

No. 121.—WONDERFUL WARTIME PENNYWORTH!

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ONE PENNY.

THE CIRCLE'S GREAT COUP!

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CHAPTER I.

THE SCRAP OF PAPER—THE GUV'NOR'S CUTENESS—A VILE PLOT.

"JOLLY fine!" I declared enthusiastically. "Terrific, in fact."

"My dear Nipper, you really must express yourself in different terms," smiled Nelson Lee, as he rose from his stall. "The opera is a rare tonic for depression, but it can scarcely be described as terrific."

I grinned, and the orchestra played the National Anthem.

Then the audience made for the exits. The guv'nor and I, to tell the truth, had been enjoying an evening at one of the West End theatres. We had witnessed a performance of a well-known comic opera, and it had been splendid—or, in forbidden language, terrific. That's my way of putting it, anyhow.

Nelson Lee and I had occupied a couple of stalls, and we had spent a thoroughly enjoyable evening. To tell the truth, the guv'nor had been a bit irritable and grumpy during the afternoon, but he was all smiles now. And he had the nerve to tell me that he preferred grand opera, really, but had come to this theatre just to please me! And he'd been grinning with amusement all the evening!

It's all bunkum, you know. Nobody likes grand opera, actually; it's the singing they like. The opera itself isn't worth tuppence, as a rule. Personally, I

like something that's jolly and musical and entertaining.

"Now for a little supper," I said, as we slowly moved towards the exit. "Where's it going to be, guv'nor? The Carlton, or Frascati's, or Lockhart's?"

Nelson Lee's eyes twinkled.

"There's quite an excellent coffee-stall in the neighbourhood of the Elephant and Castle," he replied. "How does that strike you, Nipper?"

I chuckled.

"A bit too classy," I said. "I think we'll make it Frascati's, sir."

We had reached the exit now, and we moved along towards the cloakroom. Just before we got out of the crush, I felt somebody push against me rather forcibly; then a hand touched mine.

I glanced down, curiously. I saw somebody's hand press something into my palm. Instinctively, I gripped the something, and then looked up quickly. But, in the crush, I couldn't make out who had delivered the little object. I suspected a tall, bearded man in evening dress, but I couldn't be sure.

He didn't look at me, and there was nobody else near by who seemed likely. So I squinted down at the thing in my hand. It was just a scrap of screwed-up paper—like a chocolate wrapper.

"Well, that's queer," I told myself.

The guv'nor passed into the cloakroom, and I followed him. Two minutes later we sallied out, and managed to engage a taxi. Lee gave the driver his directions,

and we got inside. I was still holding the chocolate wrapper.

"That was rather rummy, sir," I remarked thoughtfully.

"Engaging a taxi so promptly, you mean?" he smiled.

I grinned.

"Well, that was rummy, certainly," I agreed. "But I meant something else. Didn't you see what happened in the passage of the theatre? No, of course you didn't. How could you?"

"Get to the point, you young donkey," said the guv'nor politely.

"That's a nice thing to call me, when you're taking me out," I grinned. "But look here, sir. Somebody—I don't know who—shoved this into my fist just before we entered the cloakroom for our hats and things."

I exposed the screwed-up scrap of paper, and Nelson Lee looked at it.

"What is it, young 'un?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Well, have a look, and find out."

This is what I was doing. I flattened out the paper, and found that it was, really, a wrapper from some fancy bon-bon or other. The printed design was quite pretty, with gold lines and pink tracings. But, on the blank side, I saw a few words, scribbled in pencil.

"Hallo, hallo! What's this?" I said interestedly.

I bent forward, and read the words:

"Something big afoot. Look out.
—M. T."

"Now, I wonder what the dickens—Just look at this, sir," and I handed the wrapper over to Nelson Lee.

He took it, read the words, then leaned back and took five puffs at his cigar. I think he took five; anyhow, he was a long while before he spoke. When he looked at me his eyes were quite grave.

"M. T.' Why, Nipper, this little message is from our excellent friend, Mr. Montague Todd," he exclaimed slowly. "He's just telling us that the Circle of Terror has got something big afoot, and that we must look out for ourselves."

I whistled.

"Exactly," agreed the great criminologist. "Todd, probably, was in the theatre, enjoying the show. He saw us, and thought that he'd pass the tip along. He didn't care to risk speaking openly—and so he adopted this ruse. It's rather

a pity Mr. Todd wasn't more explicit, however."

"What do you think it means—exactly?"

"I can't possibly guess," replied Lee; "and I'm certainly not going to worry my head over the matter. I shall be on my guard, however. It is about time the Circle got busy; I have been expecting an offensive for some little time."

I nodded thoughtfully.

Nelson Lee and I had had several grim encounters with the Circle of Terror—and, more particularly, with its chief, the High Lord. But Professor Cyrus Zingrave, the High Lord, although about the cleverest criminal in existence, wasn't a match for Nelson Lee—the cleverest detective in existence.

At the same time, the guv'nor had to be thoroughly wide awake to defeat the infamous Circle of Terror. That scoundrelly organisation had scored several triumphs, and would have scored many more, but for Nelson Lee's intervention.

Zingrave, via the Circle's agents, had attempted to take our lives on more than one occasion; but the guv'nor had been too keen every time. He'd never been tricked completely.

Our last encounter had taken place only a short while before. The High Lord had been laid up with diphtheria then, and the guv'nor had nearly caught him napping. Now, apparently, Zingrave had fully recovered, and was on the point of launching a new offensive, as Lee put it—an offensive against humanity. For the Circle of Terror was ruthless, determined, and utterly brutal.

It was rather good of Todd to give us the tip—although it wasn't worth much, as it stood. Montague Todd was a member of the Circle. But I had saved his life under curious circumstances once, and he hadn't forgotten it. He was a decent man, and he loathed the Circle and all its grim works.

But, being a member, he couldn't back out—without dying. For the Circle was just as ruthless with its own members as with its declared victims. If Todd had attempted to free himself from the Circle's bonds, he would have been—punished. And the Circle's punishment was death.

So Todd, being a sensible chap, and fond of life, had decided to remain in the Circle. But, whenever the opportunity

occurred, he would give Nelson Lee valuable information. He had been of sterling service on several occasions.

"Something big afoot, and we've got to look out," I remarked. "Does that mean that the something big will be up against us, guv'nor?"

"Probably," said Nelson Lee. "Or it might mean that we must merely look out for some big event in the near future. As we are always looking out, this warning is rather unnecessary. Nevertheless, we'll be on the qui vive—But here we are at Frascati's."

We emerged from the taxi, and entered the famous restaurant. And, within five minutes, we had completely forgotten all about Mr. Montague Todd and the Circle of Terror.

The supper was a great success. Frascati's was crowded, and the throng was a lively one. The bulk of the male diners were in khaki, and the female—Well, there were so many colours, I won't attempt to describe 'em. Not that any of the ladies were showy. Frascati's was select.

Feeling thoroughly satisfied, and contented with ourselves and the world in general, we left the restaurant, and indulged in a brisk walk home. This was the guv'nor's idea—the walk, I mean.

After that supper, he said, we needed a walk. And so we did some poor (?) taxicabman out of a job, and used our legs instead of our cash. It was better for our health, I suppose.

Arriving home, we found everything in darkness. Mrs. Jones, the worthy housekeeper, was in bed and asleep, in the land of dreams and nightmares. It wasn't so very late, either—only about twelve-thirty, or a quarter to one.

"Going in the consulting-room, sir?" I yawned, on the landing.

"Just a final cigarette, Nipper," said Nelson Lee, producing his keys, and unlocking the consulting-room door. That door locked off both the consulting-room and the laboratory. The dining-room and bedrooms were on the other side of the landing.

The guv'nor entered the apartment and switched on the electric light. But, as he was striding into the room, he paused. I saw that he was looking at a sheet of thin paper which lay on the floor; it was a business letter of some sort that had been delivered during the morning, and hadn't been filed yet.

"Only blown off the table, guv'nor," I said, pushing past.

"Hold on, Nipper; stand where you are," put in Lee sharply. "Blown off the table, you say? Exactly. But how did it blow off—this side? Not from any draught caused by the door. Only a window draught could have wafted that sheet of paper off the desk—and the window's closed."

"Oh, it's nothing, sir," I exclaimed.

"It is a trifling affair, I will admit—but it is curious, Nipper," said the guv'nor keenly. "How did that paper blow off? Presumably, the window has been closed during the time of our absence. It was closed when we left, and it is closed now. The door has been locked the whole time, and there had, therefore, been no draught of any sort. It would seem, young 'un, that the window has been opened. By James, I wonder—"

He paused abruptly, and whistled.

"Why, what's the matter, sir?" I asked, becoming interested.

"I have just remembered that some gutter repairs are proceeding next door," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "A ladder is reared against the wall—and it is there now, in readiness for the workmen tomorrow. Ladders are very handy, Nipper. It could easily have been shifted a few feet."

"Do you think anybody's been in here?" I asked, staring.

"I may be ultra-precautious," smiled Lee, "but have you forgotten Mr. Todd's little warning, Nipper? He told us to look out. Possibly Todd was referring to something far removed from our own personal safety—but it is better to be wary. We know the grim, ruthless nature of the Circle. I am wondering if any Circle agents have been setting a few pretty little traps for us during our absence."

I looked round, with added interest.

"By Jupiter! It's possible, sir," I exclaimed.

Nelson Lee picked up the letter, laid it on the desk, and then he walked across to the window. For several minutes he examined it closely. The table-lamp—which was switched on—was heavily shaded, so the blind was still up.

"There are no positive signs here, Nipper," said the guv'nor, after a few moments. "But we mustn't forget that

the Circle employs the cleverest cracksmen. The window, although closed, isn't fastened. I think I told you to close it, just before we left for the theatre. Did you fasten it?"

"Blessed if I remember, sir," I replied. "I don't suppose I did. Why should I? We don't usually bolt and bar the place like a prison, do we?"

"That's not the point. Did you fasten the window?"

"Well, I don't think I did."

"Then, if any Circle agents borrowed that ladder from next door, it must have been a simple matter to gain entry into this apartment," said Nelson Lee. "Just for my own peace of mind, young 'un, I'll have a look round. You remain still."

I could understand Nelson Lee's line of reasoning easily enough. More than once the agents of the Circle of Terror had laid nice little traps for us during our absence from Gray's Inn Road, but we hadn't been caught napping.

And now, although there was probably nothing to be alarmed about, the detective was determined to satisfy himself before it was too late. The trap—if any—would certainly be of a deadly nature.

While I stood watching, the guv'nor examined the telephone, the desk, the cigar-box, the chairs—everything in the giddy room, in fact. But his examination was barren of result.

"Nothing doing, sir?" I said, grinning.

"No, I suppose we are too careful; for once," smiled Lee. "But it is far better to err on that side, my lad. Carelessness may lead to disaster—as you know well enough. Oh, well, I'm satisfied."

He selected a cigarette, lit it, and went over to the sideboard for a whisky-and-soda. The guv'nor isn't much of a believer in spirits—of the liquid variety—but he sometimes indulges in a nightcap.

"I don't suppose the laboratory has been entered," he remarked, as he poured out the whisky. "The door's locked, and——"

Lee ceased speaking, and I looked up. He was standing quite still, looking fixedly at the soda-water syphon.

"It may be my fancy," he exclaimed slowly, and then paused.

"Fancy, guv'nor?" I asked.

"Possibly, Nipper, I am apt to be somewhat particular to-night," smiled

the guv'nor. "Can you see a faint—a very faint—milkeness about this soda? It's so slight that it may be imagination on my part. I certainly shouldn't have noticed anything if I had not been on the alert."

I leaned across the desk.

"Half-a-minute, sir," I said, as I ran round, pulled the blind down and went to the switch. I turned on the big lights, and the consulting-room became flooded with illumination.

"That's better," I said cheerfully. "There's nothing wrong with the soda, guv'nor; it was the light that——"

Nelson Lee was bending over the syphon, and he pressed the tap just forcibly enough to release about ten drops of soda. I heard a faint sizzle—which was to be expected; but I wasn't quite prepared for what happened next.

The guv'nor gave a short sobbing gasp. Then he staggered away, the glass went crashing to the floor, and he followed it. I simply tore round the room, and found Nelson Lee lying still and silent upon the carpet.

CHAPTER II.

THE POISON GAS—CONCERNING NUMBERS 22, 28, AND 35—CAPTAIN RICHARD MAXWELL.

"GUV'NOR!" I gasped, horrified. I stared down at Nelson Lee in sheer consternation. What had happened to him? But even as I was about to kneel by his side, he uttered a long sigh, and struggled up. At the same time I became aware of a faint sickly odour in the room. It tickled my throat, and irritated my nostrils.

"Upon my soul!" gasped Nelson Lee.

"What's the matter with you, sir?" I demanded breathlessly. "Thank goodness you've come to yourself so soon! I—I thought you were——"

"Don't touch that syphon, young 'un!" mumbled Nelson Lee thickly. "Don't touch it! By James, my suspicions were right, after all!"

The detective rose to his feet rather unsteadily. He went straight to the window, jerked the blind aside, threw up the sash, and leaned far out. Then he took several large gulps of night atmosphere.

"That's better!" he exclaimed, at last.

"My throat's burning painfully, but I

think the damage is only slight. Fortunately I only received an infinitesimal dose—so small, in fact, that it was scarcely perceptible.”

“It bowled you over, anyhow!” I said grimly.

The guv'nor went back to the side-board, and looked at the syphon with great interest.

“That's just it, Nipper,” he said. “It bowled me over in less than a second. Can you imagine what would have happened if I had pressed the tap of that syphon in the ordinary way? I should, of course, have held it down for eight or nine seconds.”

“Longer, perhaps.”

“Well, during those seconds, Nipper, a cloud of gas would have been released—gas, my boy, not liquid. And that one puff would have killed me on the spot. I should have died on the instant. And you, rushing to my rescue, would have shared my fate. A clever plot, Nipper—a diabolical plot.”

“Good heavens!” I gasped. “Are—are you sure of this?”

“Didn't you see what happened?”

“Well, yes, but——”

“We'll soon make sure,” said Nelson Lee crisply. “No, Nipper, I'm not in any pain now. You see, I breathed in such a tiny quantity of the gas that it only had a momentary effect. But, as you will realise, my previous deductions were not far short of the mark. Somebody entered this apartment during our absence—and that somebody, I'll warrant, was an agent of the Circle of Terror.”

“By gum! It might have been Toddy!” I exclaimed. “That's why he gave us that warning.”

Nelson Lee shook his head.

“No, it wasn't Todd,” he exclaimed. “I don't suppose our friend knew anything of this affair. If he had done so he would certainly have added the word ‘syphon’ to his warning; that would have given us the tip on the instant. We must be very thankful that we have detected the vile plot.”

We passed into the laboratory, and switched on the lights. As this door had been locked, we knew there had been no intruders, and so we felt confident. The guv'nor started making his experiment without any delay.

As a preliminary we both donned respirators, and then Lee discharged some

of the gas from the syphon and put it through an elaborate test. This occupied the best part of an hour, but by the time he had finished he was looking thoroughly satisfied, and he decided that the hour had been well-spent.

It was safe to remove our respirators, now. Lee lit a cigar and sat on the laboratory bench.

“As I suspected,” he said quietly. “This gas is of the most deadly nature imaginable. The poison gas which is used by the soldiers in the field is quite harmless stuff by comparison. I honestly believe that only one chemist in England is capable of manufacturing such deadly stuff—and that chemist is our old friend Professor Cyrus Zingrave. If I had used the syphon in the ordinary way we should both have been killed on the spot, Nipper; there would have been no escape whatever.”

“Some awful rotter changed the syphon, of course?”

“That is obvious,” agreed Nelson Lee. “But we could not detect that—since the syphon is of the same manufacture as the ones we use constantly. But this syphon has been specially treated. The liquid remains within the reservoir, and only the gas is expelled when the tap is pressed.”

I breathed deeply.

“A jolly pretty plot!” I exclaimed. “Clever, too! I say, guv'nor, it's a good thing you were on the alert when we came in. If it hadn't been for that piece of paper lying on the floor we should have been dead by now!”

“It was a slight clue—but an important one,” said Nelson Lee, yawning. “As soon as I saw that piece of paper I knew that the window must have been opened. But it's clumsy, my lad—very clumsy.”

“I don't know so much about that,” I demurred. “It strikes me that it was a thundering smart wheeze.”

“It is on a par with the other attempts which the Circle has made to kill us—it relied upon our falling unsuspectingly into the trap,” replied the great criminologist. “Oh, yes, Nipper, it is decidedly clumsy, and these methods don't alarm me in the least. I feel, however, that this attack is the forerunner of big events in the near future. The Circle of Terror is evidently preparing some big coup—and Zingrave thought it as well to be rid of us before-

hand. It is rather a compliment, Nipper."

"I don't want any more compliments of that sort!" I grunted. "Well, I suppose we had better get to bed, now?"

This was an excellent suggestion, and in a very short time the gov'nor and I were in our little cots sleeping peacefully. The Circle's little game had misfired, and we weren't dead by any means.

We were up in good time, but slacked during the morning. After luncheon, however, the gov'nor suggested that I should run over to Fulham—to visit the Cosy Cinema, in Fulham Road.

"Your visit may be fruitless, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "But, on the other hand, you may learn something. I feel that we are on the eve of something big, as Todd put it. So a little scouting will do no harm. Disguise yourself, of course."

In less than twenty minutes I departed.

My disguise was quite simple, but effective. And my destination, the Cosy Cinema, although an innocent looking picture theatre, was, in reality, the place where the agents of the Circle of Terror received their working orders.

It wasn't a meeting-place, because the Circle-men never met there; they merely visited the hall to receive orders. And these orders were given in full view of the ordinary audience.

You see, Professor Zingrave had invented a clever system of shorthand. The characters were scroll-like, and meant nothing to the average man. But to anybody "in the know" it was possible to read the scroll easily. Both Nelson Lee and I knew the system by heart; we'd known it for months, having got hold of an instruction-book during one of our tussles with the Circle.

Well, between the films, at the Cosy Cinema, advertisement-slides were occasionally shown on the screen; and round some of these slides was a quaint scroll border—just a pretty border design it looked. In reality, however, that scroll was a shorthand order to a certain Circle agent, or agents. Naturally, the scroll was different every time; but the ordinary public couldn't detect this. And the operator at the palace was, of course, in the Circle's pay.

I entered the little picture-hall soon after it opened for the afternoon. It was a continuous performance, of course,

and I could remain in the theatre until eleven o'clock in the evening, if I liked.

There were only a few people present, for the afternoon was fine. I sat in an eightpenny seat, and settled down to enjoy the pictures. There was no reason why I shouldn't. I rather like pictures.

They were pretty good, on the whole; but it wasn't until about four o'clock that an advertisement-slide was shown. There was scroll work round the edge of it, but it meant nothing. Then came another slide—and this was more interesting.

For I detected a difference at once.

And I read off the shorthand easily—it was a definite order to three agents of the Circle of Terror—who all went by numbers. Names were never mentioned in any of the Circle instruction-messages.

The shorthand, deciphered, read as follows:

"Preliminary orders for numbers 22, 28, and 35. Be at Mellway Cove this evening, at 11 p.m. precisely. No excuse will be accepted if any man is late."

That was all; and I screwed up my face a bit. So far as I could see, the information was valueless. Where was Mellway Cove, anyhow? And why were three Circle men to be there at eleven o'clock? It was probably a very minor affair.

"No excuse will be accepted if any man is late," I repeated to myself. "That looks urgent, though. But it's only the Circle's method, after all—ruthlessness, even with its own members."

The pictures started again—on the second round—and it wasn't likely that there would be any scroll-message yet awhile. So I left my place and strolled out into Fulham Road. I had seen three well-dressed men leave just before me; and I suspected that they were "Numbers 22, 28, and 35." But they seemed to be gentlemen, and they all went off in different directions.

I jumped on to a 'bus, and was soon in Holborn. I jumped down at Chancery Lane Station, and then walked the short distance to Gray's Inn Road, keeping my eyes well skinned meanwhile. I didn't see any signs of a "shadow," but the gov'nor had always told me that I couldn't be too careful.

When I entered the consulting-room I grunted.

"Nothing doing—at least, nothing

much—" I began; then I paused, for I saw that Nelson Lee had a visitor. "Oh, I'm awfully sorry, sir," I added, backing out of the room again.

"Don't go, Nipper," called Nelson Lee. "This is my young assistant," he added, to the visitor. "I trust him in everything. Nipper, Captain Richard Maxwell only arrived a few minutes ago, and he has not yet told me his story. You may as well remain, now."

Captain Maxwell nodded genially to me.

"I've heard of you, young 'un," he said. "How do? As I was just telling your master, I may have come here on a fool's errand, but I'm infernally uneasy. I couldn't go to the police, because I haven't a scrap of evidence—and the police, I know, want hard facts before they'll act. It's only natural."

"But what's the exact trouble, captain?" asked Nelson Lee smilingly.

Maxwell—who was a skipper of the Mercantile Marine, I saw—looked grim.

"That's just it," he replied. "The exact trouble? Well, I'm hanged if I can tell you. Just at present I am engaged on special work for the Government—I've left the merchant service, temporarily. And as this special work is—well, very special, I take it that you'll treat this interview as confidential, Mr. Lee."

"Naturally," said the gov'nor. "You may be quite easy."

"Well, I'm located down at Lowbury-ness, on the Essex coast," said Captain Maxwell. "I have got my own workshops there. To tell the truth straight out, I'm making—I've made, in fact—a special hydroplane, according to my own ideas. It's a submarine-chaser, and, if it's a success, we shall turn out scores of 'em."

"The craft, then, is an experimental one?"

"That's it—experimental," agreed the visitor. "I'm confident, of course, and I think the vessel will make good. It's a hydroplane of a novel type."

"A seaplane, you mean?" I put in.

"Lord, don't you know what a hydroplane is?" asked Maxwell, smiling. "It's queer, but a lot of people have an idea that a hydroplane is an aircraft. It isn't. A hydroplane is merely a fast motor-boat. You're thinking of a hydro-aeroplane," he said. "Our newspapers often confuse the two."

"Well, this machine of mine is a novel type of craft," went on the captain. "It's a motor-boat, but it's driven by means of an air-screw, just like an aeroplane. But it's only for use on the water. I've reached seventy miles an hour on her; but I want to double that speed."

"Phew! That's going some!" I whistled.

"But I didn't come here to tell you this," said Maxwell. "The truth is, Mr. Lee, I've got an idea that spies are at work!"

"Spies?" mused the gov'nor. "Enemy spies, do you mean?"

"Well, I didn't know there was any other brand," replied the captain. "Mind you, I haven't one ounce of real evidence. I've just got the conviction that there are spies skulking about the district."

"But you must have seen something!"

"Well, yes. I've seen strangers hanging about for some little time. But they're never the same strangers. And at night I've seen a man lurking near the workshops. I've seen that more than once," said the visitor grimly. "But I've never caught anybody red-handed, and I can't say that I'd know any of these spies by sight."

"Have your workmen seen anything suspicious?"

"Not that I know of."

"You have spoken to the Admiralty authorities, of course?"

"Well, that's just it!" replied Captain Maxwell. "I haven't said a word. I didn't like to! A man gets laughed at by our complacent officials, you know. I thought I'd seek your advice first, Mr. Lee. What do you think I'd better do?"

The gov'nor smiled.

"Why, go back to Lowbury-ness," he replied promptly. "Keep your eyes open more keenly than ever, and directly you get hold of something definite, communicate with me at once. 'Phone me, if you like. I'll wake somebody up for you!"

"But you wouldn't say anything, or do anything, at present?"

"Until you've got something concrete in your hands, you can't very well act, can you?" asked Nelson Lee. "To tell you the honest truth, captain—and I hope you won't be offended—I think that you have been a little nervous—"

"I've thought that myself," interrupted Maxwell ruefully. "I was afraid you'd laugh at me, Mr. Lee. But I'm

anxious, and I may have exaggerated trivial incidents into mysterious ones. Oh, well, I'm not going to bother! But I'll ring you up if I experience anything really queer. And then you'll come down, won't you?"

The guv'nor nodded.

"You may rely upon that," he replied readily.

Five minutes later the young captain had taken his departure, and Nelson Lee yawned as he lit a cigarette.

"Had your tea, Nipper?" he asked lazily.

"Fat lot of chances I've had of tea, haven't I?" I asked. "I've been at that cinema all the afternoon, guv'nor. Nothing doing!"

"H'm! I didn't expect——"

"Nothing much, anyhow," I added.

"Oh, so your visit wasn't altogether fruitless?"

"There was a message shoved on the screen, sir," I replied. "It wasn't anything of importance, though. Numbers 22, 28, and 35—whoever they are—were ordered to be at Mellway Cove at 11.0 p.m. to-night."

Nelson Lee became alert in the instant.

"Mellway Cove, did you say, young 'un?" he asked crisply.

"Yes. Do you know where it is?" I remarked.

"Well, yes," replied the guv'nor, in a quiet voice. "Mellway Cove happens to be just under a mile from Captain Maxwell's workshops at Lowburyness. The captain's story of mysterious spies wasn't so far-fetched, after all!"

CHAPTER III.

THE £50,000 DEMAND—THE CIRCLE'S USUAL GAME—THE 'PHONE CALL.

I LOOKED at Nelson Lee curiously.

"Mellway Cove is only a mile from Lowburyness!" I repeated.

"Then—then those spies the captain talked about were—were Circle rotters! My hat! There's a connection there, all right!"

"Obviously, Nipper," agreed the guv'nor. "First of all we receive a mysterious warning from our friend, Mr. Todd; then we discover a neat trap set for the purpose of ending our useful existences; then Captain Maxwell comes along with a tale of spies hanging round his workshops near Mellway Cove; and, finally,

you report that three members of the Circle of Terror have been ordered to the Cove this evening. Oh, yes, Nipper, there's a connection between all these happenings."

I took a long breath.

"You think that the Circle is trying to get hold of this—this hydroplane, sir?" I asked.

"They will succeed if we do not take a hand in the game," said Nelson Lee grimly. "In fact, it is fairly certain that an attempt is to be made to-night—an attempt to steal Maxwell's vessel."

"But what use will it be to the Circle?"

The guv'nor shrugged his shoulders.

"They may have a special job on hand," he replied—"a job which will be made all the easier by the possession of an exceptionally fast motor-boat. This air-screw craft of Maxwell's seems to be a remarkable machine."

Just then the telephone-bell rang, and I leaned over impatiently and removed the receiver from the instrument.

"Hallo!" I exclaimed. "Eh? Yes, this is Mr. Lee's. Nipper speaking. Yes, Mr. Lee is at home. Who? Oh, I see! If you'll hang on a minute, I'll just make inquiries. At six o'clock, you say?"

I turned to the guv'nor.

"It's Sir Joseph Pagett," I explained—"or, rather, his secretary. He wants to know if you can see Sir Joseph at six o'clock on urgent business. What shall I say, guv'nor?"

"Sir Joseph Pagett!" he said thoughtfully. "Let me see! Oh, yes! He is the chairman of the White Planet Steamship Company." Nelson Lee looked at his watch. "Six o'clock, Nipper! Very well! Say yes."

I turned to the instrument.

"Yes. That's all right, sir," I called. "Mr. Lee will be able to see Sir Joseph at six o'clock."

I left the telephone and looked at the clock.

"Just gives us time to have tea!" I exclaimed. "I wonder what Sir Joseph Pagett wants, sir! Urgent business, his secretary said. I'll bet it'll be nothing of any importance."

The guv'nor didn't make any comment, and in a short time we were partaking of tea in another apartment. Lee was very thoughtful and silent, and I didn't bother him with questions. I wondered if we should journey down to Mellway Cove

during the evening. I had an idea that we should.

Sir Joseph Pagett arrived at two minutes past six. He proved to be a stoutish old fellow, with a breezy, jovial hanner. But there was a look of worry and concern in his eyes as he shook hands with the guv'nor.

"I'm glad you're able to see me, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed. "I've already put the matter in the hands of the police, but they don't give me much hope. By George, sir, it's an infernal scandal—that's what it is! How dare these impudent rogues make their demands—But there, I'm getting excited, and that won't do!"

Sir Joseph mopped his brow with a silk handkerchief.

"I'm a victim—a victim of the Circle of Terror!" he exclaimed huskily.

"By gum!" I said, starting.

But Nelson Lee merely nodded.

"I gathered, from your opening remarks, Sir Joseph, that such was the case," he said quietly. "I am not at all surprised; indeed, it has even surprised me that the Circle did not attempt to terrorise a steamship company before."

"It is appalling, Mr. Lee—that is the only word," said the shipping magnate. "Heaven knows we've had enough trouble with the enemy submarines of late! And now—To be brief, the Circle of Terror demands the sum of fifty thousand pounds!"

"Phew!" I gasped.

"Fifty thousand—or what?" asked Nelson Lee smoothly.

"Or disaster," replied the other—"just disaster, Mr. Lee! They don't explain how they intend—But I am forgetting myself. Here is the letter itself! Just read it, my dear sir. It is scandalous!"

Nelson Lee took the letter. It wasn't the first epistle of that kind he had seen, by any means; and, although Sir Joseph was furiously indignant, the guv'nor remained calm. For, after all, there was nothing startlingly original in this impudent communication. It was merely an ordinary Circle demand for money.

I was able to read it myself a minute later, for the guv'nor passed it over to me. It ran as follows:

"Headquarters.

"Sir Joseph Pagett, Bart.

"We are addressing this letter to you in your capacity as chairman of the White Planet Line.

"We really consider that the profits of

your company have been somewhat too extensive of late. Your freightage rates have been unduly excessive, and the Circle of Terror condemns profiteering very severely.

"Under these circumstances, we have decided that the White Planet Line is fully capable of disbursing some of these excess profits.

"To be exact, we demand the sum of fifty thousand pounds. This must be paid to our agents on Friday, the twenty-first instant. We will send you a further notification in the course of a few days, giving final instructions.

"We wish to impress upon you, however, that a refusal on your part will be utterly useless. Such a refusal will be followed at once by swift and terrible disaster. You are, of course, fully aware of the unique reputation which we bear.

"THE CIRCLE OF TERROR."

I laid the letter down upon the desk and grinned. I really couldn't help it, although it must have looked unfeeling. But the Circle's demand was so absolutely audacious that it became almost humorous, and the pointed remarks concerning profiteering were somewhat apt.

"What do you think of it?" asked Sir Joseph, almost fiercely. "Isn't it appalling, Mr. Lee? That reference to profiteering is all nonsense—sheer nonsense, sir! The White Planet Line has lost hundreds of thousands since the war has started!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Have you decided upon what course to adopt?" he asked quietly. "The Circle is merely playing its usual game. Several big business concerns have already suffered dearly because they refused the demands of this organisation."

"You suggest, then, that we should pay up—"

"Pardon me! I suggest nothing," interposed Nelson Lee. "At present I am merely asking you for your own decision."

"How can I decide?" asked the baronet impatiently. "Fifty thousand pounds! I am staggered, Mr. Lee! And yet, if we refuse to pay, we shall probably suffer a loss which will be even more serious. I don't know what to do—I don't know what to do. Shall I ignore this demand, or shall I comply with it? Can't something be done? There are six clear days before the money has to be paid. Can't this matter be taken in hand—"

"My advice to you, Sir Joseph, is to prepare for the paying of the demanded sum," put in the gov'nor. "In the meantime, I will do my best to avert the disaster. The police, too, will be busy also. If I can put a stop to this villainy, you may rest assured that I shall do so."

"Can you give me any hope?" asked the visitor.

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders.

"I hardly like to reply to that question," he exclaimed. "The Circle of Terror is an organisation of appalling power. But you may take it for granted, Sir Joseph, that I will work my very hardest in your cause. I shall make a point of reporting to you by next Thursday, at the latest."

And Sir Joseph had to be content with that somewhat non-committal statement. Nevertheless, he took his departure in a cheered frame of mind. How could the gov'nor make any definite promise?

"The Circle's getting busy again, young 'un," exclaimed Nelson Lee, after Sir Joseph had gone. "Fifty thousand, this time! Our friend Zingrave appears to grow more avaricious as the days pass. This is, I think, the biggest demand he has presumed to make."

"Do you think he'll get the money, sir?" I asked.

"It's probable, Nipper—quite probable. If he doesn't, there'll be a White Planet liner missing, I'm afraid. And there might be loss of life. It is a very difficult position—a very grave position."

"And what about that Mellway Cove affair?"

"Why, that, of course, is connected with this."

"Is it?" I exclaimed keenly. "By Jupiter! Where's the connection, gov'nor?"

Nelson Lee lay back, and crossed his legs.

"Just consider, Nipper," he observed. "All these happenings are not mere isolated incidents—they are the threats leading up to one definite result. That result, as we have seen, is the terrorising of the White Planet Line. Two and two, it is commonly believed, make four. Well, apply the same principle to this little problem. Sir Joseph has been given six days' grace. By the expiration of that time the Circle means to have gained possession of Captain Maxwell's hydroplane. That vessel is to be used—if the White Planet people prove obstinate."

"How's the hydroplane going to be used, sir?"

"Ah, I don't pretend to know that," smiled the gov'nor. "But it is obvious that these matters are connected. And I believe that the Circle means to attempt the theft of Maxwell's machine this very night."

"That means there's work to be done," I remarked, with relish.

"Exactly."

"When do we start, sir?"

"Did I say that you were coming?" said the gov'nor, with a twinkle.

"You didn't say it—but I'm going where you go!" I declared. "It's likely I'm going to let you run off on a dangerous errand alone, isn't it? Hang it all, gov'nor, I'm just longing to have a smack at the Circle!"

"Well, it is fortunate you got hold of that message this afternoon," said Lee. "It has proved of great value——"

Buzz-z-z!

"Oh, rats! The 'phone again!" I grunted. "You're out, sir—that's what I'll tell the idiot who's bothering at this time of the evening."

I grabbed at the receiver.

"Hallo! Who's that?" I asked curtly.

"Captain Maxwell," came the reply.

"I'm speaking to Nipper, I believe——"

"Yes. Are you at Lowburyness——"

"Yes, that's right," said Maxwell eagerly. "Is Mr. Lee there?"

"Yes," I replied, disregarding my threat to say that the gov'nor was out; the identity of the caller made all the difference. "Is it anything important, sir?"

"Important!" came the reiteration. "It's vital!"

"Hold the line a tick!" I said; and I handed the receiver to Nelson Lee, with a word of explanation. He listened quietly to the captain's words; I could just hear a dull blur.

"As it happens, captain, Nipper and I were on the point of leaving for Lowburyness," said the great detective at last. "Yes, at once . . . All right, tell me that when I see you—Eh? Oh, in about ninety minutes, I should think . . . By car, yes. All right—good-bye."

Lee hung up the receiver.

"Another development, Nipper," he said, with a grim smile. "Events are moving apace. Captain Maxwell says that something amazing has happened—"

but he won't explain over the wires. But he wants us badly."

"This is getting interesting," I exclaimed. "I wonder what can have happened——"

"Don't wonder, Nipper—wait until we get the facts," interjected the guv'nor crisply. "Somehow, I've got an idea that the events of the night will prove exciting—and, possibly, perilous."

When Nelson Lee voiced those words he didn't realise how true they were to prove!

CHAPTER IV.

THE CIRCLE'S THREAT—MAXWELL'S SURPRISE—OUT ON THE GREY NORTH SEA.

CAPTAIN RICHARD MAXWELL welcomed us warmly.

"By Jove, you've been smart, Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed, as we descended from the car. "That automobile must be a flier."

Nelson Lee and I had arrived in Lowburyness.

For the last five miles the road had led across dark, dreary marshes, and Lowburyness village lay a mile to the south. We were at Maxwell's workshops; the waters of a small dock lay within a stone's throw; the North Sea stretched away beyond.

The workshops were deserted, and we were now standing against the doorway of the captain's little office; his temporary sleeping and living quarters were adjoining. And the night was black and dull.

The spot was a quiet, dismal one at the best of times, and somewhat sinister by night. Maxwell's workshops, and the little dock itself, were fenced off from the outer marshes, and a high wooden gate was always kept locked. It would certainly be difficult for any intruders to gain an entry.

We left the car just outside the office, with all the lights doused, and then followed the skipper into the roughly built hut—for it was little else. A bright oil lamp was burning on a small central desk.

"I'm worried, Mr. Lee—infernally worried!" said Maxwell, closing the door and locking it; the window was already fastened. "Sales, my secretary, is not

on duty this evening, and so we're absolutely private."

"This man is your confidant?" asked the guv'nor.

"Oh, Mr. Sales is absolutely trustworthy," replied the captain. "Son of some big City merchant—University man. Well, look here, since I saw you in your own rooms, Mr. Lee, I've had pretty conclusive proof that my suspicions were well founded. I said that spies had been nosing around, didn't I? Naturally, I assumed that they were enemy spies—German agents. But it turns out that they were members of that infernal Circle of Terror!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"So I gathered," he replied smoothly.

"Eh? You knew it?" asked Maxwell, with uplifted eyebrows. "Well, that's rather surprising; I thought I'd give you a bit of a start. You didn't mention your suspicions to me——"

"No. Nipper brought me a certain piece of information, which led to a definite conclusion," interrupted the guv'nor. "But we'll go into that later, captain. Let me know what has happened this end."

Captain Maxwell withdrew a letter from his pocket.

"That's what's happened!" he exclaimed grimly.

"By gum! Another Circle letter!" I ejaculated, with a whistle.

Nelson Lee and I read the communication together. It was in exactly the same style as the letter received by Sir Joseph Pagett—the words were printed, and a neat purple circle adorned the top of the sheet.

And this letter was short and crisp:

"Headquarters.

"Captain Richard Maxwell,—You have recently completed the construction of a new-type hydroplane, and this vessel is required by us for certain purposes at once.

"Carry out these instructions:

"The hydroplane is to be placed alongside the jetty, with sufficient petrol and oil aboard to carry the boat at least a hundred miles. It is to be moored to the jetty at midnight, and left totally unguarded. At the first sign of treachery, we shall take swift and prompt measures to punish you.

"Refusal to comply with this

demand will be followed, before dawn, by the total destruction of your workshops and yards.

"THE CIRCLE OF TERROR."

"Well, this is getting hot!" I exclaimed. "But that must be all bunkum about destroying the workshops, sir. How can they carry out that threat?"

Nelson Lee looked at me grimly.

"The Circle possesses an aeroplane of the latest type," he replied. "That aeroplane is capable of dropping bombs. The machine might be brought down, but great damage would certainly be caused beforehand—and the chances are that the raider would escape unscathed."

"An air raid!" ejaculated the captain. "I thought we had enough bother with the Germans, without any pet raiders of our own! But your idea's pretty sound, Mr. Lee. An air raid, however, wouldn't suit me in the least, and it strikes me that there is only one course to pursue."

The gov'nor looked up sharply.

"You don't suggest——"

"Exactly!" interrupted Maxwell, nodding. "We'll comply with the Circle's demand, Mr. Lee; we'll let them have the boat. That'll save trouble, won't it? I certainly don't want these workshops bombed."

I gasped.

"But—but—you can't let those Circle rotters pinch the hydroplane," I yelled excitedly. "Hain't we better take it right away, to some place of safety, and sacrifice the workshops?"

Captain Maxwell's eyes twinkled.

"The fact is, Nipper, I don't care a toss about the hydroplane!" he replied calmly. "That's just the truth, Mr. Lee," he added, turning to the detective. "I'm quite prepared—anxious, in fact—to hand over the boat."

Nelson Lee elevated his eyebrows.

"Perhaps you will explain?" he suggested quietly.

To tell the truth, both the gov'nor and I were very astonished. We had been under the impression that the hydroplane was a valuable invention, and that Maxwell had constructed it under Admiralty instructions.

Why was he willing to sacrifice it?

Had it turned out to be a dead failure? If so, I could understand his willingness to hand it over to the Circle. But Maxwell had been enthusiastic during the

afternoon! There was something to be told, that was certain.

"Will I explain?" said the captain. "Why, of course. You see, Mr. Lee, I didn't tell you the whole truth this afternoon, because there was really no need to. But, in the present circumstances, I realise that I must be absolutely frank."

Maxwell glanced at the door and at the window, as though to assure himself that there was no possibility of an eavesdropper overhearing any of his words. Then he drew his chair a little closer, and went on talking; but he now spoke in a much lower key.

"The fact is, Mr. Lee, I don't care a jot about the aeroplane," he exclaimed softly. "The vessel has been talked about a good deal; the people round this district know all about it—it's an open secret. The hydroplane is supposed to be a marvellous craft of an absolutely new design. As a matter of fact, it's quite an ordinary boat, with no special distinctions."

"Oh, I am beginning to understand," nodded Nelson Lee. "The hydroplane, I take it, is merely a blind?"

Maxwell nodded, and grinned.

"You've hit it exactly," he replied. "It's a blind, Mr. Lee; that's what makes the situation rather humorous. The Circle of Terror, with all its astuteness, has fallen into the little trap. They think this machine is something wonderful—and they want to get hold of it. Well, they can have it, and welcome! They'll think they have triumphed—but, in reality, they will have secured a very hollow victory."

"What's the nature of the real work going on here, then?" I asked keenly.

"That's just the point," smiled Maxwell. "While these workshops are supposed to be engaged upon the manufacture of this hydroplane, we are really constructing a submarine of an entirely new type. In fact, we have finished the vessel, and it is an absolute success in every way. The Circle, of course, knows nothing about the submarine, and I am quite willing to let them have the motor-boat. They won't bother me any more, after securing it."

Nelson Lee smiled with evident relief.

"Why, the situation is not so acute as I imagined!" he exclaimed. "It seems that it will be the Circle who will be fooled over this affair. But what is

this submarine, captain? Can't you give us a few details?"

"Certainly—certainly," said our companion at once. "I know very well that I can trust you, Mr. Lee. My words may sound a trifle bombastic, because this submarine is my own invention—but I'm not going to talk about theories. I'll just tell you of the vessel's actual performance.

"She's a wonder—that's the only word," continued the skipper enthusiastically. "She has surpassed all expectations. The vessel's quite small, Mr. Lee—about the smallest submarine in existence, I believe. But she's capable of doing long ocean voyages, can ride any sea, and her normal crew consists of nine men only. At a pinch three men can manage her with ease—provided they're going on a short journey. In all essentials, this submarine of mine is as powerful as the largest naval types—and it can be produced for a tenth of the cost, and in a tenth of the time."

"But she can't carry torpedoes," I objected.

"She doesn't carry the usual torpedoes, Nipper," replied Maxwell. "My torpedoes are small—they look like toys—but they're just as deadly as any the Germans use—and they're much easier to manipulate. My boat, too, can travel at about double the speed of a full-sized submarine—and this without leaving a trace on the surface. You can quite understand how necessary it was to construct this vessel in absolute secrecy. That's why we used the hydroplane as a blind. And, as long as the Circle doesn't attempt to get the submarine, I'm content. They're after the hydroplane; and, as I said, they're welcome to it!"

We were all smiling now; the situation was quite good.

"I think we shall be able to trick the Circle of Terror very neatly," observed the gov'nor. "Your suggestion is excellent, captain. Let the Circle have the hydroplane, by all means. They'll be content, and you'll be content. But, if possible, I'd like to get a blow in at them; I don't quite care for the idea of tamely submitting to this demand."

Captain Maxwell shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't see what else we can do," he remarked. "If we don't let 'em have the hydroplane they'll bomb the whole

show—and that'll probably mean the destruction of the submarine itself."

"I wasn't thinking of attempting to thwart the Circle in that way," said Nelson Lee. "But it is fairly certain that the agents of the Circle will take the hydroplane to a spot along the coast—within fifty miles, I should judge. Well, if we could only follow the boat, we should be able to see exactly where it was taken, and then, later on, make a swoop and nab a whole crowd."

Maxwell scratched his head.

"Well, that's a decent idea," he said. "But how can we follow?"

"Is your submarine ready for sea?"

"At a moment's notice."

"Then why not go out at about eleven o'clock and lie in wait?"

"But I haven't got a crew!" protested Maxwell, rather startled by the gov'nor's suggestion.

"You can manage the boat, surely?" asked Lee.

"I can navigate her."

"And you remarked, a few minutes ago, that three men could run the submarine?" went on the gov'nor. "Nipper and I are ready. Nipper will make shift as a man, at a pinch, I dare say."

I grinned.

"I'm ready for anything," I said cheerfully.

Captain Maxwell got up and paced the little office.

"By Jove, it's a good idea!" he declared. "Why, yes, we could manage all right—the three of us. And the boat can travel absolutely unseen. We'll be able to follow the hydroplane without those aboard suspecting a thing."

"It's a spanking wheeze!" I said eagerly. "We'll chase the hydroplane, see where it goes, and then make a separate and distinct raid to-morrow."

"But that may lead to trouble here," put in the captain doubtfully.

"Nipper is rather previous," said Nelson Lee. "We won't trouble about to-morrow at present. The work, now, is to follow the stolen hydroplane, and ascertain exactly where it is taken to. That's our only course. If we attempt to frustrate the Circle to-night, it will only lead to very serious trouble."

Maxwell glanced at his watch.

"We haven't got any too much time," he remarked. "It's getting fairly late, and we've got a lot to do. The only point I'm worrying over is this: supposing there are any spies about now?"

"Well, they'll only see us preparing

the hydroplane, and placing it ready for them," said Lee. "Isn't it possible to take out the submarine without any watcher being aware of the fact?"

"Yes, of course," replied the skipper. "I was forgetting. It doesn't matter if we are seen taking the hydroplane down to the jetty, does it? The submarine is in its secret dock, and it can reach the open sea without showing an inch."

"That's just what we want."

And Nelson Lee rose to his feet, dropped his cigarette-end into an ash-tray, and buttoned his coat. His actions plainly meant that he was ready for work. Maxwell unlocked the door.

"We'll get the motor-boat down to the jetty first," he said. "After that I'll take you down into the submarine, and we'll slide out to sea. Then we'll lie out there and watch. That's the idea, isn't it?"

"Exactly!" agreed Nelson Lee.

We all passed outside, into the darkness. Maxwell extinguishing the lamp before we left. The night was still and black; the sea lay very calm, the little waves making scarcely any noise as they broke on the sands along the shore. Quite near by, the water gurgled quietly among the piles of the jetty.

I was feeling very excited inwardly. This adventure promised to be interesting. And it was "good" to know that the Circle of Terror was to be hoodwinked.

As we walked to the big building which housed the hydroplane—a building constructed over a wide waterway—Maxwell explained that he had an electric light plant installed; but the engine wasn't working now, and so there was no electric juice. We should have to make shift with lanterns.

The captain unlocked the door of the building, and we passed inside. Then a big lantern was lighted. Right in front of us stood the hydroplane, and it didn't seem to be a "dud." The machine was a magnificent little vessel, and it was a shame to hand it over to the Circle lamely.

The boat itself was quite large for a motor craft, and was fitted, Maxwell explained, with an engine capable of developing 90-horse-power. The propeller, instead of driving under the water, was an air-screw. It was, in fact, a huge aeroplane propeller; four-bladed, and made of special wood.

There was a kind of cage built round the stern of the boat. This was a guard,

to prevent anybody or anything becoming entangled in the propeller. The vessel was capable of high speed, and was very sea-worthy. She must have cost something like one thousand pounds to build. So I didn't see the fun of meekly presenting her to Zingrave.

"She's a fine boat!" I said admiringly.

"When I said I don't care a toss about her, I meant that she is of no value compared to the submarine," explained Maxwell. "She's a ripping craft, of course. It's a dirty shame to let her go, but there's no help for it."

The skipper knew well enough that the Circle of Terror wasn't to be "monkeyed" with. Refusal to comply with the impudent demand would result in a far worse disaster than the loss of the hydroplane. "Of two evils, choose the lesser"—that was the policy to adopt in a case like this.

Maxwell filled the petrol-tanks, and the oil-tanks. Then he had a look round to see that everything was in order. After that, he opened two big doors at the other end of the building, and we towed the hydroplane out into the open.

Five minutes' later she was securely moored to the jetty. We left her there, and returned to the shed, which had been relocked. We entered, and Maxwell secured the door again.

"This way," he said shortly.

He took the lantern, and led us across the building to the upper end, which was covered with floor-boards all over. The strip of water ended about half-way across the building.

"It's rather a good thing the tide's nearly full," remarked the captain. "If it had been low, we should have had bad trouble. It's difficult to float the submarine out at low water, and quite impossible to do so submerged. So the tide's just right for us."

While he was speaking, he unlocked a small oaken cabinet which was let into a side of the wall. In this we saw two small levers. Maxwell pulled one, and a wide portion of the flooring at once slid back with a slight noise.

"By gum!" I ejaculated, rather startled.

"A little arrangement of my own," smiled the captain. "It's necessary to be very cautious, you know. Hydraulic pressure—quite simple. The submarine lies concealed whenever she is brought in."

Both Nelson Lee and I looked into the black cavity which had been un-

covered. Maxwell's light revealed the conning-tower and deck of the small submarine and some iron steps leading downwards.

The submarine was dull blue in colour—slightly darker than the usual Navy slate-grey. She seemed to be wonderfully well-made, and as neat as the inside of a watch; every nut and bolt was finished perfectly.

Maxwell led the way down, and we were soon climbing downwards into the interior of the boat. Here we found plenty of room, for the vessel was made to accommodate nine men. We didn't trouble to look over the submarine, but set ourselves to the task of getting ready for sea.

The engines were of a new type; and, although they were very simple, they developed astonishing power. Nelson Lee was made chief engineer for the time being—after having received instructions from the skipper.

I appointed myself look-out, while Captain Maxwell, of course, took charge of the actual navigation. The vessel was controlled almost completely from a small apartment immediately beneath the conning-tower.

Here we found a perfect maize of dials and instruments; they were meaningless to the guv'nor and me, but Maxwell—being the actual inventor—knew the whole craft from stem to stern.

The electric light had been switched on, and everything was ablaze with brilliant illumination. The periscope was of a design which differed in every respect from any other I'd ever seen. By a cunning arrangement, Maxwell had contrived to construct the long arm, so that it caused no ripple whatever upon the surface of the water, while the reflection of the seascape ahead was cast upon a small screen with amazing clearness. I didn't find this out until later on, however.

The preparations took well over half an hour, and by that time it was after eleven o'clock. When we were all ready to leave, Maxwell started the engine, and told the guv'nor exactly what to do in response to the various signals. It was rather hard lines on Nelson Lee to be shoved down in the engine-room, right in the bowels of the boat, but somebody had to be there.

At last we slid silently down towards the sea, leaving the building behind us within the first minute—passing out, of course, beneath the double doors. It

was a ticklish little trip, and although the distance to the deep water outside the bay was only a half a mile, the journey took us close upon twenty minutes.

Although the submarine was brilliantly lit within, not a gleam of light escaped. The air was pure and cool; Maxwell's arrangements in that respect were astonishingly effective. It was possible, he declared, for us to be totally submerged for twelve hours on end without feeling the slightest ill-effect.

"Well, young 'un, I think we'd better heave-to out here," remarked Maxwell, as he touched one of the engine-room signals. "That'll bring Mr. Lee up," he added. "We've simply got to wait now until the enemy moves."

Nelson Lee's head soon bobbed up through the manhole, and a moment later he stood beside us.

"We're just outside the bay," explained the skipper. "The night's very dark, Mr. Lee, so I think our best course will be to rise to the surface and watch the jetty through our night glasses. There's not much risk of our being seen, for only the conning-tower will be above water."

This arrangement was put into execution, all lights being previously extinguished. The submarine lay just upon the surface, with only her conning-tower showing, heaving gently to the lazy motion of the sea.

The guv'nor was soon perched in position, with a pair of binoculars to his eyes. In a few moments he announced that he could see the motor-boat and jetty perfectly. Maxwell and I, of course, couldn't see anything, for we were below. But I took a look at the periscope-screen, and could distinctly see the dull, black line of the shore. It wasn't possible, however, to detect the jetty.

The captain seized the opportunity to use this period of waiting for the purpose of examining the engines, and making sure that everything was in perfect running order. I went down with him, and was greatly interested in all I saw.

The boat was filled with astonishingly cute inventions. Some of them were Maxwell's own, but others, of course, were a modified form of older inventions. Maxwell was about to show me the arrangement for discharging torpedoes when we heard a slight sound from above.

Hurrying up, we found the guv'nor within the control-room.

"The hydroplane is just being prepared for sea," he explained crisply. "There are three men, I believe. We must be very careful now, captain; the boat will probably come out to sea quite near this spot, and we must be submerged before then."

Nelson Lee's voice sounded somewhat curious in the darkness, for the lights in the control-room were all extinguished, and we had switched off the others before ascending from the engine-room. The hatchway, you see, was still open, and we didn't want any possible gleam to penetrate outside into the night.

Without undue haste, but speedily nevertheless, the hatch was closed, and the submarine submerged until she was just beneath the surface. The engines were then started, and we waited, the skipper and I watching the periscope-screen. This was a kind of mirror, and the whole surface of the sea was reflected upon it—but, of course, in miniature.

The night was so dark that we were unable to see very clearly; but, after about fifteen minutes had elapsed, Maxwell suddenly uttered a short ejaculation. It expressed keen satisfaction.

"They're coming, lad!" he muttered tensely. "Do you see? That faint blur moving towards us——"

"Yes, I can see it," I put in.

"The hydroplane will pass about a couple of fathoms off our port bow," went on the skipper. "That'll do just nicely. When she gets well ahead we shall be able to see her quite distinctly against the sky-line—that's the advantage of having an air-propeller."

Maxwell's words proved to be true, and in a short time the hydroplane was skimming over the water just ahead of us. The engine-room signal was given, and Lee obeyed. And we were soon speeding along in the wake of the stolen boat.

Fortunately, the Circle men were not travelling at full speed, and we were thus able to go quite easily.

"I don't suppose the scoundrels have got the hang of the thing yet," remarked Captain Maxwell. "They'll speed up when they get out into the open sea, I'll warrant. But the engine's not working her best, and they won't be able to get more than sixty out of her."

"Can we do that?" I asked.

I saw the skipper smile.

"Eighty, easily," he replied. "Submerged, too!"

"That's all right, then!" I said, with satisfaction.

Maxwell steered according to my observations. Under ordinary circumstances, of course, four or five men had to be on duty;—but we were managing quite well. And the chase continued without an interruption for two solid hours.

Contrary to the captain's expectations, the Circle men did not increase the speed of the hydroplane; they had taken things quite easily. They were probably congratulating themselves hugely upon the success of their daring enterprise. They assumed, of course, that their demand had been carried out to the letter.

Well, as a matter of fact, it had been carried out. But we were just keeping an eye upon the thieves. If we could locate their base, it was quite probable that we should be able to deal a severe blow at the Circle; for, as likely as not, the spot would be an aeroplane base, as well.

But, just after the two hours had elapsed—at about a quarter-past two—the hydroplane quickened its pace considerably. The night was a little brighter now, and I could see distinctly. We were following the hydroplane fairly closely, but those on board had no idea of our proximity.

Suddenly, I stared into the mirror very keenly.

"There seems to be something," I exclaimed abruptly. "She's zig-zagging queerly, and seems to be in difficulties. My hat! She's stopping, too! If we're not careful we shall run right under her stern!"

Maxwell altered the course slightly, and telegraphed down to the guv'nor. The submarine at once slowed her pace, and the steady throbbing became less intense.

"Why, they've stopped altogether now!" I said quickly. "I can see the propellor just moving round—there's no power on, I'll swear!"

My words were true; and the submarine came to a stop. Then Nelson Lee came up and looked into the mirror with me. It was rather weird to be gazing upon that miniature reproduction of the sea surface. The hydroplane lay only five or six fathoms away from us, and she was swaying curiously.

"Why, this is serious!" exclaimed the



The gov'nor gave a short sobbing gasp. Then he staggered away, the glass went crashing to the floor, and he followed it.—(See p. 4.)

guv'nor sharply. "That boat's floundering, Nipper—don't you see how her bows are down? Why, in less than five minutes she'll be completely under!"

"That means those rotters will drown!" I gasped.

"Let 'em!" growled Maxwell. "We're not called upon to rescue them— But I suppose we shall have to," he added. "We're not Huns!"

Very shortly it became quite apparent that we should have to rescue the three Circle agents. For they were in dire straits. There was no longer any doubt that the hydroplane was sinking by the head. Her nose, in fact, was already under water. There were no lifebelts aboard, and the three men would undoubtedly drown—unless we took a hand.

Even while we were deciding, the stricken craft suddenly listed to starboard; and, a moment later, she turned over in the water, and lay so that we could see her keel.

"It's queer!" grunted the skipper. "They must have been up to some monkey tricks with her. What's caused her to sink on a quiet sea like this! Whoa! There she goes!"

As Maxwell spoke we saw the stern of the hydroplane lift up clear for a moment; then it slid under the surface. We saw the three men leap outwards, and then three heads were just visible bobbing among the swirls.

"We shall have to pull them aboard!" said the guv'nor gravely. "We can't possibly stand by and see those men go to their deaths—scoundrels though they are! And we shall have to be pretty sharp, too."

The submarine soon rose, and then Lee threw back the hatch, and stepped out upon the little deck. I followed him; and was just in time to see the three men swimming towards us.

As they climbed aboard the guv'nor showed them the muzzle of his revolver.

"I don't suppose you've got much fight in you!" he exclaimed dryly. "But, my friends, I advise you to attempt no tricks. No, this isn't a German submarine—we're British, but we happen to know with whom we are dealing!"

"Thank Heaven you are here, sir," gasped one of the rescued men. "We don't want to try any tricks, you can take it from me! We thought we were done for this trip!"

"Your lives are in no danger," said the guv'nor grimly. "But you will have to submit to being handcuffed——"

"Why, what's that?" I interjected suddenly.

I was pointing rather unsteadily away to port. There, dim and blurry in the night, I saw something coming rapidly towards the submarine. It looked like a small electric launch. But how could that be possible?

The guv'nor looked round rapidly.

"What's wrong, Nipper?" he asked in a sharp voice.

"Why, there, guv'nor," I exclaimed huskily.

And then Nelson Lee saw the oncoming launch. He clicked his teeth together sharply.

"By Heaven! Have we walked into a trap?" he muttered. "What can that boat be doing here—showing no lights——"

Without the slightest warning two of the rescued men had flung themselves forward. They grabbed Nelson Lee's left foot before he could use his revolver. The next second he was flat on his back on the slippery deck.

After that I don't exactly know what happened. I found myself fighting like fury. Then something bumped heavily against the submarine's side. Harsh voices rent the air; men swarmed over the deck like flies.

In the midst of the excitement Maxwell came up to see what the trouble was about. Before his head was fairly out of the hatch a rope was passed over it, and the noose drawn tight. He was utterly helpless, and was a captive within two minutes.

By this time both the guv'nor and I were also overpowered.

And we all three realised the terrible truth. We had been trapped by the Circle of Terror—and were in that dread organisations power!

CHAPTER V.

BEFORE THE HIGH LORD—ZINGRAVE EX.
PLAINS MATTERS—OUR FATE!

I SIMPLY couldn't realise it at first. My brain seemed to be afire. I was aware of an intense, burning fury within me. Instead of hoodwinking the Circle, the Circle had hoodwinked us! The realisation of that apparent fact nearly sent me crazy.

The Circle had hoodwinked us!

The sentence seemed to be flashing before my eyes. I'm quite certain that I've never been so completely stunned in my life as I was in that moment. The Circle must have known about the submarine the whole time! The hydroplane had been deliberately sunk in order to trap us! The three men were in no danger, of course, because they knew that the electric launch was near by.

Although they couldn't have known, positively, that we were near by, they had risked sinking the hydroplane—being quite sure that they, themselves, were safe. And their calculations had been correct. We had done exactly what they wanted; we had fallen into the trap!

And yet, although I was so furious, I knew that we weren't to blame for what had occurred. It was just a sheer disaster. Zingrave had made his plans cunningly—so cunningly that no man on earth could have foreseen them. Nelson Lee didn't profess to be superhuman; he was just as liable to misfortunes as anybody else.

The first really lucid fact I knew was that the gov'nor and I were lying in the bottom of a fast electric launch, and the latter was speeding over the water, through the darkness.

We were bound and helpless; and there were several men quite close to us. Captain Maxwell was not there, and so it was fairly obvious that he had been left behind on the submarine—a prisoner, too.

I knew why. He was wanted, of course, to investigate the boat. But where we were being taken to I couldn't imagine.

We had been overpowered on the deck of the submarine of course; and, considering the odds, we couldn't blame ourselves for being whacked. The launch was a silent one, and carried no lights whatever. She had apparently been standing by when the hydroplane sank. But, lying low on the water, we hadn't seen her; and we had had no inkling of her presence until I spotted her—too late.

The launch proceeded steadily for about ten minutes. Then the speed slackened, and I presently felt her bump gently against something solid. Several voices came to my ears; then, after a pause, I was told to get to my feet. As

my ankles weren't bound, this was easily done.

I saw, to my astonishment, that the launch was lying alongside a decent-sized steam-yacht—her parent ship, of course. Not a light of any sort was showing, and I could see that Nelson Lee was being forced up the ladder in front of me.

We stepped upon the deck and stood quite close together. Two men in reefer coats and peaked caps faced us, and one of these gave a quick order for us to be taken below without delay.

The vessel was British, of course, and I instinctively knew that the man who had given the order was none other than Professor Cyrus Zingrave himself. He was a small man, wearing a neatly-cut iron-grey beard.

The gov'nor and I were escorted down the companion in the darkness, and then into one of the luxurious state-rooms. Here, as soon as the door was closed, the brilliant electric light was switched on. The ports, I saw, were totally obscured.

But I didn't see this at first; I was momentarily dazzled by the brilliant light. A voice spoke amusedly.

"Quite a successful coup, eh?" it exclaimed. "We have captured the Maxwell submarine, its inventor, and our two dear old friends, all in one swoop. I think we might regard tonight as a night of triumph."

"You have every reason to congratulate yourself," replied Nelson Lee evenly. "I certainly did not anticipate this move on your part. It was smart work—and I admit it freely."

By this time I could see quite distinctly. The state-room was superbly furnished, with every evidence of luxury and expense. Both the men in reefer coats were apparently gentlemen of wealth; they were dressed extremely well, and looked like the average pleasure-seeking yachtsmen. But, as I said, I was pretty sure that the short man with the grey beard was Professor Zingrave himself—the High Lord of the Circle of Terror. The fact that he addressed us proved, anyhow, that he was in command.

This yacht was probably owned by a wealthy man of repute—but he was also a member of Zingrave's "Council of Three." I wasn't sure of this, of course—but I couldn't think of any other explanation.

"We've had you in our hands before, Lee, and you've managed to slip away," went on the short man. "I am the first to acknowledge your undoubted ability. You have proved yourself to be exceptionally astute on many occasions. Indeed, you have been such a thorn in the Circle's side that we have been in the habit of taking you into consideration whenever we planned a big coup. I am not going to utter any threats—I will merely say that even the cleverest of men trip sooner or later."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Exactly," he agreed. "But other men trip, don't they?"

"I suppose you mean that I shall do so?" said the short man calmly. "It's possible, Lee—quite possible. I am by no means invulnerable. But, somehow, I don't think I shall trip yet awhile. As you may have guessed, I am the High Lord of the Circle—and every man on board this yacht is a slave—my slave. Whatever happens, every man is bound to secrecy. It is rather a pity that this lad should have to suffer on your account——"

"Chuck that rot!" I cut in gruffly. "I don't want any of your pity!"

"Nipper is inclined to be independent!" smiled Zingrave, with all his old urbanity, and silkiness of voice. "It was rather a good thing that Captain Maxwell called you in, Lee; Fate has played into my hands wonderfully. I know, of course, all about the submarine from the very start. I knew, also, that the vessel would not be handed over to me as meekly as the hydroplane was. Accordingly, I adopted a little subtlety. There is no harm in my telling you that Sales, Captain Maxwell's secretary, is one of my most trusted men."

"A Circle spy!" exclaimed Nelson Lee bitterly. "I quite understand—now. Until you spoke those words I was somewhat puzzled. Your spy system seems to be run on German lines!"

"I pride myself that the Circle's system is far superior to that of the Huns," said the High Lord easily. "Sales was keenly on the alert, and he easily guessed your intentions as soon as he saw that the submarine left its secret dock. He accordingly gave his men instructions, and wirelessly to me I, at this end, had everything prepared. The hydroplane was deliberately sunk—in order to make Maxwell bring his sub-

marine to the surface. The rest, of course, you know. It was quite a simple business. We stood to lose, but the chances were that we should succeed. We have succeeded; and Maxwell is now being forced to do the Circle's bidding. Under my orders he will take the submarine in a safe harbour in Sorby Creek, on the Norfolk coast."

"You are obligingly frank," said the gov'nor calmly.

"Why not? It amuses me, and it will do no harm," said Professor Zingrave. "Surely, Lee, you know what to expect? You have cost me several hundreds of thousands of pounds—you have ruined many of my most promising schemes. Naturally, I do not love you because of that. You will not be surprised when I tell you that I intend to have a little sport—at your expense. I am not a man who believes in display as a rule; but I feel that this occasion demands special attention."

"Why don't you drop us overside, and finish with it?" I exclaimed fiercely. "That's what you mean to do, I suppose? I've noticed that people who talk a lot about what they're going to do, very seldom do it!"

"An apt remark, Nipper," said the High Lord. "But it won't apply on this occasion. And I shall not weary you with any further talk. If you will excuse me a few moments, I will just give my orders."

And Zingrave left the cabin. He had spoken gently and quietly the whole time; but his eyes had glittered with evil hatred during the interview. Every word he had uttered had contained a hidden menace.

We were now left alone with the other man, who had spoken no word at all. He lounged against the table, fingering a small revolver. This precaution was, of course, quite unnecessary. We were not quite such fools as to attempt a dash for freedom under the present circumstances—with our wrists bound, and in the heart of the enemy's camp.

Zingrave returned in a few minutes, bringing with him one of the ship's officers. This man took charge of us, and marched us into an empty state-room. We were locked in, and a man was placed on guard.

"Well, gov'nor, this is a nice fix!" I exclaimed huskily.

"I'm afraid the position is hopeless,

Nipper," was Nelson Lee's quiet reply. "You realise, of course, what this all means? Zingrave has got hold of Maxwell's submarine, and poor Maxwell himself. If the White Planet Line refuses to pay that fifty thousand, I can prophecy that one of their bigger ships will be torpedoed, with all the ruthlessness of the Huns."

"It's a terrific coup, guv'nor!" I said, shaking my head. "About the biggest thing the Circle's ever done! By Jupiter, I never thought the night's adventures would end like this!"

"The night's adventures are not ended yet," Nelson Lee reminded me.

We didn't feel much like conversation; and we weren't allowed much, in any case, for, after about ten minutes, I could feel by the absence of vibration that the engines had been stopped again.

Almost at once the state-room door was unlocked, and we were taken out upon deck. The night was not at all dark now. The stars were all shining, and a hazy half-moon was visible. On every side stretched the grey North Sea.

Without a word, we were hustled down the ladder into a dinghy, which had been lowered in readiness. The officer and three men got in with us, and pulled away from the yacht.

We didn't go far, and I soon understood why, for our destination proved to be a huge bell-buoy, which looked like a skeleton cathedral dome, rising out of the water. From the level of the sea, the thing seemed to be a huge size, towering right above us. The iron bell-cage was wet and slimy, and I wondered what the idea could be.

I didn't find it necessary to wonder for long. The guv'nor was dealt with first. He was hauled out of the boat and bound to the ironwork of the buoy—spread-eagled on to it, in fact. Of course, any amount of struggling would be useless, for in that position it was utterly impossible to use any force, and the ropes were strong and thin.

I felt like making a struggle for it. I felt like fighting the whole infernal crowd. But what was the good of causing trouble? In the end I should be subdued, and I knew it. So I fought down my rage and submitted.

I was placed close beside the guv'nor, and tied just as securely. To be bound, spread-eagled, on to the caging of a buoy

is no joke, I can tell you. I felt terribly helpless, as, indeed, I was.

The boat then pulled away and returned to the yacht. The sea was somewhat choppy now, for a breeze had arisen, and the spray splashed on us continuously as the buoy rolled in the waves.

"What's the idea of this, guv'nor?" I asked hoarsely.

"I'm afraid they haven't done with us yet, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "But our position even now is fairly desperate. In this exposed position we shall be dead within six hours, and I don't suppose many ships pass this way. Zingrave wouldn't be here if that was the case."

We waited rather fearfully to see what would occur. I half expected the yacht to steam away, leaving us there. But Zingrave had mentioned sport. What could he have meant by that?

The yacht was quite clearly visible in the weak moonlight. But it was not until ten minutes had elapsed that we discovered Professor Zingrave's diabolical intentions. The High Lord, to tell the exact truth, indulged in some revolver practice! And the guv'nor and I, spread out upon that buoy, formed the targets!

Horrible as the idea was, it fitted Zingrave to a T. It was just the type of devilry that he gloated in. At last he had got us in his power, far from land, and so he meant to pander to his Hunnish desires.

The idea was to kill us both and leave us there. When found—perhaps not for days—our deaths would be a mystery which would probably never be unravelled. It was Zingrave's bitter hatred of us which prompted him to resort to this villainy.

I've set all this down now; but, of course, we didn't know anything about it until the first shot was fired. We were both looking at the yacht's deck when we saw a tiny red flash, followed by a sharp crack.

"Why——"

That's all I could say—at any rate, it's all I did say, for a faint "ping" sounded quite close to me. At the very same second the guv'nor's head dropped on to his chest, and he became deadly limp.

"Guv'nor!" I gasped fearfully.

"I'm not touched, Nipper," muttered Nelson Lee sharply. "But if we can trick Zingrave, we will. He will naturally assume that his first shot was a bull's-eye, and he won't aim at me again."

Crack!

Again came the sharp report from the yacht's deck. This time something like a burning hot iron seared my wrist. I knew that a bullet had grazed me, but I took the guv'nor's tip without a second's hesitation.

Even as I felt the burning pain, I allowed myself to go completely limp, and hung there as though dead.

"Splendid, Nipper!" muttered the guv'nor. "I'm afraid, however, that Zingrave will send some more shots to make assurance doubly sure. Were you hit that time?"

"My wrist was grazed, sir," I replied.

"Our luck is holding good, after all, young 'un," said Nelson Lee softly. "Don't move an inch, whatever you do! There are probably several pairs of binoculars levelled at us at this very moment."

We both remained as limp as rags. It's a wonder our hairs didn't turn grey during those tense minutes. We were expecting bullets with every second that passed, and it's a pretty rotten feeling to be a target.

The tension was relaxed, however, when we distinctly heard the sound of the yacht's engines again. The vessel was getting under way! That meant that our danger for the moment was over.

"Don't look up, Nipper!" said Lee sharply. "They're probably still watching."

I didn't move a hair, and I didn't tell the guv'nor that my wrist was aching abominably. I began to think that my injury was more serious than a graze. But perhaps the acute pain was due to the fact that some salt spray had dashed over my arm.

Five minutes later the yacht was steaming away in earnest. And now she was showing quite a number of lights. The secret mission of the night was over. But what had happened to the submarine and poor old Maxwell, I couldn't imagine.

I was simply bubbling with exuberance now. I don't suppose I had any real cause, for we weren't out of the wood by any means. But, after the prospect of swift and sudden death, this unexpected breathing space was joyful. I could have shouted with delight.

And we undoubtedly owed our lives to Professor Zingrave's overwhelming conceit. In his cocksureness, he fondly imagined that both his shots had sped

true to their mark. Being an expert with the revolver, he had assumed that a miss on his part was impossible.

But it was the guv'nor who had triumphed this time. By acting so promptly, the High Lord had naturally been led to believe that his aim had been accurate. In his conceit, he hadn't even troubled to fire any further shots. That was extremely fortunate for us, for our luck wouldn't have held much longer.

And so, while the yacht steamed away, we were left upon the buoy, helpless, in a hopeless predicament, but alive!

CHAPTER VI.

THE HAND OF PROVIDENCE—AT THE COMING OF DAWN—THE PATROLLING SEAPLANE.

NELSON LEE turned his head towards me and smiled reassuringly.

"Our position is not quite so desperate now, Nipper," he exclaimed. "Perhaps we shall prove to Zingrave that we are as slippery as ever. But don't raise your hopes too high. Oh, by the way, how's your wrist?"

"Aching, guv'nor," I replied—"aching like old boots!"

The yacht was now merely a smudge upon the gloomy horizon. The moon was half concealed by dull clouds, and the whole seascape looked drear and sinister. There was no other ship visible upon all that vast expanse. And supposing there had been? How could we expect to be seen? Why, even in daylight, we might be missed by a dozen vessels even though they passed within a mile! Our forms were practically invisible against the iron cagework of the buoy.

"Your wrist is aching, Nipper?" asked Nelson Lee. "I hope that bullet didn't do any real damage. Can't you manage to see?"

The wrist which had been hit was the one farthest from the guv'nor. He, of course, couldn't see it at all. I stretched forward, exerting a considerable amount of energy, for I was trying to stretch my bonds somewhat.

And then an extraordinary thing happened. Without the slightest warning, the rope round my injured wrist parted with a slight snap, and my arm hung down free!

For a few seconds I was so amazed that I simply gasped. I hadn't been expecting anything of this sort. I'd even made

up my mind that struggling would be utterly useless. And now, without any struggling at all, the rope had parted!

Then, in a flash, I realised the truth.

"Great Scott!" I yelled.

"Good gracious, Nipper! What ever is the matter?" asked Nelson Lee, rather startled.

I didn't reply for a moment; I really wasn't capable of it, for the realisation of the truth nearly choked me. My wrist had come free. The rope had parted at the slightest tug, and it was the rope which had secured my injured arm.

Of course, Zingrave's bullet had grazed my skin, and had passed clean through the rope, almost severing it;

Extraordinary as it seemed, there was, upon serious consideration, nothing really astounding in the fact, for Zingrave's bullet was just as likely to hit the rope as it was to hit anything else. Instead of killing me, the awful scoundrel had provided me with the means of getting free! It was the Hand of Providence, in all conscience!

"What is the matter?" repeated the guv'nor sharply.

"My hand's free!" I gasped. "Don't you understand, sir? That bullet of Zingrave's cut through the rope! Why, in five minutes we'll both be free! It's the biggest piece of luck that ever happened!"

I waved my hand excitedly for the guv'nor to see, forgetting all about the pain in my wrist. It was the salt which had made it smart so much. Actually, the skin was only severely grazed.

"The High Lord blundered rather badly, young 'un," remarked Nelson Lee calmly. "He was so extraordinarily pleased with himself that he became careless. Yes, I can see your hand is free. It's rather wonderful, my boy."

"The bullet went just in the right place," I exclaimed huskily. "But even now it'll be a bit of a job to get myself completely free. Whoa! The sea seems to be getting rougher, sir! This old buoy is rather drunk!"

The huge thing, in fact, was rolling giddily, and we rolled with it. And the spray was now much more severe. Both Nelson Lee and I were practically drenched.

I unbuttoned my coat, took out a pen-knife from my waistcoat pocket, and opened the blade with my teeth. Then I reached over as far as possible, and I

was just able to touch the bonds of my other wrist with the keen blade.

"It's O K!" I said gaspingly. "I can just reach, sir!"

My position was rather strained, but in a few seconds the cord was severed, and my other hand was free. I now found it necessary to cling to the ironwork to prevent myself being thrown face forwards.

All this time, of course—I don't think I've mentioned it before—the bell within its cage was tolling monotonously. Yet the sound seemed quite small to what I should have expected. It didn't interfere with our conversation, for there were distinct pauses between each toll.

Having got my hands free, it was easy enough for me to reach down and unfasten my ankles. Then I climbed up the ironwork and attended to the guv'nor. In less than five minutes he was free also.

We now climbed right on to the summit of the buoy, and sat perched there in comparative comfort. We could keep a better hold, and the spray didn't reach us except occasionally. The gloomy sea stretched out in one vast expanse on every side. Not a single light was showing.

"Nice, cheery outlook, sir!" I said lightly.

"At all events, the outlook is far rosier than it was ten minutes ago," said Nelson Lee. "There's no reason why we should die, Nipper. We can stick this for hours, if necessary—for a whole day, even—and we shall surely be picked off during the hours of daylight, which will soon be heralded in the East."

"I don't think we should have lasted long in our other predicament, guv'nor," I remarked. "The spray would have drenched us continuously, and we might not have been spotted for weeks. But now, of course, we can wave and signal to any passing ship. Oh, I'm hopeful!"

Nelson Lee was silent. I could see he was bitterly chagrined over the vicissitudes of the night. Vicissitudes means changes, I believe, and we'd had enough changes during the last three or four hours to please anybody!

But we weren't pleased over it. The changes had all been in favour of our enemies. Everything had gone wrong, and it would have been foolish to blame ourselves. The cleverest man in the world can't always guard against treachery.

And we were the victims of treachery. If it hadn't been for the spying of Sales, Captain Maxwell's secretary, our plans would have gone smoothly. But, owing to the traitor's wireless information to Zingrave, we had been tricked.

The net results were rather appalling.

The guv'nor and I were sitting upon a bell-buoy far out in the North Sea. If it hadn't been for Zingrave's conceit, we should have been dead.

Captain Maxwell was a prisoner in the Circle's hands.

And the submarine, which was to have been kept a secret at all costs, had been stolen by the Circle of Terror.

Truly, it had been a night of misfortune.

But there was one rosy spot in all the gloom.

"I say, guv'nor," I exclaimed, as a thought struck me. "That was a ripping disguise of Zingrave's, wasn't it? But he didn't even trouble to disguise his voice—because he meant to kill us. And he told us something that might be jolly useful—if we can only escape from this position."

Nelson Lee smiled grimly.

"To quote the professor's own words," he observed, "he saw no harm in giving us the information, and it amused him. I rather fancy he wouldn't be amused if he knew the exact circumstances. Zingrave was obliging enough to tell us where the submarine is being taken to."

I looked at the guv'nor rather queerly.

"Supposing that was a blind?" I suggested. "Zingrave wouldn't have given us the real information, would he?"

"I don't see why not, my boy," replied Lee. "The High Lord fully intended us to die; and there was no harm, therefore, in taking us into his confidence. Zingrave has made the same mistake before now. Even the cleverest criminals are often undone by their own folly. The professor could not resist the temptation to gloat over us—"

"But, I say!" I put in quickly, "where is the submarine being taken to? I've forgotten! Somewhere in Norfolk—"

"Sorby Creek was the name of the place," said Nelson Lee. "I have an idea that it is somewhere between Cromer and Wells—on a very lonely,

desolate stretch of coast. Sorby is a tiny hamlet."

"Wouldn't it be fine if we could go there and recover the submarine?" I exclaimed. "But we mustn't think of that, yet. We're still marooned. And I'm jolly thirsty, guv'nor. I'm cold and miserable. Why the dickens doesn't some ship come along?"

Nelson Lee gripped my arm affectionately.

"You mustn't be impatient, Nipper," he said. "We can't expect to be rescued before daylight—and even then it may be evening before we are taken off this buoy. There are hours of hardship and torture before us—torture when the sun beats down upon us."

I began to look serious; I hadn't quite realised what it would mean when the day came. But now I thought of the possible prospect. The day promised to be a brilliant one, for there wasn't a sign of rain in the night sky.

And when the sun raised himself in the high heavens, he would blaze down upon us with terrible power.

We hadn't a single inch of shelter; even our caps had vanished. And, naturally, the metalwork of the buoy would become burning hot under the sun's rays. We should suffer dreadful agonies from thirst.

And supposing we weren't picked off? There was the prospect of another night; and then, perhaps, another day — And supposing a storm came up? We should be tossed about and should die of exposure—

"Oh, rats!" I muttered to myself. "What's the good of meeting trouble half-way?"

All the same, I was greatly subdued. The joyous feeling of freedom which had come immediately after I had cut my bonds, had now vanished. I could see that our position was very little improved.

What difference did it make, whether we were tied to the buoy, or whether we merely clung to it? We couldn't move off it, and the chances were that we shouldn't be seen by any passing ship. And then, the thought of the burning sunshine made me apprehensive.

At last, after what seemed to be an eternity, the first faint flush of dawn broke in the east.

For an hour past the sea had been as black as ink, for the moon had dis-

appeared. But now the blackness turned to a drab, cold grey. The North Sea looked almost wintry in that dim light.

But the dawn became brighter and brighter; until, at last, daylight had come to us. And I noticed a faint smudge of smoke towards the East, clearly outlined against the lightening sky.

"A ship over there, guv'nor!" I said, pointing.

Nelson Lee looked, but said nothing. We both watched with interest; and, presently, the smudge of smoke became clearer, and the nose of a big steamer came into view over the horizon. She was certainly getting nearer, and I felt a great excitement within me.

"Let's get up and wave!" I said tensely.

"A sheer waste of energy, my boy," objected the guv'nor. "We'll wait until the boat is within sight, at all events. It is merely a smudge at present."

We waited for hours, it seemed. The ship revealed herself as a big merchant vessel, with one funnel. She must have been of about 6,000 tons displacement. And she was serenely steaming along in the far distance.

"She's passing!" I exclaimed dismally. "She won't come over this way at all, sir! But if we can see her, those on board can see us! That stands to reason."

"Not necessarily, young 'un. At this distance we are merely a little dot upon the face of the sea. Even through binoculars it would be difficult for the crew of that vessel to distinguish us."

"Well, I'm going to wave!" I exclaimed grimly.

I took off my coat, wedged my feet firmly into the ironwork, and then started waving my coat wildly to and fro. Then the buoy rolled over with the swell, and I nearly fell headlong into the sea.

"Steady, Nipper—steady!" said Nelson Lee, grabbing me. "You don't want to get a ducking, do you? Wave away if it pleases you—I'll hold you tight."

I flung the coat about until my arms ached, and until I was breathless. But the big steamer continued on its course sedately unconscious of my exertions. At all events, she didn't change her course an inch.

And, before long, she became a smudge on the horizon, as before.

"Rotten!" I grunted, sitting down beside Lee. "All that exertion for nothing! And I suppose that's the way all the ships'll go!" I added bitterly. "That must be the regular traffic route out there. Whoa! Here we go again!"

With the dawn the breeze had freshened briskly, and the sea was becoming somewhat restless and uneasy. The great bell-buoy tolled ceaselessly, and rocked to and fro upon the grey waters. I noticed, now, that I was feeling rather dizzy and sick. The motion was decidedly unpleasant.

An hour passed, and the sun rose superbly above the sea. But on every side lay the bleak, bare water. Not a sail was to be seen—

"Can you hear anything?" Nelson Lee asked suddenly.

I had been very deep in thought, and had taken no notice of anything for some little time. The guv'nor's voice broke in upon my reverie abruptly. I looked up, somewhat vaguely.

"Hear anything, sir?" I repeated. "Only the bell—that's making enough row to awaken— Oh, you mean—"

I didn't finish, but stared up into the sky with a sudden quickening of my pulse. I heard, now, a distinct, insistent humming. And such an humming could only be caused by the engine of an aeroplane.

Almost at once I spotted a big biplane right away to the south. She was about two thousand feet up, and was travelling straight in our direction. I could see the sun glinting upon the whirling propellor, and the 'planes shone whitely.

"By gum! She's coming right over us," I gasped excitedly.

Nelson Lee caught my excitement this time. As I whipped off my coat again, the guv'nor followed suit. Then we both waved frantically. I even yelled at the top of my voice—although that, of course, was utterly useless. If I'd had a megaphone the airman couldn't have heard me. But I was excited.

The machine, I could see now, was a seaplane—and this made me simply frantic with hope. I had previously thought that the pilot would possibly see us, and would go back ashore to have a boat sent out. But the machine was a seaplane! She could come down on the water and rescue us herself!

The hum was now a roar, and the big seaplane looked almost upon us. She would pass about half a mile away, broadside to us, and she was going steadily, without a sign of easing down.

I could see the circles upon her planes, now, and knew that the machine must be an R.N.A.S. patrolling scout. These machines, I knew, were up and down the coast continuously, from dawn until dusk, on every fine day. I hadn't thought of seaplanes previously.

"Oh, lor'!" I roared. "She's going past, guv'nor!"

There was no doubt about that. The seaplane held on its course without a deviation, and Nelson Lee and I waved our coats wildly. It was maddening. We could even see the pilot's head, for the machine was now broadside to us, and flying right past. Within two minutes she would be gone—

"Ah!" ejaculated Nelson Lee suddenly.

"Hurray!" I yelled in a cracked voice.

For, at that second, we had both seen the pilot looking down at us. The machine at once swerved round in a steep-banked curve, and the roar of the engine shut off abruptly. Both the guv'nor and I ceased our efforts, panting heavily.

The seaplane was coming to our rescue!

We were hot and flushed, and I could hear my heart beating against my ribs tremendously. I watched the descending seaplane with great interest. She was coming down steeply. Then she flattened out, and her floats touched the water gently, and she came gliding along towards the buoy, sending spray behind her in cascades. And she came to a standstill within fifty yards, heaving gently to the motion of the sea.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CODE TELEGRAM—DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR LENNARD ARRIVES—THE CIRCLE WINS.

THE pilot—who was the only occupant of the seaplane—waved to us.

"What's wrong there?" he called curiously. "You fellows seem to be in a pretty mess, don't you?"

"Can you take us off?" called the guv'nor, in reply.

"Well, I don't know," exclaimed the

pilot. "I'm not sure whether the old 'bus will lift with three up. But how on earth did you get in this fix? Sub-marined, I suppose? Anybody else——"

"No, we're not the survivors of a shipwrecked crew," interrupted Nelson Lee. "My name is Lee—Nelson Lee—and my young assistant and I have been the victims of an outrage. We were left on this buoy to die."

"Ye gods!" said the pilot, in open astonishment. "I know your name, Mr. Lee, and I'm jolly glad to be of assistance to you. I am Lieutenant Turner, of the R.N.A.S. Just patrolling, you know—joy-riding, in fact."

Lieut. Turner was only a young fellow of about twenty, and he was grinning cheerfully at us. He couldn't risk bringing the machine alongside the buoy, and so Nelson Lee and I plunged into the water and swam to the seaplane.

We hauled ourselves on to the floats, and stood up.

"That's better," said our rescuer. "Lucky this 'bus is a two-seater. I suppose you can both squeeze into the empty cockpit? We'll have a proper jaw when I've taken you ashore."

"By Jupiter, you're a brick!" I exclaimed impulsively.

"My dear kid, I couldn't leave you on that buoy, could I?" grinned the lieutenant. "I'm rather anxious to hear your yarn—but that'll do later."

The guv'nor and I climbed up, and managed to squeeze ourselves into the passenger's cockpit. It was a bit of a tight squeeze, but we didn't mind a scrap. Turner touched the switch, and the engine started with a splutter.

A moment later she was roaring with appalling force, and the seaplane cut across the water with a wake of foam behind her. She rocked and swayed giddily, but seemed disinclined to rise.

At last, however, after a long run against the wind, the machine hopped once or twice, splashed down again, and then got off sweetly. Once in the air she rose without the slightest difficulty, and we were soon a thousand feet up.

Then her nose was pointed towards the land—which, at this height, we could easily see away to the west. It seemed that the seaplane was only twenty minutes flight from its base, and so the journey was quite a short one.

We "landed" on the waters of a little bay, and taxied right up to the

beach. Here a couple of mechanics hauled the seaplane up. Both men looked astonished—and I didn't wonder. Lieut. Turner had gone out alone, and had returned with a couple of wet-looking passengers.

A little way from the beach lay the hangars; they were painted all sorts of weird colours, in order to disguise them. The bay was secluded, and high cliffs surrounded it.

The lieutenant took us into one of the hangars, and here Nelson Lee briefly explained the position. He didn't go into any details—but frankly told Turner that we were up against the Circle of Terror.

"Phew! You've had a warm time!" said the young pilot.

"But, thanks to your assistance, we are safely ashore," replied the gov'nor.

"Now, lieutenant, I want to ask you a favour."

"Fire away."

"It is virtually important that the news of our rescue shouldn't leak out," said Nelson Lee gravely. "You quite understand that, don't you? The Circle will hear of our escape within an hour—if it is talked about. And I have urgent reasons for remaining "dead" until to-night."

Turner nodded.

"I quite understand that, Mr. Lee," he said. "I won't breathe a word—and those two men will keep their heads shut, I know. Not that there's anybody here to talk to, anyhow. Still, I'll give them the tip."

"And I'll add a different sort of tip," smiled the gov'nor. "A fiver between them will be acceptable, I dare say. How far are we off a town here?"

"Three miles—Caseby."

"Oh, so that's where we've landed?" said Lee. "H'm, I thought we were further north. Now, I was wondering if there was a cottage about here—"

Turner grinned.

"You want to dry your clothing, and find a breakfast—what?" he suggested. "Well, look here, Mr. Lee. There's a shanty just up the beach—one of ours, you know. You can have that, and welcome. Dry your clothes in the sun while you feed. I can let you have plenty of grub from the stores."

"That's splendid of you," said Nelson Lee. "Are you in command here?"

"Well, I am for to-day," smiled the

other. "Evans had a bit of a smash yesterday, and he's being mended. This seaplane station is only a small one, and we're as lonely as Robinson Crusoe as a rule. You'll be all right here."

So, after a little further talk, everything was arranged.

The sun was getting up now, and the gov'nor and I stripped off our clothes and laid them in the sun to dry—meanwhile donning a couple of blankets which Turner lent us. By the time we had breakfasted our clothing was dry, and we dressed again.

At about nine o'clock Nelson Lee wrote out a code telegram—a long message—and Turner himself took it into the little town of Caseby, and despatched it. The lieutenant went by car. Of course, he didn't undertake the journey especially for the purpose of despatching the wire—he would have gone in any case.

The day passed quietly, and the gov'nor and I managed to get several hours' sleep. We awoke in the early evening, feeling fresh and good. And, just as dusk set in, an old friend arrived.

He was Detective-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard. The gov'nor's wire had been addressed to the Yard—and Lennard's arrival was the result. The inspector brought four men with him. Eight others were due to arrive in about an hour.

"I thought I'd bring a good crowd," explained Lennard. "They're all picked men, Lee. There's something big on hand, I understand?"

The inspector and the four men listened with great interest while Nelson Lee related our adventures in detail.

"The position is rather grave," concluded the gov'nor. "Captain Maxwell is in the hands of the Circle—and the submarine as well. We know, however, that the vessel is now lying in Sorby Creek. My plan, Lennard, is to make a surprise raid to-night. It's the only feasible course to pursue. With luck, we shall succeed in getting the submarine—and that's most important. Poor Maxwell will probably suffer."

"They'll let him go, I should think," said Lennard. "Anyhow, your plan is good, Lee. We ought to be successful. But the Circle is so infernally cute. We shall have to be thundering careful."

"You've arranged about the cars?" asked the gov'nor.

"Yes—everything's ready."

Our plan was perfectly simple. Finesse was out of the question now; we were going to make a bulldog rush to Sorby Creek, in the hope of recovering the submarine by sheer surprise.

Luck would play a large part in the night's adventures.

Shortly after Lennard and the gov'nor had planned everything the other eight Yard men arrived on the scene. These were given their orders, and our whole plan of attack was cut and dried to the last detail.

We were handicapped, of course, by our lack of information. We didn't know what kind of a place Sorby Creek was, and there was no telling how many Circle agents there were at the spot. All these things we should find out when we arrived. And our method of attack, in consequence, would have to be left largely to chance.

Then, of course, there was the possibility of the submarine being out at sea. For this reason, Nelson Lee decided to start off without a moment's delay—in order to arrive at Sorby well before ten o'clock. It wasn't likely that the submarine would be taken out until after that hour.

Detective-Inspector Lennard had brought two powerful touring cars, and we were soon on the journey—the distance to Sorby was about thirty-five miles. It was a bit of a squeeze, and I hung on to one of the footboards. There were seven in our car, and eight in the one behind.

Well, nothing happened on the way—nothing worth recording, anyhow. In case there were any spies about, our cars moved along about a mile apart. Nelson Lee and I were in the foremost one, of course. We had learned that the creek lay a mile our side of Sorby itself. So we shouldn't have to enter the little hamlet at all.

The country up there was bare and desolate, and the night was one of the darkest I've ever known. This was all to our advantage, and we didn't mind a bit when a fine drizzle of rain commenced falling.

Nelson Lee pulled our car up when we arrived at a little wood at the bottom of a hollow. Here the automobile was concealed among the trees, and the second car was treated in a similar fashion.

Every man knew his job, and we

separated into pairs—one man, of course, being compelled to go alone, as our number was odd. The gov'nor and I went straight forward along the road itself. The others spread out in different directions, fan-wise.

The creek lay only a few hundred yards beyond, and it had been arranged that certain signals should be given in the event of any two men being surprised by the enemy. The whole thing rather reminded me of a minor military operation. We were a raiding party, penetrating the enemy's trenches.

The seashore lay only a short distance to our right, and we could distinctly hear the waves breaking on the shingle. The cliffs, however, were very low on this part of the coast, being little higher than banks.

The creek itself flowed into the sea through a tiny, narrow bay, and there wasn't a house or a cottage within three miles in any direction. In a little backwater, however, Nelson Lee and I suddenly came upon a ramshackle old boathouse. It was roomy by the look of it, although low in build. It had evidently been used for the purpose of storing the boats of a large boys' school which lay inland. A new site had been adopted, however, a couple of miles further along the coast. Consequently, this boathouse had long since been deserted.

The gov'nor and I stood among some bushes, gazing upon the old building. We could just see it dimly in the gloom, with the waters of the creek beyond. The boathouse itself was built right over the backwater—so that the boats could be floated right in.

"They can't be using that place, gov'nor!" I murmured.

"I'm not so sure," he replied softly. "The Circle men may have been preparing this retreat for weeks past. In any case, we will creep forward and make a close inspection."

There didn't seem to be any necessity for secrecy, for the spot was silent and deserted. But as Lee and I crept nearer, he suddenly gripped my arm tightly. We both stopped dead.

"Do you see?" whispered the great detective tensely.

His eyes were keener than mine, for I detected nothing until several seconds had passed. Then I made out the figure of a man leaning against the side of the

old boathouse. Obviously the fellow was on guard.

We made short work of him. Without a sound, Lee and I crept up, and sprung on him before he could even utter a cry. He went down with a crash, and caught the back of his head upon a stone. This saved us a lot of trouble, for he was effectually stunned for the time being.

Without waiting a second, Nelson Lee tried the door of the building, and found that it was fitted with a new lock. Round at the rear, however, some of the boards were gaping, and we managed to see what lay within.

Like a dim shadow the conning-tower of Maxwell's submarine stood out of the water, but the vessel herself was submerged.

"That's queer!" I murmured in astonishment. "This backwater must be thundering deep, guv'nor. The submarine's practically submerged!"

"The tide's high, my boy, and it is quite obvious that this place has been specially prepared. It is possible that several men are aboard the boat even now. We must fetch the others here without delay, and make our attack."

Nelson Lee stood back a little way and uttered a cry which sounded exactly like that of a night bird. He repeated it three times, at intervals. And, after five minutes had passed, ten men were on the spot. The others were probably out of their bearings.

"The submarine's within this shed," said Lee to Detective-Inspector Lennard. "We've settled the guard, and the way is clear. The man's presence there looks rather suggestive. There are, probably, men aboard the vessel even now. We've got to make a bulldog rush, Lennard."

The inspector gave some brisk orders in a low voice. A few minutes later some of the men had found a large plank—which would serve admirably as a battering-ram. It did. Within a minute the door was smashed to atoms!

Nelson Lee and I stepped into the building, and made our way along the ledge, the guv'nor flashing his torch upon the submarine. Careless of the danger, he intended boarding the vessel.

But the very instant he flashed his light upon the conning-tower, he uttered an angry shout.

"Do you see, Lennard?" he roared. "We've been hoodwinked! This thing's a fake—a mere piece of scenery, constructed of wood and canvas."

The Circle of Terror had won the game after all!

Well, that's all—for the present.

Nelson Lee was deeply disappointed with the fiasco. We found that the water in the boathouse was no deeper than three feet! And we also found plenty of evidence to show that the submarine had actually been out in the creek at the time of our raid!

But Zingrave, with his usual cunning, had made provision for a sudden surprise attack. And while we were making a terrific noise smashing into the boathouse, the submarine itself slipped quietly out to sea.

But our raid wasn't altogether fruitless.

For, in a little hut on the other side of the creek, we found Captain Richard Maxwell. It was from him that we learned the exact truth. He was to have been taken aboard the submarine at eleven o'clock in order to give instructions to a couple of skilled engineers.

He had been brought to the spot, and had been placed in the hut—with a guard at the door—to wait until he was required. But our attack took place before he was transferred to the submarine. Consequently he was left in the hut—and thus rescued.

But both Nelson Lee and I remembered the demand for fifty thousand pounds from the White Planet Line. By all appearances, the Circle of Terror would have everything its own way. Appearances, however, are very often deceptive.

And the Circle's plans didn't pan out quite so well as they fondly hoped. Even though they were successful for the minute—even though they had brought off a great coup—they weren't destined to triumph for long.

THE END.

Another Splendid "CIRCLE OF TERROR" Story will appear
in a Fortnight's Time, under the Title of:
"THE ISLAND STRONGHOLD."

NEXT WEEK!—(See p. iv of cover.)

BEGIN THIS THRILLING SERIAL TO-DAY!

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 on board *H.M.S. Flyer*, is ordered out to sea, and helps to rescue the wounded on board a torpedoed hospital ship. He also rescues a German sailor. His great friend.

BOB RANDLE, has been sent out to France with his regiment after an affecting scene with

MARY THWAITES, daughter of Fisherman Thwaites, of whom Tom is very fond; and her brother Fred is one of those rescued by the *Flyer*. Tom's father has been captured by the commander of a German submarine, and as he walks along the deck Tom wonders if he will ever see him again. The German sailor he has rescued, suddenly addresses him by name.

"You've got my name pat off. What d'you want to say?" asks Tom fiercely.
(Now read on).

HOME!

"**Y**OU think that all German sailors are cowards and murderers, don't you?"

"So they are. Look what you've done to-day, you curs! Is it fair play to sink a hospital ship? Hadn't the poor fellows aboard her suffered enough, but that they should be sent to drown by cold-blooded murderers like you?"

Some of the other seamen stopped to listen, and a threatening murmur trembled on their lips.

The Hun made a hopeless gesture.

"Ah!" he cried, bitterly, "It is not our fault. We hate to do it. There are some brutal submarine commanders, but most of us detest the work, though we have to obey orders. It's our only chance of winning the war."

"Then you oughtn't to mind if you are shot down or hanged or drowned for it," answered Tom hotly.

"Waid! Waid! You saved my life. Well, it is only tit for tat, after all."

"What do you mean?"

"Our submarine came from the base at Zeebrugge. It was our sixth day at sea. The hospital ship was our first prize. Before we left harbour a U-boat came in. Her captain was Otto Mayer. Captain Mayer during his cruise sank some fishing boats, including the smack *Dora Grey*, from Wethersea——"

"Eh, what's that——" And Tom Crawley almost had his hands on the German sailor's throat.

"Leaf me alone. I didn't do it. And it was a life saved for a life saved. For the captain of the U-boat that sank the *Dora Grey* brought her captain back with him to port, and his name was Thomas Crawley."

Strange lights began to dance before Tom's eyes. He felt his brain swimming. Could he believe what this German said? Was it the truth?

"How can I believe what you say is true?" he faltered.

"It is the truth. Listen, and I'll tell you. After the smack *Dora Grey* went down, Tomas Crawley, the master, swam to the submarine, and held on to the rail. A sailor tried to stamp his hands away. The German submarine officer struck the brutal sailor down, and saved the British fisherman. And he brought him back into harbour, where the fisherman was interned."

Young Tom began to believe at last. His face lit up with an indescribable joy.

"And why have you told me this?" he asked eagerly.

"Because you saved my life," was the simple answer. "I guessed you were the fisherman's son, as he talked about a son in Wethersea. I thought you would be glad to know."

"I am glad, yes I am glad. And no matter what you've done, you've got some pluck, kid, though you are German,

and seem a decent sort, too," said Tom. "So shake hands."

The Hun hesitated, then gripped the extended paw, and went below when they were ordered there by Captain Walsh, and remained uncomplainingly quiet for the rest of the voyage.

The destroyer Flyer returned to port as soon as practicable, taking the survivors picked up from the sunken hospital ship and the German prisoners with her.

And for once in a way there was a British destroyer able to report the sinking of a German U-boat, knowing that the submarine had been sent to the bottom of the Channel beyond the shadow of a doubt.

It was with mixed feelings that Tom Crawley found himself back again in harbour at Weathersea. He brought good news with him, and bad, too: good for his mother, who would feel immeasurably relieved to know that her husband and Tom's father was safely interned, and likely to come back to her when the war was over; but bad news for Mary, who worshipped her big brother Fred.

Up till then nothing but good news had come home to the Thwaites' about Fred, who was fighting in France, and his father, the plucky Weathersea fisherman. His mother and his sister Mary had always declared that no harm would ever come to Fred; he was so brave.

And here was Fred, down in the hold, and almost at the point of death so far as Tom could tell.

As soon as the Flyer had come to her anchorage, steps were taken to remove the survivors of the hospital ship. The doctors and nurses went quickly ashore. Then the one or two wounded were removed.

The last of all to go was poor Fred Thwaites.

One of the doctors remained behind on purpose to look after him.

Very gently they lowered him away into one of the ship's boats, and the seamen pulled lustily across the harbour, landing him at the distant steps. Here an ambulance, which had been sent for, was waiting.

"Might I see him off, sir?" asked Tom Crawley, choking as he turned to plead to the petty officer in command of the boat.

"Friend of yours?"

"Chum of my schooldays, sir."

"All right. Only be lively."

Tom footed it up the steep, stone steps after the bearers. As Fred was laid down on a stretcher belonging to the motor ambulance and made comfortable, Tom bent over him.

"How are you feeling, old man?" he murmured.

"Oh, all serene, Tom. I'll be all right soon. You'll be seeing mother and Mary and dad before I shall, maybe. Tell 'em I'm all right, will you, and give 'em my love."

"I will, Fred," blubbed the little sailor boy. "I will. God bless you!"

"Cheerio! This is a bit of luck for me, for they're taking me to the hospital at Weathersea, and that's near 'ome," said Fred, as they picked him up and bore him gently away.

The stretcher was run into its place in the motor ambulance, and the driver set off at once, the crowd parting to let it by.

So Tom saw it vanish, and so returned to the boat with a heavy heart. He felt afraid about Fred. There was something in the brave lad's face he didn't like to see there—a wistful, pensive look which suggested all sorts of possibilities.

"Is—is he very bad, sir?" Tom pleaded of the military doctor who passed him just then.

"Pretty bad, my boy. Shock, you know, following upon severe physical strain, and some rather serious wounds. But he is wonderfully strong, and I dare say he will pull through now. He was beginning to rally. Oh, yes, I think there is ground for hope."

With this somewhat comforting assurance Tom returned to the Flyer.

He had to remain aboard her that night, and it was not until the middle of the following day that he received permission to go ashore, and fled hot-foot to the little cottage to tell his mother that his father was safe.

Her joy was almost indescribable. She cried and she laughed, and she cried again. But in the end she showed considerable relief, and for Tom to see her going about her work, singing in her old light-hearted way, was a joy indeed.

Later in the morning he went out, and turned his steps towards the Thwaites' cottage.

He almost dreaded to meet Mary again, after her avowal about Bob Randle. He

hesitated as he neared the place, and almost turned back.

But Mary was working in the little garden in front of the trim cottage, and called out to him. So there was nothing else for it, and Tom made his way towards her, and after a short interchange of commonplace remarks, said:

"Mary, dear, I've brought you news of your brother Fred——"

To his surprise the tears gushed from her eyes, and rolled down her bonny cheeks.

"Yes, yes, yes. I know, dear Tom," she answered, throwing her arms about his neck and kissing him in her old sisterly way. "They sent down from the hospital and told us. Fred is all right, and—and they say you risked your life to save him. Oh, Tom, we are all so proud of you, we are indeed!"

And poor little Tom could only stand there and blink at her, too, through a mist that formed in front of his eyes, and wonder and wonder, because this dear Mary of his had a heart large enough to hold a place for almost everyone.

FRED IN HOSPITAL!

FRED THWAITES had been home a week or more, and was getting on nicely in hospital. When Tom Crawley and Mary Thwaites called to see him.

Both were in better spirits and happier in mind than they had been for some time, for here was Fred back from the war, and, thank Heaven, though severely wounded, in no danger of losing his life. Fred's father and mother had already visited him, and both had been assured by the doctors and nurses that their boy would recover, though it seemed his usefulness in the war had ended.

Since he had done his duty manfully and well there was comfort in that thought also.

And as further examination of the Hun prisoner, rescued from the sunken German submarine, had given convincing proof that Thomas Crawley, the fisherman, was alive, Tom was light-hearted as any schoolboy, and rejoiced in the change the good news had made in his mother, who kept house in her old efficient way now that she knew her husband would be coming back when the

bitter struggle reached its inevitable end.

When Tom and Mary entered the sunlit ward in which Fred and fifty or sixty other "casualties" lay, they found him propped up in bed, smoking a "fag," and talking brightly to a young and pretty nurse.

There was no dangerous cases in this ward, and it was a wing insulated from other parts of the big hospital. A gramophone was playing for the benefit of the "Tommies."

Fine, cheerful, sun-tanned, and uncomplaining men that they were, they took things smilingly.

Flowers gladdened the room on every hand, the sunlight streamed in through the lightly curtained windows, and from outside came the song of birds.

Mary, when she first saw her brother, sank down on her knees beside him, stretched out her strong and capable arms, and clasped him in them, while the tears streamed down her cheeks.

Fred, strong though he was, could not hide his tears either.

At last, with a laugh, he turned to Tom, disengaging himself gently.

"Mary, dear," he smiled, "you make me feel soft. But it's grand to see you. And you look just fine. And how are you, Tom?"

"Pretty good, Fred," answered Tom, choking back the lump in his throat. "Feeling better, Fred?"

"Much. But they say they won't be able to get me ready and fit for further military service inside a twelvemonth."

A year! How Mary's cheeks glowed, how her eyes shone!

What might not happen in twelve months? The war might be at an end, and Fred would be spared to them. He'd done enough to make them proud of him. Why, only on Saturday last a letter had arrived from the major of Fred's regiment, in which he gave his own personal tribute to Fred's bravery.

Fred had advanced and taken a machine-gun position single-handed, had Fred, and they said he was bound to get the V.C. or Military Medal, at least.

He'd earned his rest had Fred.

After the first emotion of the meeting was over they settled down to talk of commonplace things, and very rapidly all the local gossip was exhausted.

Then of a sudden Fred said:

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

"Oh, by the way, Mary, I met Bob Randle out there"—with a jerk of the head in the direction of France."

"Met—Bob——"

"Met him—where?" And Tom Crawley's cheeks flushed, and then went very white.

"Oh, it was near Messines. He'd come out with a new draft. I was just standing beside the road watching them as they sat down for a rest, when I heard someone call me by name. I looked round, and there was Bob, his face agrin, with his hand stretched out, as fine a soldier as ever I've clapped eyes on, and it seems only yesterday that he stood behind the counter in his father's grocery store, a pasty-faced shop assistant who seemed to have no go in him whatever."

"The war makes men like that," murmured Mary.

"Bob's no coward. Never was," growled Tom Crawley, grudgingly, "though we used to think so, Fred. I got him to fight me in the ring, thinking he'd funk. And he gave me the hardest battle ever I've had in my life. He proved himself a better man than me, Fred——"

"A better man than you, Tom? I don't believe it."

"But he did—he did," and Tom's voice was hoarse in its insistence. "Ask Mary. He's a man, is Bob."

"Man he must be. Why, Tom, he's got his sergeant's stripes; and the way he spoke to the men and the way they looked at him went to show that he was born to be a soldier. He is keen on the job, too. Said he wanted to go over the top. Only way to end the war was to keep on hammering the Huns, he said. Didn't want to be in it, but now that he was in it, was eager to get through with it. Mark my words, we shall hear something big about Bob before long."

"I'm sure we shall—I'm sure we shall," said Mary, and her face was radiant. "I have always believed in him."

Fred's look strayed far away.

"Said he was sorry America had come in," he muttered.

"Oh, why?"

"Because he wanted all the honour and the glory to be won by the old country. Now we'll have to share it with America."

"And—and do you think he will see

some fighting soon, Fred?" asked Mary, with bated breath.

"Yes, very soon—very, very soon."

A half an hour later they left the hospital, and carried with them a remembrance of pain and suffering bravely borne, by as gallant and as stout-hearted a British soldier as had ever stepped upon a battlefield, and he was one of millions.

Tom Crawley walked along moodily by Mary's side. His boyish eyebrows were drawn together in a frown. He was thinking of Bob Randle, and all that Bob might do at the front.

He wished at that moment that he, too, were a soldier, instead of a sailor, for Mary seemed to honour the khaki most.

Presently Mary touched his arm, and smiling at him, said in a gentle voice:

"Tom, please don't misunderstand. If I'm proud of Bob it's because I've always known the good there was in him, and I'm happy to find that I was not mistaken. But I'm a fisherman's daughter, and I love the sea, and the brave men who guard our coasts and stand for all that is best and bravest in our England. If I don't talk so much about them it's because they are so familiar to me. I shouldn't like to see you in khaki, Tom. And you'd never be able to carry the pack, you know. I'm very, very proud of you, Tom."

The young sailor-boxer's face lit up.

"Are you, Mary, old sport?" he cried, and he showed his teeth in a merry laugh. "Then wait till I get another chance of showing what I can do against the enemy. You'll see that I can be as brave as Bob or your brother Fred then."

"I haven't a doubt about it, Tom," said she

THE FIGHT AT SEA.

THAT night, soon after the shadows shut down upon land and sea, the *Flyer* left the harbour of Weathersea. Before then her wireless had been crackling, and messages had been interchanged with other vessels and telegraphic stations, suggesting that there might be something doing.

Captain Walsh, alert and full of suppressed eagerness, stood upon the bridge as the vessel swept past the harbour's bar, his eyes directed seaward.

Every man was at his post, and like

(Continued overleaf.)

magic the word ran round that they were about to come to grips with the enemy once more.

The secret of the wireless was well kept, and yet instinctively the seamen guessed that the intention was to cut off enemy raiders, whose movements were known to the captain.

The gunners stood at their posts. Every man was at his station. The keen-eyed lookouts picked up distant objects in the night with a never-failing certainty that was uncanny.

A brisk wind was blowing, and storm clouds swept across the sky in dense, black masses, obscuring the rising moon completely at times.

Then the darkness was profound. But every now and then the silvery beams of the moon would break through the fast scudding clouds and envelope the sea with their magic light.

Then Tom's eager eyes could make out a vessel here and another there in the far distance, mostly warcraft he noticed, and British he guessed.

Every now and again he would raise his eyes to the crackling masthead of the wireless and watch the livid sparks dancing there.

Then the Flyer would alter her course. Whither was she bound? What was her object?

(To be continued.)

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