Italian nobleman—Count Tamagno."

"Was it usual for Sir Francis to visit patients so late in the evening?"

"Not exactly usual, but the count was a special case."

"Very serious?"

"Yes, I believe so. An affection of the throat."

"Can you tell me when Sir Francis first attended Count Tamagno?"

Dr. Mason thought for a moment.

"Quite recently," he replied after a

pause. "Only about ten days ago, Mr. Lee. No, it must be practically a fortnight. Sir Francis visited the count regularly every evening—Sunday included."

I compressed my lips.

Practically a fortnight ago!

To say the least, this item of information was significant. It would be just a fortnight since the receipt of that Circle letter! Sir Francis must have attended Count Tamagno for the first time on the very night Nipper first kept watch—the evening of the day the letter had been delivered. I made certain of this point.

"Nearly a fortnight ago," I said. "That would just coincide with the receipt of that communication purporting to come from the Circle of Terror——"

Dr. Mason nodded.

"Why, of course," he agreed quickly. "That's right, Mr. Lee. Sir Francis visited the count on that very evening."

"For the first time?"

"Yes."

I brought back to my memory Nipper's description of the Cedars, Ellismore Gardens, Richmond. I remembered how the gates were locked and barred after the specialist's departure.

There was something queer about that place.

Was it possible that Count Nicola Tamagno was concerned in this matter? Sir Francis had last been seen at Lady Cullmore's—and he had then been on his way to Richmond!

I turned to Dr. Mason.

"By the way," I said. "Did you ring up the count last night?"

"Oh, yes."

"Who answered the 'phone?"

"I don't know. The count's butler, I believe," replied Dr. Mason. "He told me that Sir Francis had not arrived, and that the count was worried. So, of course, it is obvious that Sir Francis vanished on his way from Lady Cullmore's to Count Tamagno's place."

I nodded—but I had other thoughts.

Suppose the count's butler had been lying? It was quite possible that Halesford had been kidnapped at the Cedars——

But I didn't allow my thoughts to run away with me. I decided upon a course of action at once.

It seemed to me that if I went to Richmond I should stand a good chance of

getting hold of something definite. And so I took my departure from Harley Square after another short conversation with Dr. Mason.

I had thought it rather curious that Dr. Halesford should have told his assistant anything about the Circle of Terror's demand. But Mason, it seemed, had opened the letter, and couldn't help knowing. For he was, in a way, Sir Francis's private secretary.

On my way to Richmond I was thinking keenly. It was almost dark now, for the day had been heavy, and the sky was overcast. But no rain was falling. The air was unpleasantly close.

I thought of Nipper. He didn't know anything about my movements, of course. I had arranged with him, in fact, to go to a theatre during the evening. But, since my chance meeting with Detective-Inspector Lennard I hadn't thought of Nipper.

If I failed to put in an appearance, the youngster wouldn't worry much; and it was possible that I should get back to Gray's Inn Road fairly early. I only meant to make a few inquiries now.

When I reached Ellismore Gardens I found that thoroughfare to be a highly respectable residential quarter. All the houses were big, and the Cedars appeared to be one of the biggest.

It was dark now, and all was black in the grounds of the house. The gate was not locked, as I saw at a glance. I merely wanted to have a closer look at the place, so that I should be able to form a decided opinion. If my suspicions were aroused by that inspection, then I should certainly bring Nipper with me, later on, for a night expedition.

And the simplest way of gaining my end was to enter the gate boldly and walk to the front door. I could ring and then ask if Mr. Brown lived there. Receiving a negative reply I should apologise and depart.

But, during those few minutes, I should be enabled to see much. As I mentioned, I was simply scouting. I had no absolute suspicion against Count Nicola Tamagno; I just had a vague notion that all was not as it should be.

It might have been a sheer coincidence that Sir Francis Halesford's first visit to Tamagno took place on the very same day that the Circle of Terror's message had been delivered. Such coincidences

are far more common than most people believe.

On the other hand, there was possibly a positive connection.

I was wearing no disguise, but that was easily remedied. I merely turned my soft hat down, and altered my facial expression to such an extent that even Nipper would not have recognised me.

This is an effective method when one only wishes to conceal one's identity for a few minutes. I couldn't keep it up for a long period, of course.

But disaster was dogging my footsteps, had I only known it!

I pushed the heavy gate back and entered. The house lay some little way back from the road, and was almost concealed by the trees. The gravel drive was in perfect condition. I noted, as I slowly walked, that two or three windows were illuminated. I must have traversed about half the distance from the gateway to the house when I stood stock still. I seemed to know, instinctively, that I was not alone. I didn't exactly hear any suspicious sounds; but I felt the presence of others quite near me.

Half-turning, I caught the faintest glimpse of two shadowy forms. I had no time for speculation, or anything of that sort. For, even as I turned, something was thrown over my head—a coat, or a big muffler—and pulled violently.

There is no better method of rendering a man harmless than that. That sudden jerk sent me flying backwards. I tripped and fell, unable to cry out, owing to the folds of the muffler.

The next second, as I struggled on the ground, I felt the rough hands of two men on me. They had me down in such a way that struggling was useless, and I gave up the unequal battle.

I was captured.

CHAPTER IV.

(Nelson Lee continues.)

MR. SIMON JESSELL—SOME INFORMATION
—THE DECOY LETTER—THE THREAT!

THIS attack had been quite unexpected.

I had been anticipating no such activity on the Circle's part. For, without a doubt, my captors were agents of the Circle of Terror. But, in a flash, I knew that my suspicions regard-

ing Count Nicola Tamagno were well-founded.

That, at all events, was some slight consolation. It was good to know that I had been on the right track.

But I didn't attempt to delude myself as to the peril of my position.

The Circle of Terror, having got hold of me, would certainly not allow me to get free. If I did get free again—which I doubted—it would be owing to my own efforts, or to outside assistance.

The latter was very improbable. In fact, I couldn't see how any assistance from outside could come to me. I had not communicated my plans to anyone—which was, perhaps, an omission on my part.

The fact remained, however, that I had come to the Cedars, Richmond, unknown to another soul. Nipper, indeed, had not the slightest inkling of my whereabouts. And even Dr. Mason knew nothing.

It is really a most senseless proceeding to struggle against hopeless odds. In this particular case I was completely overwhelmed. The thick muffler was tightly bound round my nose and mouth and eyes; it was difficult to breathe, even. This handicapped me to such an extent that my two assailants had all the advantage.

As a result, my wrists were quickly bound behind my back, and I was jerked to my feet. Then I felt myself hustled forward until, at last, I mounted the front steps and entered the house.

I dimly heard some muttered words as we paused; and then we proceeded onwards again up a flight of broad, carpeted stairs. I tried to memorise the turnings we took, but I found this to be impossible. I was twisted about continuously, until a door closed and the muffler was suddenly removed.

I stood blinking for some seconds in the strong electric light. The apartment, I saw, was comfortably furnished, and was a bedroom. Standing right in front of me, carelessly fingering a half-smoked cigar, was a well-dressed man of about forty years of age. He was clean-shaven, and displayed that indefinable quality which tells of a public school education, and a life of luxury and ease. He was smiling amusedly at me.

"Rather an unexpected denouement, eh?" he remarked lazily.

"Not so unexpected as you seem to

imagine, Mr. Jessell," I replied with equal calmness. "I came to this house because I had a vague suspicion that it was connected with the Circle of Terror. I am rather gratified to discover that my theory was not at fault."

"I don't think you will be gratified by the time we have done with you, my interfering friend," sneered the other. "You have caused us an infernal amount of trouble, and we simply cannot allow you to continue the game."

"That, I presume, is a hidden threat?"

"There's no reason why it should be hidden," said Jessell grimly. "You are in a Circle stronghold here—we may talk freely. Make no mistake, Mr. Lee, you have made a very fatal blunder this time."

There was a short silence. I had recognised my companion as Mr. Simon Jessell—one of Professor Zangrave's chief advisers. Jessell was a member of the "council of three"—a newly elected member, I believed. But his presence in this house told me that a big game of some sort was in the wind.

I looked round the room curiously and interestedly.

"My good Lee, if you are thinking of making any dash for freedom——"

"Not at all," I interrupted. "I am not so foolish as all that. I was just speculating as to whether Sir Francis Halesford is in the house or not. He is, of course, in your hands?"

Jessell nodded.

"Why should I deny it?" he asked. "You obviously came here to spy out the land. You suspected that Sir Francis had been kidnapped—having, of course, been sent on the trail by that incident a fortnight ago. Sir Francis was foolish to approach you with that letter."

"Halesford has been taken away, I presume?"

"Exactly."

"Where to?"

"You can guess at that—you are a clever man, Lee," sneered the other.

"Guesswork is never satisfactory," I replied. "It is far better to obtain the positive facts."

"Even if I told you, the information would be useless to you," he said grimly. "But I am a cautious man—I do not disclose facts which might possibly bring disaster. Accidents sometimes happen. You might, if an earthquake occurred,

escape from this house. But earthquakes are rather uncommon in London."

Jessell spoke banteringly; but I really admired him for his reticence. He meant to make no statement which might possibly recoil upon the Circle.

I looked round the room again. The window was concealed by heavy plush curtains, which effectually screened the light. The fireplace interested me. It had been completely blocked up—and I knew the reason.

There was a curious odour in the apartment, although the cigar smoke partially concealed it. But I knew that the room had been fumigated quite recently. Sulphur had been burnt. Obviously, this had been the sick count's bedroom. The fact that the apartment had been fumigated told me that the Italian nobleman had actually suffered from some throat disease.

"You were referring to Sir Francis," said Jessell, seating himself on the edge of the bed, and eyeing me calmly. "My dear Lee, Halesford was foolish—very foolish. He is safe, but quite out of reach. He made a bad mistake when he took that letter of ours to you, a couple of weeks ago."

"Perhaps it wasn't a—mistake," I said slowly.

"No? You will allow me to think differently, I am sure," said Jessell pleasantly. "It was a mistake of such proportions that you have been drawn into the net in addition. From our point of view that is very satisfactory. But Sir Francis was shadowed on that eventful morning; he imagined that he had given our men the slip when he drove up to a big hotel, and then left by the back door. Pahaw! He was followed to Gray's Inn Road, and we knew that he had shown you our letter. Accordingly, after he had left, a Circle agent approached him, and he was compelled to do our bidding; he was instructed to inform you that the whole affair was a hoax. By a simple system of terrorism, Sir Francis was broken in, and he was forced to obey every order we gave."

"He jibbed at last, I gather?"

"Not exactly; but he showed signs of restlessness," replied Jessell. "And so, much against our will, we were compelled to take him away altogether. We were quite aware of your activities, Lee, and you were followed to this house by two trusted agents of the Circle. I think

you know what happened when you arrived."

I nodded.

"And now?" I asked.

"You will, of course, pay the penalty."

"And that is—death?"

"I don't want to spoil the enjoyment," said Jessell smoothly. "You will learn in good time. For the moment I have another matter to attend to. Your young assistant, Nipper, although only a lad, is a nuisance to us. We hoped that we should trap the pair of you, but Nipper is still free—"

"And will remain free—"

"Oh, no!" said Jessell curtly, rising from the bed and facing me. "He will pay the penalty, too. Where is Nipper at this moment?"

I smiled.

"You can guess at that—you are a clever man, Jessell," I said banteringly.

Simon Jessell scowled for a second; and then he laughed.

"That was neat," he exclaimed. "My own words! But guesswork is never satisfactory—it is better to obtain the positive facts. Your answer suffices in this case, too. Come, Lee, you are in the Circle's power—"

"But Nipper isn't," I interjected quietly.

"He will be before the night's out," said Jessell. "It was foolish of me to question you. Nipper, of course, is at your rooms in Gray's Inn Road. And I want you to write the lad a letter—a decoy letter, to tell the truth."

"So that you may entrap him, too?"

"Precisely."

"You won't make me do that, Jessell," I said quietly.

"Won't I?" Jessell produced a small revolver. "You're a sensible man, Lee, and you know that any refusal on your part will be followed by drastic consequences. In addition, you are only required to write this letter because it simplifies matters. Nipper will be captured in any case—be sure of that. I put it to you plainly: either write the letter I indicate or—"

"I will write," I interjected sullenly.

"Ah! That's better," smiled Jessell.

"You are sensible, after all."

But I had only consented because I was desperately anxious to save Nipper from the Circle's hands. It was barely possible that I should succeed. My own

fate was fairly certain; but Nipper—Well, there was a chance for Nipper.

If I refused to comply with Jessell's demand I should only hurry my own end. And Nipper would be trapped sooner or later. But, by writing the decoy letter I might be able to give him a hidden warning—although it would be utterly impossible to acquaint him with the facts of my own predicament. I had no thoughts for myself now.

Simon Jessell, still keeping his eye on me, moved across the room to a small mahogany bureau which stood against the wall. He pulled the flap down, and then took a sheet of notepaper and an envelope from one of the pigeon-holes.

These he laid on the desk-flap, and pulled forward a pen and an ink-pot.

"Now, my dear Lee, I'm ready," he said briskly. "One moment, though."

He came to my side, pushed my coat up, and removed the revolver from my hip-pocket. He stowed it into his own.

"We sha'n't need that," he remarked.

Then he touched a bell, and another man entered the room. My hands were to be loosened, and Jessell was taking precautions. I almost smiled. I should never have made an attempt to break away. What would have been the use? The house was probably alive with Circle men.

"This chair, Lee," said Jessell pleasantly.

I sat down at the desk-bureau, and my wrists were freed.

"Now, write as I dictate," went on Jessell, allowing me to see his revolver a little more clearly. "Don't try any tricks, or—"

"Don't waste time," I interrupted. "I'm not a fool."

He smiled, and nodded.

"Right you are," he said. "Go ahead: 'My dear Nipper, the very instant you get this note come straight to me at No. 253, Hanson Walk, Camberwell—'"

I stopped writing.

"What's the idea of this?" I asked grimly.

"Of which?"

"Sending Nipper to Camberwell?"

"Well, it is possible that Nipper will leave this note lying about," replied Jessell easily. "We don't want to give this address. The Camberwell place is of no importance. And Nipper will be attended to there quite effectively."

There will be men specially detailed to look after Nipper as soon as he falls into the trap."

I nodded, and I realised that the situation was very acute. This ruse of Jessell's was undoubtedly smart; but I was determined to hoodwink him if I possibly could. To write any private message on the notepaper, however, was impossible.

The Circle of Terror meant to finish off both Nipper and myself at one blow. Well, they'd probably be successful as far as I was concerned. But Nipper—I wasn't quite so certain of that issue.

I turned, and dipped my pen in the inkwell.

"Go on," I said shortly.

And the letter, when completed, ran as follows:

"My Dear Nipper,—The very instant you get this note come straight to me at No. 253, Hanson Walk, Camberwell. I need you badly. Have got on the track of Sir F. If this note is delivered while you are out, come to me the instant you have read it. Haste.

"NELSON LEE."

Jessell took the letter the very instant I had signed my name; he guessed that I might be tempted to add some private mark or other. He nodded as he read it, and then smiled.

"I half suspected that you would attempt trickery—that you would disguise your handwriting in some way, so that Nipper's suspicions would be aroused," he said. "I know your fist well, though, Lee. It is lucky for you that you refrained from any dodge."

"I know the man I'm dealing with," I said quietly.

"Well, do the envelope."

I wrote it quickly, as though I had been in a hurry at the time of writing. Jessell, of course, instructed me to do this, and I put the words "By hand" at the left-hand top corner.

"That's good enough," said my captor easily. "I fancy Master Nipper will catch this bait quite eagerly. The pair of you in one night—eh? Not so bad, is it? You're beaten at last, Lee."

Jessell quickly tied my hands again; then he sealed the letter up, and turned to the other man who was in the room.

"You'd better get off as soon as possible," he said, handing the fellow the letter. "Go on your motor-cycle, Ellis, and simply drop the letter into the box

and give a double knock. Then come straight back."

Ellis departed without a word, and Simon Jessell rubbed his hands genially as the door closed.

"We're not quite ready for you yet, Lee," he remarked. "But you'll receive attention before so very long. If you have any special message to leave for anybody—if you desire to make a will, for instance—you had better seize your chance now."

"I'm not dead yet," I said, with quiet grimness.

"To all intents and purposes you are dead, even now," sneered Jessell. "I won't go into details, but as soon as things are fixed up you will leave this world in a rather novel fashion. Perfectly simple, you know, but unusual."

"You make me quite curious," I said calmly.

But I knew very well that there would be little or no chance for me. I was to die in a novel fashion, it seemed. What diabolical contrivance had Zingrave's tools prepared for my reception?

I could only wonder.

CHAPTER V.

(Nipper takes up the story once more.)

I RECEIVE AN URGENT SUMMONS—THE PINK BORDER—I HIT THE SCENT!

I WAS worried.

That's only putting it mildly, because I was really filled with an alarm which I wouldn't fully admit. It was quite late in the evening, and I hadn't seen the gov'nor since the early afternoon.

He'd gone out—over to New Bridge, I think—on some business or other, and had promised to be back in less than an hour.

Well, Nelson Lee hadn't turned up, and now it was getting on for ten o'clock. Of course, the gov'nor often stays out for days on end without letting me know a word. That's one of his little ways.

But this time I had a sort of idea that something was wrong. The Circle of Terror was jolly keen on nabbing Nelson Lee, and the thought which worried me was that he had been collared.

Still, it wasn't any good moping, and so I was just squatting in one of the big

easy chairs, reading. In all probability, Nelson Lee would turn up before long with a very simple explanation for his absence. All the same, I felt pretty rotten, and I couldn't read a word.

Traffic was still going fairly strong in Gray's Inn Road—trams and 'buses, etc.—and the night was fine and close. For some time I had been leaning out of the window, squinting down on the heads of the passers-by. Incidentally, I dropped a few apple cores, and one or two of them had dropped on sundry hats—accidentally, of course.

But I soon got fed up with that—chiefly because, I'll admit, my stock of apples ran out. The entertainment was over, and so I withdrew. And since then I had been trying to read a novel. Work didn't appeal to me.

At last I got up with the intention of going into the laboratory. I couldn't help worrying, and I wanted to do something to occupy my thoughts. It wasn't any good making any inquiries anywhere, because I didn't know where to inquire. Besides, the gov'nor would probably return before long, and then I should have looked a fine ass.

Just as I got up I heard a loud double knock on the door below. So I paused before leaving the consulting-room. It was too late for the postman, of course, so it was probably a telegram. And telegrams are as common as flies in Gray's Inn Road.

The gov'nor had wires at all times of the day and night, and so I wasn't particularly interested. But it might be a telegram from Nelson Lee himself.

I heard Mrs. Jones puffing up the stairs, and I went to the door and opened it. She had just reached the top.

"It's a letter, Master Nipper," she said breathlessly. "The man who brought it said he couldn't wait a second, as he was in a hurry—and he said that you'd understand."

"That I should?" I asked.

"Yes, he mentioned your name, Master Nipper."

I took the letter, and glanced at it.

"Why, it's from the gov'nor! Right—ho, Mrs. Jones, I'll attend to this."

The housekeeper departed, and I returned into the consulting-room and tore the envelope open. The letter inside was from the gov'nor himself, and was quite short. He merely told me to join

him at once at No. 253, Hanson Walk, Camberwell.

All my anxiety was brushed away.

"Something doing!" I chuckled, as I buzzed across the room and pulled my boots on. "Camberwell, eh? I wonder what the wheeze can be. On the track of Sir F., the gov'nor says. Ye gods! I wonder if he means Sir Francis Halesford?"

At that time I didn't know that the famous throat specialist had been collared by the Circle, and the gov'nor, of course, had got his information from a Scotland Yard official.

As soon as I'd got my boots laced, I picked up the note again, and re-read it, in order to get the address clear. Evidently something big was in the wind. There was work for me—and I was eager for it.

"I'll get a taxi!" I decided. "That'll be quicker than a 'bus—Hallo! What's this?"

I frowned at the letter in a rather puzzled fashion. I just saw that there was a curious flourish beneath Nelson Lee's signature. It was just like the flourish one sees beneath five signatures out of every ten.

But the gov'nor always drew a straight line!

In my first excitement, I hadn't noticed it at all, but now it seemed to stare up at me. It wasn't right—it wasn't the gov'nor's style at all. But I knew, positively, that he had written the letter. There was no doubt about that.

"Great Scott!" I ejaculated suddenly.

I believe I jumped a foot into the air. I remembered, in a flash, that Nelson Lee had once made an arrangement with me—more in joke than anything else. He'd told me that if ever he was away, and I got a letter from him with that flourish under his signature, it would mean that the letter was a decoy one, and that he was in danger!

Was it possible that this note was a trick?

That arrangement of ours wasn't such a wild wheeze, after all. Decoy letters are very often used by criminals if they want to get hold of somebody. For a minute or two I couldn't quite believe it, and I stared at the letter with my heart thumping nineteen to the dozen.

"It's queer!" I told myself keenly.

"It's thundering queer! Now I come to think of it, why didn't the chap who



NIPPER ON THE WATCH!—(See page 7.)

brought the letter come up to me? He skipped off directly he'd delivered it into Mrs. Jones's hand."

I hadn't thought it funny at the time, but I did now. And I became more and more convinced that some trickery was afoot. The guv'nor had been collared by somebody, and had been forced to write this note! He hadn't been able to write anything private, and so he had given that warning of the flourish.

But who'd got hold of him?

The Circle of Terror, of course! Who else? And now they were doing their utmost to get hold of me! The whole thing came to me in a flash, and I was suddenly filled with tremendous alarm.

Nelson Lee was in the hands of the Circle, and the Circle had made plans for my reception, too. I felt positively sure of this after a minute's thought. In fact, their cunning little trick hadn't worked.

And I'm not going to take any credit on myself for that. It was the guv'nor who had spoilt the game. If it hadn't been for the flourish, I should have tripped up as easily as winking. Nelson Lee had realised, of course, that I should take warning as soon as I saw the signature.

But what could I do?

Go to Camberwell—and get trapped as well? That didn't strike me as being a very hopeful idea. No, the best thing would be to hurry down to Scotland Yard and get help. Then we could buzz off to Camberwell—

My thoughts came to an abrupt stop. Camberwell!

Was it likely that the guv'nor was at Camberwell? Of course it wasn't! It was the most unlikely thing in the world, when I came to consider it. The Circle had, no doubt, prepared this trap cleverly. And they would have prepared for contingencies. Supposing I tumbled to the wheeze, and took police along with me? They wouldn't want their place raided, and Nelson Lee set at liberty, would they?

If I took police with me to Camberwell we should probably find nothing—we should simply waste our time. The Camberwell address was merely a blind. As soon as I got into Hanson Walk I should be set upon and captured. As likely as not, there wasn't any such number as 253 at all.

So I readjusted my views.

Nelson Lee had been captured by the Circle of Terror, and was almost certainly miles and miles from Camberwell. And I didn't know where he was! There wasn't the slightest clue to give me that information. And I nearly felt faint as I realised the awful position.

For about two minutes I stood quite still.

I felt quite stunned. My very worst fears were realised. The satisfaction I had felt, upon reading the note for the first time, now gave place to almost blank despair.

What could I do—what could I do?

The hopelessness of the whole situation was appalling. Perhaps the guv'nor had been murdered already! And, even if he hadn't, there wasn't the slightest chance of my getting to him.

I hadn't seen him since the early afternoon; I knew nothing of his movements that evening. He might be in Blackheath, or Ealing, or Streatham, or Hammersmith, or Wapping—anywhere!

One thing I was certain of—and that was that the guv'nor was not at Camberwell. My own common sense told me that the Circle wouldn't have made a blunder of that sort.

I tried to think of any possible clue. I looked at the decoy letter again. Nelson Lee had undoubtedly written the note from the dictation of his captors. The mention of Sir F. was significant.

Had Sir Francis Halesford disappeared? If so, the Circle had got him. And Nelson Lee had been copped while investigating. I simply had to do something, and so I turned to the telephone directory, and hastily looked up the throat specialist's 'phone number.

Then I rang up. A man's voice answered almost at once.

"Hallo! Is that Sir Francis Halesford?" I asked huskily.

"No. My name is Mason—Dr. Mason," came the reply. "Who is that?"

"I'm Nipper—"

"Oh, Mr. Lee's assistant?"

"Yes. I haven't seen Mr. Lee since this afternoon, sir," I said. "I've heard something about Sir Francis. Has anything happened to him? You are Sir Francis's colleague, aren't you?"

"That's right. Sir Francis disappeared yesterday—"

"By gum!" I breathed. "He did, eh?"

"The news has not been made public yet," came Dr. Mason's voice. "Mr. Lee knows all about it. He was here this evening——"

"The gov'nor was there?" I yelled excitedly.

"Yes. He made a few inquiries," said Dr. Mason. "He is interested in this case. Don't you know anything about it?"

"Not much," I replied. "But I believe Sir Francis was kidnapped by the Circle of Terror."

"That's what Mr. Lee believes."

"The gov'nor's busy on the case, then?" I asked, with fast-beating heart.

"Not that I know of, Nipper," replied the other. "He was interested, but he left me many hours ago, after questioning me rather closely."

"Do you know where Mr. Lee went when he left you?"

"No," came the disappointing reply.

"You haven't the faintest idea?"

"Not the faintest."

"Didn't he give you a hint, even?"

"My dear lad, I have said he didn't," came Mr. Mason's mild protest. "Is anything the matter?"

"Mr. Lee's been captured by the Circle—that's all!" I said heavily. "I'm trying to get on the track. I don't believe I can. What you've told me is helpful, but I don't believe I'll be able to do anything. How did Sir Francis disappear?"

"He was on his way to Richmond last night——"

"To Count Tamagno's?"

"Yes. But what you tell me of Mr. Lee is very grave," said the voice over the wires. "He has disappeared, too? Upon my soul, how terrible! I wish to Heaven I could do something, Nipper. But your master left me in total ignorance of his plans. I know nothing."

"Well, thanks very much, Dr. Mason," I said. "I'll try something else. I've got to get on the trail somehow."

And I wished him good-bye, and hung up the receiver. What had I discovered? Nothing that was worth a fig. Sir Francis had vanished—I practically knew that before. Nelson Lee had been busy on the case—I'd guessed that. The Circle of Terror was responsible for both abductions—and I knew that, too.

Dr. Mason had only made my suspicions certainties.

But I wasn't a fraction of an inch nearer a solution. Nelson Lee might have been at the North Pole for all the help I could render him. Rushing to Scotland Yard wouldn't be an atom of good. By the morning, for certain, the gov'nor would be dead. I knew the Circle of Terror!

I've never felt so horribly helpless in my life as I felt then. Once again I picked up the decoy letter. I did so mechanically, and looked at it, while my thoughts were far away.

Then, quite suddenly, I found myself staring intently at the sheet of note paper. Something which I had seen before, but hadn't been impressed by now seemed to strike a chord of memory in my brain.

The notepaper was a sheet of excellent quality cream vellum—quite commonplace stuff, but first-class. And all round the edge was a curious pink effect. This hadn't escaped my attention, but I certainly hadn't examined it closely.

I did so now, however.

Right round the edge of the vellum paper was a border of pink, shading off unevenly into the cream of the vellum itself. It was a queer phenomenon. The envelope, I saw, was just the same.

What did that pink border mean?

Oh, it was nothing, of course. How in Heaven's name could that help me? I gave an impatient exclamation, and flung the paper and envelope on to the table. Yet I continued to stare at them.

The paper hadn't faded—I knew that. Yet cream vellum notepaper isn't usually pink at the edges. What made me think deeply was the recollection of an experiment Nelson Lee had once made, years before.

I couldn't remember what the experiment was, but I vaguely recalled that something of this nature had happened to some paper the gov'nor was testing. Anyhow, that pink border might turn out to be a clue.

I was pretty desperate, and I clutched at a straw. This seemed to be a straw, in all conscience! But, for want of something better to do, I decided to seek advice on the matter.

The whole thing seemed hopeless to me, and I was in a fearful state of mind. But activity was better than inaction—with its accompanying distracting thoughts. It was something to do.

And the only man I knew who could explain the cause of that queer pink effect was an old chemist in Holborn. His name was Burnside, and he knew the guv'nor and me as well.

Almost before I knew it, I was running down Gray's Inn Road. I didn't even think of possible Circle spies at the time, and I never knew whether anybody was on the watch. If so, nothing happened.

Mr. Burnside's establishment was a swell place, and it was situated a little way up Holborn. When I arrived I found the place closed, of course. But I rang the private bell, and the door was soon opened by a maidservant.

"Is Mr. Burnside at home?" I asked.

"Yes," said the girl. "But it's too late for business——"

"That's all right—tell him Nipper wants to see him," I interrupted.

The girl left me in the hall, and in less than a minute Mr. Burnside himself appeared, wiping his mouth with a serviette. Evidently I had disturbed him at supper. Various snatches of conversation from a half-opened door came to me. The whole household was at supper, it seemed.

"Well, Nipper, what is it?" said the chemist. "A toothache mixture——"

"No, sir," I said quickly. "Sorry if I've disturbed you. I'm in terrific trouble, and I want you to look at this piece of paper. Mr. Lee's been collared by some of our enemies, and I'm trying to get on the scent."

"Dear me!" said Mr. Burnside. "Come in here, my boy."

We passed in to a little sitting-room, and the chemist switched the light full on. Then he looked at me gravely.

"Mr. Lee has been captured——" he began.

"I can't stop to tell you everything now, Mr. Burnside," I interrupted. "I can't, really. I want you to look at this sheet of notepaper. The pink effect all round the edges. Do you know what it's caused by? It might be a clue."

He took the sheet of paper, and examined it closely under the light. Then he took a magnifying lens from his pocket, and examined it again. I looked on in a fever of impatience.

What an ass I'd been to disturb Mr. Burnside! How could he help——

"Yes, I think I know the meaning of this curious effect," said the chemist, slowly and thoughtfully. "I have seen something of the kind before. It is unusual, but by no means remarkable. The pinkness of the edge might have been caused in two or three different ways."

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"This vellum is of splendid quality—it is made of esparto grass," he replied—"at least, I believe so. And aniline sulphate would turn the edges pink—aniline sulphate solution——"

"Oh, lor', that's no good!" I growled.

"Or sulphur fumes would have a similar effect, I believe," went on Mr. Burnside. "I have heard of a case where some notepaper was affected in this way, after being left in a room that had been fumigated by the burning of sulphur."

"That's no help, either," I groaned.

"The room had been occupied by a sufferer from smallpox, I remember," said the chemist. "The paper, after the fumigation, was found to possess pink edges—just like this."

I found myself staring at Mr. Burnside fixedly.

Then I began to tremble with excitement and hope. That pink effect had been caused by fumigation! And fumigation meant some sort of infectious disease! I think my brain must have been very acute just then.

For, instantly, I thought of Count Nicola Tamagno.

Both the guv'nor and I had had vague suspicions concerning the house at Richmond. Sir Francis Halesford had been kidnapped on his way to Richmond! And Count Tamagno had suffered from throat disease!

One of the rooms at the Cedars had been fumigated—and this notepaper had been in the room. Nelson Lee had written the letter, and so it was obvious that he was at the spot where the fumigation had taken place. That was almost certain.

The thought which throbbed in my brain was this: Nelson Lee was at Richmond, a prisoner in the Cedars!

Count Tamagno was somehow or other connected with the Circle of Terror—and the guv'nor had been trapped. What was more likely? Lee had probably gone to Richmond after leaving Dr. Mason.

I gave a sudden yell. A penny to a pound I had hit on the truth!

"He's at Richmond!" I gasped.

"Eh? What's that, Nipper?" asked Mr. Burnside, in astonishment.

"I've got it!" I shouted. "A fumigated room! Gee whillikins! I'm off!"

I snatched up my cap, grabbed the note from the chemist's hand, and made for the door. He looked at me in amazement.

"Good gracious!" he cried. "Have you gone mad, boy?"

"Can't stop, sir!" I gasped. "Thanks awfully for telling me this—I'll go into the whole yarn later on!"

"But—but——"

I didn't hear any more, for I was dashing along the hall, leaving the astounded chemist staring after me. I reached the street, and found a taxi just passing. I didn't wait to hail it.

I rushed into the road, and jumped on to the vehicle as it was going.

"Scotland Yard!" I yelled. "As fast as you can drive!"

"Look 'ere, young shaver——"

I cut the driver short by shoving a ten-shilling currency note into his palm. Then I scrambled into the cab, and we were soon howling along smartly. The cabby didn't wish to argue further.

At Scotland Yard I met with a piece of luck. Just as I was passing under the wrought-iron arch, with the intention of making for the little back door which leads to the Criminal Investigation Department, I ran into Detective-Inspector Lennard. The very man I wanted to see!

"By gum! I'm glad I've found you!" I gasped.

"Hallo! It's Nipper," said Lennard.

"What's the trouble, young 'un?"

"Mr. Lee's been collared—by the Circle," I said rapidly. "I've hit the trail, and I want help, Mr. Lennard—I want help badly!"

Detective-Inspector Lennard whistled.

"Mr. Lee in the hands of the Circle!" he ejaculated. "You'll get that help all right, Nipper. Now, then, out with the yarn."

Exactly five minutes later I had panted out the main facts, and Detective-Inspector Lennard was making things hum.

But things were to hum to a much livelier tune before the night was out!

CHAPTER VI.

(Nelson Lee relates what happened at "The Cedars.")

MONTAGUE TODD'S INFORMATION—THE CIRCLE'S WAY—A DIABOLICAL SCHEME.

SIMON JESSELL turned as the door of the bedroom opened.

A man entered, and I looked at the newcomer uninterestedly. My own position was grave, and my thoughts were bitter.

These Circle devils meant to kill me—I knew that.

"Well, Todd, what is it?" asked Jessell sharply.

Todd! I looked at the newcomer closely, and then I recognised him. He was Montague Todd, a trusted member of the Circle. Yet Montague Todd was, in reality, an ally of mine—and a secret enemy of the Circle.

Some months before, Nipper had saved Todd from certain death, and the man, although a member of the all-powerful Circle, had expressed everlasting gratitude. On more than one occasion, too, he had proved his sincerity.

Montague Todd's position in the Circle was a fairly responsible one, and he was able to give me many items of information. More than one of Zingrave's precious schemes had been wrecked by Todd's treachery.

For, of course, the man was a traitor—but he was working in the cause of justice. Usually, I detest an informer, but Todd's position was very different. He was a decent man at heart, and was risking his own life by working against the interests of the Circle.

Jessell was his superior, and it was apparent that Todd had brought news of some sort. The two men stood talking in low tones for a few minutes against the door. I was sitting on the edge of the bed.

"All right, Todd, I'll go down," Jessell said at last. "You must remain here with the prisoner. Wait a moment, though—we'll fix him up thoroughly at once. It will save time later, anyhow."

"This'll be a good night's work, sir," said Todd venomously.

He looked over at me with a sneering glare of exultation. It was well done, and Jessell was deceived. I wasn't. Todd had used that expression solely for Jessell's benefit.

From his pocket Jessell produced a ball

of thin cord. It was of the very finest quality, and amazingly strong.

"Now, Mr. Lee, if you'll oblige us," said my captor genially. "I'm going to leave you for a little while, and this man will keep you company. But it is advisable to make things quite secure."

I was taken to the foot of the high bedstead. It was of the usual type—iron and brass. And it formed an ideal rack. With my back towards it, my arms were outstretched, and my wrists bound securely to the cross-bars. Then several lengths of the cord were passed round my middle. My knees and ankles were similarly treated. Thus, although I was standing up, I was utterly helpless. I was bound to the foot of the bed, and I couldn't move a finger.

"That'll do," panted Jessell. "Don't move from this room until I return, Todd. I sha'n't be long."

"Very good, sir," said Todd respectfully.

Simon Jessell passed out, and the door closed. Montague Todd stood by the door, lighting a cigarette. He was listening, too. Finally, he bent down and applied his ear to the keyhole.

Then, after a few moments, he came over towards me.

"You're in a pretty fix, Mr. Nelson Lee!" he sneered, raising his voice. "This'll be the finish—for you!"

But his expression was now one of anxiety. He bent forward his face, so that his face came near to mine.

"This is terrible, sir," he whispered. "I don't think I'll be able to do anything for you. The house is full of Circle men. Jessell won't be long. I can't set you free——"

"No, Todd, it's rather hopeless, I believe," I murmured.

"If I cut your cords, you'd only be collared outside," Todd went on. "And I should be polished off, too. Afraid there's nothing to be done. It's rotten. How did you manage to get into this hole, sir?"

"My own carelessness, Todd," I said bitterly.

"I can't quite believe that, sir."

"It is the truth, nevertheless," I replied. "Do you know what Jessell's intentions are? How does he propose to kill me?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Todd anxiously. "By gum! I wish I could do something to put a stop——"

"Don't jeopardise your own safety for my sake, Todd," I said quietly.

"I'm helpless, sir—helpless!"

Todd looked over at the door, but all was quiet.

"Maybe you thought that the Circle was dying down, sir?" he went on, in a soft voice. "Perhaps that's why you were—careless, as you put it. The Circle's as strong as ever, and the High Lord's got several big schemes in the wind."

"Sir Francis Halesford, I presume, is connected with one of these schemes?"

"Oh, no, not in the least," replied Todd. "Sir Francis will be released before long. The fact is, Mr. Lee, the whole business of the Circle has been disorganised recently. The High Lord's been very ill."

"The High Lord, eh?" I said, in surprise. "By James! Then Count Nicola Tamagno is the High Lord?"

"That's right, sir."

"And he's been ill?"

"He was so bad that we thought he'd peg out completely," said Todd. "By gosh! I wish he had! He's worse than the Kaiser! The Kaiser's a gentleman compared to the Chief of the Circle of Terror!"

I was learning a few things, at all events. So it was Zingrave himself who had been ill—and, in consequence, the Circle had been inactive. It was like a huge motor deprived of its driving power. That driving power was Zingrave's astute brain, and the motor was the Circle of Terror.

With Zingrave well again, however, the great organisation would renew its scoundrelly efforts with fresh energy.

"The High Lord's throat was affected, I understand," I said.

"Diphtheria!" murmured Todd.

"By Jove, a bad complaint!" I said. "That accounts for the fumigation of this room, and for the plot against Halesford."

"Of course, sir. The Chief had a terribly severe attack—that was while he was taking up his quarters here in the character of Count Tamagno," explained Todd. "You see, sir, the High Lord came here after you had routed him out of his place down in Surrey."

"Then, before he could get busy, he developed diphtheria?"

"That's it, Mr. Lee," said Todd softly. "Of course, he couldn't—or wouldn't—"

inform the proper authorities. In all cases of infectious diseases you are supposed to notify the authorities, aren't you? Well, the Chief didn't care for that idea, and so he planned for Sir Francis Halesford to attend him—and Sir Francis is about the cleverest throat physician in London. The High Lord couldn't have the doctor come in the usual way."

"Naturally not," I agreed. "Sir Francis would very soon have given information in the right quarter, and then the patient would have been removed. Diphtheria is a bad complaint, Todd. Sir Francis was, as I know, compelled to come."

"He attended the Chief every evening—and had been terrorised into keeping silence," replied my companion. "At last, however, he showed signs of rebelling, and so he was taken prisoner without further delay."

"He's not in this house now?"

"Oh, no. You see, Mr. Lee, the Chief and Jessell thought it quite possible that Sir Francis had blabbed—or that he had, at least, made some suggestive remarks which would ultimately lead to a police inquiry. The Chief didn't know, but he thought it advisable to clear off into the country."

"Was he fit to be removed, then?"

"Yes. The worst's over, now, and the High Lord's mending rapidly," replied Todd. "I wish he'd died! He only left here yesterday, and Sir Francis was taken with him. It was thought to be the best way."

"I am not surprised to hear that," I said drily. "If the police had raided this house with your excellent Chief in the throes of diphtheria, he would have been trapped quite hopelessly. Where has he skipped to this time?"

Todd looked round cautiously.

"Kent, sir," he replied. "The Drive Farm, three miles beyond Littlestone, in Kent. He reckons he's safe there for any amount of time—and so he is. I daren't say a word—I should be executed in less than an hour if I was suspected of treachery. That's the Circle's way. I'd give my right hand to be able to save you, but I don't think it's possible."

The man's distress was genuine, and I knew, too, that he was speaking the truth. How, indeed, could he possibly help me? If he cut my bonds, we might,

perhaps, make a dash for freedom, but our chances of getting out were so remote that the game would not be worth the candle. And I couldn't expect Todd to sign his own death warrant in that way.

"I'll do my best to delay——"

Montague Todd ceased speaking, and backed across the room with noiseless footsteps. He leaned against the mantelpiece, and lit a fresh cigarette.

"Oh, you're going to die all right!" he exclaimed jeeringly.

I understood. For, at that moment, I heard footsteps outside. The next second the door opened, and Simon Jessell appeared. He was carrying with him a small handbag.

"You'd better get off now, Todd," he exclaimed crisply. "Dalton is waiting for you in the hall, and he's got your orders. You're to go straight over to Hampstead at once—on a special job."

"Right, sir," said Todd readily.

But, as he turned, he managed to give me one look. It was a look of infinite regret. For Todd knew, in that second, that all idea of assisting me was gone. He had to leave the house with another man at once!

The door closed behind him, and I found myself faced by the smiling Mr. Jessell. But there was a hard, steely glitter in his eyes, which made the smile almost repulsive.

"The last act is just about to commence, my dear Lee," he said grimly. "By this time, I have no doubt, Nipper is safely in our hands. I'm sorry I can't give you exact information on that point. We haven't yet received word from Camberwell—but it will certainly come in due course."

Jessell lit a cigar, and then came right close up to me.

"Look here, Lee," he said quietly. "You understand this position, don't you?"

"I understand that I am about to be murdered."

"Punished is the correct word—punished for your intolerable habit of interfering with the Circle's concerns," said Jessell. "I have been in consultation with my colleagues, and we have come to a decision. We are, in fact, disposed to give you a chance."

"That is very generous of you," I said grimly.

"You are pleased to be bitter," smiled

Jessell. "However, you spoke the truth. We are generous. And, although we have many old scores to settle up, the Circle will allow you to go free—under certain conditions. We don't like killing people—that's the simple truth. If an object can be achieved without any killing, then we refrain from violence. But, as you know, the Circle is absolutely ruthless when it is thwarted."

"Well, what's the idea of all this?"

Jessell puffed out some smoke meditatively.

"Although you are the Circle's most bitter enemy, Lee, we know that you are a man of strict integrity," he went on. "Your word is your bond. Oh, I'm not flattering you—that's just the truth. And, if you will take a solemn oath to the effect that you will refrain from interfering with the Circle of Terror again, you will be set at liberty. But you must leave England, and go to the United States or elsewhere. You must give up your detective work for good and all. Your sworn word will be sufficient."

"We are wasting time, Mr. Jessell," I interrupted quietly. "I don't acknowledge defeat in that way. You can get on with your dirty work just as soon as you like. I don't bargain with my enemies."

Jessell's smile vanished.

"You refuse the Circle's offer?" he asked, in surprise.

"I do."

"It will mean death to you——"

"Perhaps—we don't know yet," I replied grimly.

Simon Jessell turned without another word, and fetched the leather bag from a chair. I watched him, with a smile on my lips. I positively believed that I should die within the next minute, for I had an idea that a poison needle was to be plunged into my flesh—or some such device as that. But I didn't flinch. I preferred death to the terms Jessell had offered.

But my poison needle theory was quite wrong.

"Do you know what has happened in this room?" asked my captor.

"I don't quite understand your meaning."

"You may have noticed some peculiar smell——"

"Oh, you are referring to the fumigation?" I interrupted. "Sulphur has been burned here, I imagine."

"Exactly. The window has been tightly sealed, and the fireplace is in a similar state," replied Jessell. "As for the door, that can soon be attended to. In other words, Lee, we consider that a second fumigation will not be a bad policy. There may be a few germs left alive. One large specimen, in particular, needs to be dealt with."

"To be quite frank, you are going to choke me to death by means of sulphur fumes?" I asked, concealing my horror.

"We are going to fumigate the room—that is all," replied Jessell. "Your presence here is really an unfortunate mischance. You will be unable to escape, and sulphur fumes are very deadly, I believe."

With that, Jessell commenced making preparations. I was to be choked to death by sulphur dioxide gas—produced by the burning of sulphur in the room! It would certainly be an appalling death, and I readily understood why it had been chosen for me.

It obviated all necessity of actual violence—it was certain—and the condition of the bedroom was just suitable for the process—the apartment having been fumigated only the day before.

Jessell was working behind me, just beside the bed, and so I could not see what he was doing. I heard a match being struck, then there was a longish pause. But, quite suddenly, Jessell moved across the room to the door.

"I'm sorry, Lee—you've brought it on yourself," he exclaimed. "It's not too late, even now——"

"You've had my answer," I said between my teeth.

Simon Jessell scowled.

"You infernal fool!" he exclaimed fiercely.

His hand shot out, and he switched the light off. Then I heard the door slam behind him, and the key turned in the lock. After that came a slight shuffling sound. The crack at the bottom was being rendered airtight.

From behind there came the glow of the burning sulphur. And I suddenly caught a whiff of the sharp, choking fumes.

"I wonder how Nipper is faring?" I muttered tensely. "Upon my soul, I never expected an end such as this. Poor Nipper! I fear he will very soon share my fate——"

Again the fumes caught me, and set me coughing.

In a very short while the whole room would be choking with the deadly gas. It could only be a matter of time—a very short time—before I lost consciousness. And then—

I waited for the ghastly end, fearfully, but calmly.

CHAPTER VII.

(Nipper describes the concluding events.)

THE ARRIVAL AT RICHMOND—THE GUV'-NOR'S PLUCK—NELSON LEE WINS THE GAME.

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR WALTER CHARLES LENNARD—to give the old boy his full name—had made things buzz with a vengeance. He saw my arguments clearly, and had been good enough to praise me in high terms.

He considered that the chances were all in favour of our finding Nelson Lee within the Cedars, Ellismore Gardens, Richmond. That clue of the decoy letter had been of the utmost value.

Well, we arrived at the Cedars long before midnight, and found everything quiet. We ran into my old friend, P.C. Reynolds, just as we turned into Ellismore Gardens, and he came along with us.

There were ten of us altogether. Lennard had brought some of his smartest men along. It was to be a raid on a small scale. If we couldn't gain admission in the ordinary way, we were going to break in.

I was simply bubbling with anxiety and excitement.

From Reynolds we learned something which was to prove of great value. It was really a splendid piece of luck. He told us that only a few minutes before we appeared several gentlemen had left the Cedars in a big motor-car.

But the most significant part of Reynolds's information was this: he stated that the gate had been locked by the men—after they had come out! This pointed to one thing—that the house was now empty.

All the same, we meant to raid it without delay.

"It looks jolly queer to me, Mr. Lennard!" I said concernedly. "I'll bet they've faked up some horrible plot or

other. Months ago, over at St. John's Wood, the gov'nor got into the Circle's clutches, and they blew up the house after leaving it. Mr. Lee only just escaped in time. They may have worked the same dodge here!"

"That's cheerful—for all concerned," remarked the inspector. "Rather pleasant to know that the house is going to fall on top of us. But you may be wrong, Nipper. I don't suppose they'd work the same trick twice."

"Well, let's get inside!" I gasped.

We arrived at the gate, and found that it was securely locked. But, with the united efforts of four of Lennard's men, the lock gave way in less than half a minute. Then we hurried to the gravel path.

The house lay in absolute darkness.

As a preliminary, Lennard hammered at the door, and pulled the bell. But there was no answer, in spite of the appalling din.

"The door's solid," said the inspector shortly. "We'll try a window."

"This one'll do!" I panted.

Without waiting for instructions, I smashed the window with my elbow, and reached up for a catch. A second later the sash was up, and we were all scrambling into the room.

I flashed my torch about.

"Hold on, young 'un," warned Lennard. "There may be danger. Let me go first."

But I didn't take any notice of the inspector. I dashed to the door, and entered the big hall. The hall was superbly furnished, although the room had been empty. Everything was absolutely still.

Despair seemed to overwhelm me.

"Guv'nor!" I shouted at the top of my voice. "Guv'nor! Mr. Lee!"

"That's no good, young 'un—"

"What's that?" I hissed.

Lennard ceased speaking abruptly.

And we heard, from upstairs, a faint, husky, choking cry. It wasn't the gov'nor's voice at all—it sounded almost uncanny. But the sound sent me flying up the stairs four at a time.

Detective-Inspector Lennard and several of the other Yard detectives came rushing after me.

"Impulsive young rascal!" I heard Lennard gasp.

On the landing I paused again, breathlessly.

"Guv'nor!" I roared.

Again came that choking cry, weaker this time. And it proceeded from a room just near me. Lennard and another man were by my side now, and we all pelted across to the door.

It was locked, but the key was outside.

"See that!" I gasped, casting the light of my torch upon the floor. "The cracks have been stuffed up! It's gas, I expect!"

"Good heavens!" muttered Lennard.

He turned the key and opened the door. Then he and I strode in. But something seemed to catch our throats violently, and we staggered back, coughing and gasping. I knew the cause in a second.

"Sulphur!" I choked. "Sulphur! Oh, the demons!"

I groped forward, and saw the electric-light switch. In a moment the room was ablaze with light. And there, tied to the foot of the bedstead, was Nelson Lee! The guv'nor was nearly unconscious, but not quite. We had just come in time.

Either the sulphur hadn't burnt sufficiently to cause his death yet, or we had been so prompt that the horrible fumes hadn't had time to work.

Jamming a handkerchief over my mouth and nose, I tore out my knife. Then, while the inspector held Nelson Lee steady, I slashed through the tightly bound cords. In a few seconds he was free.

"Downstairs!" mumbled Lennard, through his own handkerchief.

Our eyes smarted, but we didn't care a jot. I wanted to help, but Lennard and another man carried the guv'nor down to the open air. I followed, nearly bursting with excitement and joy.

My theory had been right!

I had hit upon the truth—and Nelson Lee was saved! Left to himself, he would certainly have perished.

Beside the house was a neat lawn, and the guv'nor was stretched out on this. Then we started business in earnest—Lennard and I, at least. The others were making a round of the house.

It was some little time before our efforts were rewarded. Lennard knew exactly what to do in a case like this.

"It's all right, Nipper—he hasn't got it bad," said the inspector crisply. "He'll come round in no time. The sulphur didn't have much chance, you see. We came along at the right time."

And, a little while later, Nelson Lee was sitting up. The cool night air had worked wonders. He hadn't been unconscious even at the first—although jolly near it. I bent over him gladly.

"Guv'nor," I said joyfully. "Thank Heaven, you're all right!"

Nelson Lee smiled faintly.

"You're a good chap, Nipper," he said, in a husky voice. "How did you manage it? I had given up hope. Then I heard the hammering——"

"It was that letter you wrote, sir."

"But I didn't tell you to come here, young 'un."

"I know you didn't—but I came," I said cheerfully. "You see, guv'nor, I spotted the pink edges of the paper, and that set me thinking. I took it round to old Burnside, and he told me that it might be caused by sulphur fumes. I immediately thought of this house—and guessed things. Mr. Lennard came along without a moment's delay."

Nelson Lee nodded approvingly.

"You have been wonderfully keen, Nipper," he said. "You used your wits, and proved that you are as smart as I always believed you to be. I owe you my life——"

"Oh, rot, sir!" I said uncomfortably.

"Don't be a young ass, Nipper," put in Detective-Inspector Lennard. "If you didn't save Lee's life, who did? I'll tell you what, Lee, you'll have to award the young bounder a putty medal, set with glass beads!"

The guv'nor laughed.

And, twenty minutes later, he was walking about. His head ached and his throat felt like a red-hot pipe, but he was all right in the main. The deadly fumes hadn't had time to do any serious damage.

"Nothing doing," remarked Lennard, turning to us, after speaking with one of his men. "The house is empty—not a soul. And not a sign of evidence. The Circle birds have flown."

Nelson Lee nodded grimly.

"I know where they have flown to!" he said.

"The deuce you do!" ejaculated Lennard. "If you take my advice, Lee, you'll get back home—and go to bed——"

"But I'm not going to take your advice, my dear Lennard," smiled the guv'nor. "There's work to be done before dawn."

"With you in that state?"

"I'm all right in the main."

"Well, you're plucky—that's all I say," remarked Lennard admiringly. "You seem to thrive on hair-breadth escapes, Lee! What's the game now? Do you want me in it?"

"Certainly."

"I'm ready—when you like," said the inspector promptly.

"Well, I like now," was Nelson Lee's reply. "The High Lord of the Circle has been suffering from diphtheria—that's the meaning of all this business—but he's practically well now. And he's down in Kent, and he's taken Sir Francis Halesford with him—just to complete the cure."

"How on earth do you know that?"

"Somebody was kind enough to tell me," said Lee briskly. "Jessell—he's one of the High Lord's chief men—thinks I'm dead by this time. But in the morning the news of my escape will leak out. And then it will be too late to take action. We've got to move at once."

"Where to, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"Sir Francis is at a place called the Drive Farm, near Littlestone, in Kent—that's some distance beyond Sevenoaks," said the guv'nor. "Have you got a big racing car, Lennard?"

"Not in my pockets," grinned the inspector. "I'll send one of my men to a garage just up the road."

"Good!"

Lennard moved away to give his orders.

"Oh, guv'nor, I'm so glad!" I said fervently. "I thought the beasts had got you this time. And Zingrave's down in Kent, eh? Who told you that?"

"Todd."

"My hat! Did he try to save you?"

"He would have done so, I believe, but he was forced to leave the house before my execution," replied Lee. "But he gave me some very useful information, and we'll win the game, after all."

Exactly fifteen minutes later a big racing motor-car was buzzing southwards into Kent. I was at the wheel—the guv'nor not feeling up to driving—and he and Lennard and Detective-sergeant Bates were behind.

We were off to rescue Sir Francis Halesford—and, incidentally, to collar Professor Cyrus Zingrave!

It was a swift journey. The roads

were in excellent condition, and although the night was dark, we had decent lamps on the car. Not so good as those used in pre-war days, but decent, all the same.

After we had travelled about half the distance, and while we were gliding down a long hill almost noiselessly, I thought I heard a faint indistinct hum. But I didn't make any remark. And then the guv'nor spoke.

"Do you see it, Lennard?" he asked abruptly. "An aeroplane, flying southwards, almost immediately above us!"

"By George! A German raider!" said Lennard. "Let's hope a bomb doesn't drop—"

"I fancy that aeroplane is British," I heard the guv'nor say.

I jumped.

"It belongs to the Circle, you mean?" I shouted, turning my head for a second.

"Exactly."

And we all believed that Nelson Lee had hit upon the truth. A Circle aeroplane—a messenger taking a warning to the Drive Farm! The guv'nor's escape had been discovered, and this was the result.

After all, it was only to be expected—although we hadn't anticipated such prompt measures on the Circle's part. And we weren't sure. It was the only surmise. I sent the big car forward with even greater speed.

The aeroplane had disappeared into the night—I hadn't seen it at all. And, at last, Sevenoaks was entered and left behind. Littlestone came next. We paused there, and spoke to a policeman who was wandering aimlessly down the little main street of the village—the only bobby in the place, I expect.

The Drive Farm, he told us, was about three miles away. We couldn't miss it because it was just up a by road, and it was whitewashed, and the roof was of a peculiar shape.

We raced on, and drove straight up to the farm without any attempt at secrecy. As the car stopped we all heard a distinct hum in the sky. The aeroplane! And the hum was dying out even as we listened.

"I'm afraid the High Lord has escaped!" said Nelson Lee quietly. "He has left in the aeroplane—for he is well enough for the journey now. At least, desperation has made him well enough. But let's make sure."

We did.

The Drive Farm was deserted and silent! The birds had flown! Montague Todd's tip, useful as it was, had been balked by the Circle's promptness in sending the aeroplane to the rescue! Professor Zingrave had flown—literally!

But our journey to Littlestone was well repaid.

For we found Sir Francis in an attic—poisoned! The Circle had had its ruthless revenge! Having failed in his schemes, Zingrave had vented his villainous rage upon the poor physician.

Nelson Lee made a rapid examination, and discovered that Sir Francis, although in a bad way, could be saved. The gov'nor immediately applied certain restoratives—for he is a wonderful doctor himself—and Sir Francis was put out of danger.

It would be weeks before he would be well again, but he was saved.

Zingrave had vanished, and no trace of the mysterious aeroplane was ever discovered.

Simon Jessell, the rotter who had attempted to murder Nelson Lee, had vanished, too. They weren't far off, we felt sure, but they couldn't be found.

But Nelson Lee had certainly triumphed. He said that I had triumphed, too; but I wouldn't admit that. I'd only used my common-sense, after all.

There was one thing certain.

The Circle would soon show signs of hostility. With Professor Zingrave, the High Lord, hale and hearty again, it was pretty obvious that startling events would take place. Nelson Lee was on the look-out for those events.

For the Circle of Terror was still all-powerful.

Our campaign was by no means nearing its close—as I had declared. I had to admit that I was wrong; for, very soon, we had ample evidence to show that the Circle of Terror was not fizzling out!

But, upon the whole, the gov'nor and I were easily holding our own.

THE END.

"The Verdict of the School"

**Is the Title of NEXT WEEK'S Story.
It deals with the Further Adventures**

— of —

**NELSON LEE & NIPPER
AT**

ST. FRANK'S COLLEGE.

**Set down by Nipper, and Prepared for
Publication by the Author of "The
Yellow Shadow," "Nipper at St.
Frank's," "The Ivory Seekers," etc.**

DON'T MISS "THE VERDICT OF THE SCHOOL."

GRAND NEW SERIAL—JUST STARTING!

The Boxing Sailor

A STORY OF THE RING AND LIFE IN THE NAVY.**By ARTHUR S. HARDY.**Read this first!

TOM CRAWLEY, light-weight boxer and stoker aboard *H.M.S. Flyer*, makes his first public appearance in a contest with **Jimmy Yowl**, lightning feather-weight. He wins the fight, and with the prize-money is able to replace his father's torpedoed fishing smack. Tom is jealous of

BOB RANDLE—who, the lad considers, is a "slacker"—on the grounds that Bob seems to find favour in the eyes of

MARY THWAITES, the pretty daughter of **Fisherman Thwaites**, of whom Tom is very fond.

FISHERMAN CRAWLEY'S smack is chartered as a mine-sweeper, and one day is torpedoed by a German submarine in sight of land. Old Thomas Crawley is taken prisoner and carried on board the U-boat. But the others are put afloat on a raft. They are soon picked up by a British destroyer and landed near Weathersea. Tom and Bob go to meet them, and Mary is very anxious about the fate of old Tom Crawley. Meanwhile a big boxing match is fixed up between **Jerry Nelson** and Tom. It is a draw, and just as the audience are about to leave the hall a whirring noise is heard. A moment later something strikes the building itself, and there is a deafening report. In a moment all is confusion.

(Now read this week's thrilling instalment.)

THE ESCAPE FROM THE BOXING HALL

THE Germans are shelling Weathersea. Bolt for your lives!"

The words struck terror to the hearts of many who had patronised the boxing show at Dan Simmons' Hall in their eagerness to see Jerry

Nelson box the local bantam-weight boxer, Tom Crawley, on the occasion of Mrs. Crawley's benefit.

A shell had struck the building. There could be no doubt about that. The flash, the cloud of dust, the crash of falling brickwork, the rending of timber, and clattering of glass, was evidence enough of the fact. And even strong and resolute men leapt to their feet, and began a rush for the doors in the first moment of panic.

It wouldn't have been so bad, perhaps, if the lights had not gone out.

The bursting shell had apparently short-circuited the electric installation, or damaged the wires. At any rate, the interior of the building was suddenly plunged into impenetrable blackness, and an indescribable confusion instantly prevailed. Men struggled with women in a fight for the doors, and boys elbowed and fought their way frantically towards the exits. Chairs were overturned, and cries of pain mingled with the shouts of terror that rang clear above the distant crash of shells.

For a moment mob law prevailed. The crowd was out of hand. Like a flock of sheep they scrambled and fought, they hardly knew for what or why.

Then a voice rang above the clamour.

"Take your time. Keep cool there. There's no danger. Wait while my men open the emergency doors. Stand where you are, everybody. Give us a chance."

It was Dan Simmons calling. At first nobody paid the slightest heed. But upon Dan repeating the appeal, the stronger-nerved among the men saw that there was reason in it. The service men more especially answered to the call.

"Steady there. Steady, all of you. Show us a light."

Then an electric torch flashed. Then another, and yet another.

The poisonous fumes of the burst shell began to disperse, and the dust no longer choked. Yet there was still occasion for alarm, for an ominous whistling sound was followed by a tremendous explosion near at hand, somewhere outside in the street.

Boom! Boom! The enemy were firing from the sea, and land guns somewhere along the coast were beginning to answer the challenge.

Mrs. Crawley had meanwhile stood as if turned to stone leaning against the ropes of the ring, with the words of gratitude she'd intended to speak still trembling on her lips.

Jerry Nelson sprang across the ring.

"This is no place for me, Tom," he cried, as he brushed by Tom Crawley. "I'm off."

Tom gripped him by the arm.

"Stop, Jerry!" he cried. "You'll never be able to reach your dressing-room through this mob. Stay where you are. You're safer up here in the boxing ring than anywhere just now."

Jerry stopped.

"Blowed if you're not right there, Tom," said he, and he laughed a nervous sort of laugh. "Only, you know, when you hear the shells bursting, you feel as if you want to be doing something."

Tom leapt to his mother's side. He linked his arm in hers.

"Mother," said he, and there was an anxious ring in his voice. "You're all right, aren't you?"

"Yes, Tom, dear," she faltered, in reply. "But it seems hard to stay here and be killed."

"We sha'n't be killed unless our time has come," Tom answered reassuringly.

"Where's Bob Randle?"

A voice answered him, close at hand:

"I'm here, Tom. All serene?"

"All serene—where's Mary?"

"She's here with me, Tom. Can you see us? Lean over the ropes. That's right. Catch hold of her hands. I'll lift you up, Mary. Got her, Tom? Right—ho—pull——"

Tom had groped for and held Mary's hands, and, with Bob Randle helping to

raise her from below, and he pulling from the ring, Mary was soon hauled up, drawn through the ropes, and stood beside them there.

Bob Randle followed.

"Lights! Lights! Steady there—take your time—take your time. Open the doors, my lads. Don't crowd—give them a chance of opening the doors——"

Still Dan Simmons directed his attendants and his patrons from somewhere, and a moving light disclosed his whereabouts.

His coolness and resource undoubtedly saved the situation. Had it not been for him, many lives might have been lost in the bolt for the exits.

As it was afterwards shown, most of the injuries sustained by the unlucky patrons of boxing who had filled the hall that night were received in the first blind rush, where many had been thrown down and trampled upon in the dark.

The flash of electric torches, the rally of the regular attendants of the hall to Dan Simmons's call, and the prompt opening of all the emergency exits saved the situation.

Yet there was danger even after the first swarm of men and women had swept out into the streets.

Suddenly a terrifying alarm rang upon the air.

"Fire! Fire! Fire——"

Tom uttered a hoarse cry as he heard, and looked upwards.

He could see a hole in the roof, and about this tongues of flame were licking, and smoke was rolling. Yes, the building was on fire, this terror being added to the continuous crash and smash and boom of shells and guns.

"It's all right!" roared Dan Simmons, still unperturbed. "There's plenty of time. And no danger. Bring more lights there."

More lights were brought. By means of them the open doors were revealed, and soon the crowd were outside the building, and in the street.

It was then that Bob Randle caught Tom by the arm.

"Now it's time to leave, Tom," said he. "You look after your mother. I'll help Mary. Let's go back, and out of

the building by way of the dressing-rooms. We shall find the way clear there."

Tom nodded, and shot a glance of surprise at Bob, whose earnest face could just be seen in the gloom. What a cool hand Bob was, to be sure!

And once again the young boxing sailor regretted the hard things he had once said concerning him.

The flames were gaining ground. The wind blew the smoke into the boxing theatre in suffocating clouds.

Tom drew his mother towards the ropes. "Don't be afraid, mother, dear," he cried. "I'll get you safely out of this."

His mother did not answer, but she followed him obediently, and without fear. Bob Randle was first through the ropes. He led Mary Thwaites down the steps. Once on the floor below, they waited for Mrs. Crawley and Tom. Then Bob led the way, the ladies followed, and Tom brought up the rear. So they gained the dressing-rooms, which were deserted, and so found the way to the street open to them.

Here there was light. The night watchman had lit a lantern, and hung it upon a nail on the wall.

By means of it they were able to see, and Tom bade his mother and Mary stay there while he went to the door and had a look round. "For," he declared, "it may be worse outside than here, and there's no danger of the fire spreading yet."

IN THE SHELLLED TOWN.

WHEN Tom Crawley put his head out of the boxing hall and looked around him, there was not a soul in sight. Strange, indescribable sounds came to him through the night—the bursting of distant shells, the boom of guns, the screams of women, the cries and shouts of men.

Then a lull, followed by the clanging of a fire bell. Next a whirr and rattle of a passing motor-car. From the sky above the unmistakable clatter of an aeroplane.

What damage had been done to Weatherssea? Was that a chance shell which had struck the boxing hall, or had

more of the accursed missiles of the Hun murderers exploded in the town?

His answer came in a sudden burst of flame, and a dull red glow in the sky above him, somewhere along the street, over the housetops yonder.

Next a glare behind him, and the shouting of men.

Tom turned his head, ran to the end of the building, and peeped round the angle of the wall. He saw a great gap in the roof, and part of the wall had been demolished by the shell. How the rest of the building had escaped was almost a miracle. Tom Crawley uttered a low cry as he realised that hundreds of lives might have been lost there.

The flames were leaping fiercely now. Unless help came quickly, Dan Simmons's hall was doomed.

"Poor old Dan!" sighed Tom, as he ran back to the back door, and dashed into the waiting women and Bob Randle, who were standing behind the protecting wall.

"All right, Tom?" inquired Randle quietly.

"Yes. All right as far as I can see. But we may as well stay here for a bit. It's as safe as any where."

"I want to go home," said Mrs. Crawley, in a low voice.

"So do I," cried Mary eagerly. "I want to know if mother is safe."

"Come on, then," said Tom.

He led the way with Bob. Mrs. Crawley and Mary followed at their heels. When they reached the main street, they saw the front of the hall besieged by an eager crowd of men. Angry cries came to their ears. Some of the fisherfolk were fighting to get to the doors.

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Tom excitedly.

"Some villains, seeing how things were at Dan's, tried to break into the office and steal the benefit money," was the prompt reply. "There are men who would do anything."

"I must try and find Dan, Bob," said Tom, diving into the crowd, and pushing and wriggling his way through. "It's mother's money they tried to steal. Stay there. I sha'n't be long."

A motor fire engine now dashed up, with clanging bell, scattering the crowd

right and left. Past the hall to the street that ran beside it the fire engine went, and vanished, with a stream of men and youths pelting after, and policemen running with them; special constables, too, all bent on keeping order and controlling the crowd.

The diversion helped. Tom gained the main entrance doors of the boxing-hall without difficulty. Here, to his surprise, he found a number of attendants, wearing flannels and sweaters, pushing the crowd back.

They pushed Tom, half-dressed as he was.

"It's all right. I'm Tom Crawley," panted Tom. "Where's Dan?"

"Here I am, my lad!" cried a resonant voice from the steps above, and, looking upwards, Tom saw the boxing promoter. He'd just come out of an open door.

"I hear they've stolen the benefit money, Dan!" cried Tom.

"No, my lad," was Dan's cheery reply. "They tried to. I caught three men in my office, and one of them was actually handling the cash. They turned on me, and threatened to do for me. Rough, hungry-looking men they were, too. 'For shame, my lads!' I cried. 'Would you steal Mrs. Crawley's benefit money at a time when there's nobody but myself left to protect it, and after my hall's been bombarded? That's not British, is it? And it's not sporting?'"

"And, what then?" asked Tom, his eyes widening.

"Then? Why, they put the money back, and helped to drive out some wasters who came pelting in on the same errand. And now I've got it all locked up in the safe. No harm will come to it there, even if my hall is burnt to the ground!"

Tom marvelled at Dan's cheerfulness and optimism. Did he know that his hall was on fire, the sailor-boy wondered. He asked him.

"Oh, yes," Dan replied. "But the fire brigade's here. I 'phoned for it; they'll soon get the fire under. And I'm insured."

"That's a good thing, Dan."

"You're right, Tom; but I've a lot of pals in Weathersea who'd see me right, even if I weren't."

Dan sprang down the steps and passed Tom.

"So long, my boy! You get home under cover," he said. "Boys"—to the attendants—"rally round me, and help me to drive the people back."

And so he vanished amid the surging crowd.

Tom went back, and found Bob Randle, his mother, and Mary where he had left them. Jerry Nelson was there, too—Jerry, who had got into his outdoor clothes in the dressing-room, had picked up Tom's and brought them along to the almost naked lad.

"Thought I'd find you, Tom," said the bantam-weight Tommy from Hull. "And you'll want your clothes—got your cap and boots, too!"

Tom thanked him, and slipped into trousers, jumper, and cap like magic. His boots he carried with him. And so they went on home.

As they left the neighbourhood of the boxing-hall, Tom glanced backwards. He saw the flames beaten down by jets of water, and dense clouds of smoke roll heavily away. An echoing cheer rang in his ears.

"They're getting the fire under!" he shouted. "Hurrah! Dan's hall is saved!"

JACK S WAY.

As they hurried along the streets, they passed by whole rows of shops, the windows of which had been driven in, and now and then they were harrowed by the sight of a house almost completely demolished.

Police and soldiers were thronging everywhere—moving from place to place in orderly fashion. A motor ambulance flashed by. Next they met a party of stretcher-bearers swinging along. They bore a sufferer who was covered up with a sheet. Some sobbing women and a girl, in her teens, walked behind.

Bob Randle gripped his teeth as he watched them pass.

"Somebody will have to pay for this, Tom!" he muttered. "It makes me wish I were in France now."

"It makes me wish the old Flyer were ready for sea, so that we could blow the coward who did this to smithereens!" said Tom.

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

Mary Thwaites sobbed, and tears gutted down her marble cheeks.

Mrs. Crawley looked on with dull, agonised eyes, and then said, bowing her head:

"Oh, Tom, Tom, dear, take me home."

"You look after Mary, Bob," said Tom.

And, giving his mother his supporting arm, he turned away and sought the nearest passage home.

By this time the distant booming of the guns showed either that the enemy had steamed further along the coast, and were bombarding Borrowmouth, or else were in full flight for home, pursued by British warships, which might catch the villains yet.

As they approached the harbour, Tom saw further proofs of the accuracy of the enemy's fire. In Fishmonger Lane four houses and shops were in ruins, only the skeleton supports of the houses remaining. The smell of gas was almost unbearable, and some of the ruins were smouldering.

They were forced to make a detour, a guard of soldiers and specials turning them back. Yet, when they reached their cottage, they found it intact; not a window broken; not a tree, shrub, or plant disturbed.

As Tom opened the gate a cat ran to meet them, evincing lively signs of terror. Tom opened the door with his key, and led his mother in. He lit the lamps, and placed a chair for her.

"You're all right now, aren't you, mother?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you, Tom. I'm a little tired and shaken; but I'm a fisherman's wife, and I've learnt how to face trouble."

Tom changed his ring-shoes for his boots, and then made for the door.

"I'm going to see if anything's happened to Mrs. Thwaites, and I want to find out if Riley, Sam, and Morgan are safe. Then I shall go down to the harbour, in case I'm wanted. They may send the *Flyer* to sea even as she is."

"Go, Tom. But don't be late. Kiss me, my boy."

Tom kissed his mother fondly, well knowing the feelings which had actuated her in asking him; then with a smile and a "Cheerio!" he opened the door and went out.

He hurried to the Thwaites', and, to his great relief, found the cottage undamaged, and not a single dwelling-place in the street injured.

Mary was there with her mother and father; Bob had gone. Tom remained only a moment; then hurried towards the harbour.

As he neared it, he realised for the first time how successful, from the enemy's point of view, the bombardment had been. Every window was broken; there were gaps here and there between the houses. Tramway standards and cables were down, and in places the road had been blown to smithereens. The top of a clock-tower had been carried clean away. He saw salvage men and volunteer helpers busy everywhere clearing away the debris. For the first time for months most of the street lights were burning brightly. The harbour itself was alive.

Every available warship had been ordered out. The pier and the quays were thronged with people, mostly townsmen and fishermen. Oddly enough, the harbour had not been hit. Not a single vessel had been damaged.

Tom tumbled up against scores of his comrades from the *Flyer*. He met Tomkins, the A.B., who was smoking and eyeing everything with a serene complacency that irritated Tom.

"That's right! Grin! Why not?" said the sailor-boy. "Half *Weathersea's* been blown to atoms! That's good reason for smiling, isn't it?"

Tomkins took his pipe out of his mouth and spat.

"Do you know why I'm smiling?" he asked.

"For that reason, I should say."

"You're wrong! I'm smiling because they had orders from the First Sea Lord to speed up the mendin' of the *Flyer*, and we'll be at sea and peppering the enemy before many hours are up, Tom! Hear the clanging of the 'ammers over in the dock? They're at it, day and night, overtime, or any other time, too, and—Hullo! Here's the skipper!"

Sure enough, Captain Walsh, accompanied by two of his lieutenants and a stranger in civilian attire, came up just then in a motor-car, the sailors barring the way and stopping the car for a moment. They saluted their commander.

(Continued overleaf.)

who returned the salute, and nodded and smiled at them.

"Make the most of your time, my lads!" said the captain of the *Flyer*. "For, we shall be ready for sea to-morrow, and you know what that means—we're going to engage the enemy!"

The car passed on, and as it went

every seaman there whipped his round cap off his head and waved it frantically.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!" they cheered.

And Tom shouted louder than them all. It was Jack's way of bidding defiance to the Hun.

(To be continued.)

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