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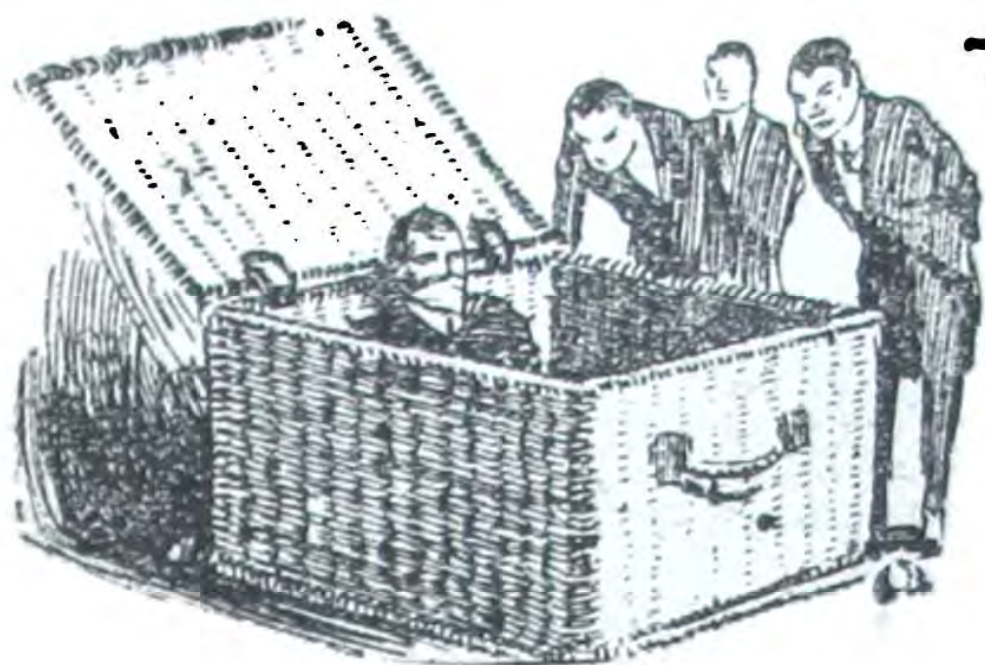
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AUTHOR'S NOTE.

Nelson Lee and Nipper are at St. Frank's College, to escape the attentions of the murderous Chinese Secret Society, the Fu Chang Tong, whose hatred they have incurred. Although living in the school in the characters of master and pupil, Nelson Lee and Nipper, nevertheless, find many opportunities to utilise their unique detective ability in various mysterious and adventurous cases.

CHAPTER I.

(Told by Nipper.)

THE GUV'NOR GIVES ME A HINT OF HIS PLANS, AND I AFTERWARDS LEARN, WITH MUCH SADNESS, THAT TOMMY WATSON IS LIABLE TO DELUSIONS.

NELSON LEE tossed his cigarette-end into the fire, and leaned back comfortably in his chair.

"The fact is, Nipper, we have been taking things too easily at St. Frank's," he remarked. "Life has not been exactly strenuous. But now it appears that we shall be called upon to act briskly——"

"Hold on, 'guv'nor," I interrupted. "Life hasn't been strenuous, eh? What about all this business connected with Yakama? Don't you call that brisk and lively? We've been fighting the Circle of Terror, anyhow."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Quite so, Nipper," he agreed. "But we have been fighting from ambush, as it were. You are a schoolboy, and I am a schoolmaster. To-morrow, however, I shall reassume my own identity for a few hours."

I stared at Nelson Lee in something like alarm.

"But—but you mustn't, 'guv'nor!" I exclaimed quickly. "What about Fu

Chang Tong? Why, you'll be spotted and done in——"

"My dear lad, I shall not be so foolish as to run unnecessary risks—and I don't imagine for a moment that I shall be 'done in,' as you elegantly term it," remarked Lee smoothly. "This murderous affair must be concluded forthwith—and to bring about that result I must act boldly and decisively."

"And what about me?" I demanded warmly. "Where do I come in, sir?"

"Unfortunately, Nipper, you don't come in at all."

I bristled. I don't know what it means exactly, but I did it.

"That's all very well, 'guv'nor," I exclaimed indignantly. "I don't come in at all! Do you mean to say you're going on this journey to London alone—I suppose it'll be London, won't it?"

"Exactly."

"But I want to come with you—to share the risks, if necessary."

"Of course you do, my boy. I quite understand that," interrupted Nelson Lee quietly. "But it is really impossible for me to have you with me, much as I should like your company and assistance."

I felt somewhat mollified, but I was disappointed all the same.

There had been queer goings-on at St. Frank's lately, and I was just as

anxious for a settlement as the gov'nor was. I was now sitting on the desk in his study, in the Ancient House.

It was evening—a Monday evening—and the weather was cold. In my own study—C in the Remove passage—tea had been finished only a short while before. I had left my two chums—Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson—in order to have a private word with the gov'nor.

I wasn't quite sure as to what he meant to do. You see, these queer goings-on I had referred to were in connection with a Japanese junior at St. Frank's, who rejoiced in the name of Sessue Yakama. He was quite a decent little fellow in every way, and was deservedly popular.

Well, there had been several attempts upon Yakama's life, and these attempts had been made by agents of the Circle of Terror. Needless to say, Nelson Lee and I had taken an active part in protecting Yakama from harm. And, so far, the attempts upon his life had failed.

Cecil de Valerie, of the Remove—generally known as "The Rotter"—had been in league with the Circle, but he had had no idea of the true game. The silly ass had been duped, but Nelson Lee had got the truth out of him, and De Valerie had received a severe flogging for his pains. He, at least, was eliminated from the case.

But, as the gov'nor told me, the affair wasn't over. The High Lord of the Circle himself, the rascally Professor Zingrave, had had a hand in the pie. He had been foiled, and it was quite certain that Yakama was still in grave peril.

Only a few days ago, Nelson Lee and I had collared Zingrave in an old tunnel which led from the old monastery vault behind the College House to the deserted quarry on Bannington Moor. Well, a Circle man had come upon us from the rear and a struggle had followed.

Afterwards, I picked up a sheet of the pocket diary, and this, according to the gov'nor, was tremendously valuable, for upon it was a note, jotted down in the Circle's private system of shorthand, to the effect that a Circle agent named Gerald Brunton would interview Mr. Toko Nagamo at noon on Tuesday.

I referred to this note now, and asked Nelson Lee if it was connected with his proposed trip to London.

"Of course it is, Nipper," replied the

gov'nor. "Just consider the facts. There have been two foul attempts upon this Japanese boy's life, and we know that the Circle of Terror is concerned in it. But it is not conceivable that Zingrave has any personal reason for wishing Yakama harm. We must, therefore, conclude that the Circle of Terror has been paid to accomplish the work. I have reason to believe that the Circle is in somewhat low water owing to our coup some months back at Cathrey Island. Well, since Zingrave has been paid to put Yakama out of the way, it naturally follows that somebody must have paid him."

"This Toko Nagamo fellow?"

"Precisely! We cannot be sure, of course; but the inference is fairly obvious," said the schoolmaster-detective. "It is my belief, Nipper, that Nagamo is the prime mover in the whole sinister business. I am a believer in the policy of attacking the root of an evil, therefore my attentions to-morrow will be devoted to a close study of Mr. Toko Nagamo."

"Who is he, anyhow, sir?"

"A highly placed Japanese official, well known in diplomatic circles," replied Lee. "His record is a splendid one; but, in face of what we know, we have excellent reason to believe that he is an unscrupulous scoundrel. The very fact that a Circle agent is to interview him is of itself a proof of guilt."

I couldn't get much more out of the gov'nor, although I questioned him as much as I dared; but when he likes Nelson Lee can shut up as close as an oyster, and no amount of persuasion will make him speak.

Naturally, I was jolly keen to have a hand in the affair—and a foot, too! But, considering my position at St. Frank's, I couldn't have gone up to London with Nelson Lee without causing unwelcome comment. He was "Mr. Alvington," the Housemaster of the Ancient House, and I was "Dick Bennett," of the Remove. It was rotten, of course; but I'm not a chap to grumble.

Leaving the gov'nor's study, I wended my way to the Remove passage, mentally deciding to tell Montie and Tommy all about it. The Japanese boy, Sessue Yakama, was "digging" in Study C for the time being, so that we could easily keep an eye on him, and protect him if necessary.

When I entered, I found Sir Montie

Tregellis-West and Yakama at prep. At least, Yakama was. Sir Montie was busily engaged in polishing his eye-glasses and staring mournfully at his lesson-book.

"Hallo! Where's Tommy?" I asked, shutting the door.

"Dear fellow, please refrain from worryin' me," said Tregellis-West dreamily. "Tommy doesn't interest me—he doesn't, really. I've been wrestlin'—wrestlin' frightfully."

"Who with, Tommy?" I asked.

"Not that kind of wrestlin', Benny boy," said Tregellis-West. "It's these shockin' Latin verbs, you know. Begad, I believe my hair will be goin' grey—"

"Oh, rats!" I said, grinning. "They are easy enough, Montie. I suppose you've driven poor old Tommy out of the room with your moans!"

"Pray don't be so absurd, Benny! I haven't been moanin'," protested Sir Montie. "Tommy saw somethin' out in the Triangle—a lurkin' form under the chestnuts. He went down to have a look round just before you came in."

"I'm blessed if I know whether to believe you, Montie," I said, frowning. "Are you kidding me? I say, Jappy, what's become of Watson?"

"I'm pained," murmured Montie. "Begad, I'm accused of fibbin'!"

Sessue Yakama looked up with his perpetual smile.

"The wonderful Sir Montie has been extraordinarily veracious," he said calmly.

I grinned.

"In other words, what Montie said was right?" I asked.

"It is exactly so, Bennett," nodded Yakama. "Watson was peering from the window upon the beautiful Triangle, and he surprisingly declared that a strange and wonderful form was creeping beneath the august chestnut-trees."

"Jolly queer!" I commented. "A lurking, creeping form? By Jingo, I wonder if—"

A somewhat startling thought had entered my mind. Was it possible that the Circle of Terror agents were getting busy again? If, by some extraordinary chance, this should be so, then Tommy Watson might be running into some danger.

I grabbed Sir Montie by the collar and hauled him to his feet.

"Begad, what on earth's the matter, you ravin' lunatic?" gasped the swell of

the Ancient House. "You're ruinin' my collar, Benny!"

"Never mind your silly collar!" I exclaimed briskly. "We're going outside to see what's happened to Tommy. You stay here, Jappy, and keep in the study until we come back."

"I will do as you beautifully suggest," smiled Yakama.

His somewhat remarkable way of putting things often caused grins among the fellows, but I wasn't in the humour for grinning just now.

Montie, catching some of my anxiety, hurried with me into the passage. There was nobody about at the moment, and we quickly passed out into the dim Triangle.

The lights of the College House gleamed across the way, but over by the elms and chestnuts everything was black. It was certainly an ideal place for anybody to lurk if they were so inclined.

"Tommy's not here, old boy," murmured Sir Montie. "Ain't it shockingly cold? I believe it's freezin', don't you?"

Considering that the fountain was frozen as hard as a rock, this was a somewhat unnecessary remark of Montie's, and I gave it no answer. We crept on towards the gaunt trees, and I began to think that my alarm had been premature. But quite suddenly Tregellis-West caught his breath in.

"Did you see, dear boy?" he asked softly.

"No; I'm blessed if I saw anything!"

I paused as Montie leapt forward between the old trees. Following him, I caught sight of a dim, shadowy form just beyond. Without the slightest hesitation, Montie flung himself at the other.

"Begad," yelled Tregellis-West. "I've got him, Benny! I've got him!"

I rushed up, and found my noble chum squarely astride the chest of the unknown, who was flat on his back. Montie, with great impartiality, was hammering away at his victim's face.

"It's all right, dear fellow," he panted. "I've got him down!"

"Ow! Stoppit! Yow! Gerroff, you idiot!" howled the victim.

"Do you surrender, dear boy? I—I mean you rotter!"

"Oh, you dotty lunatic!"

"Begad, he's gettin' wild again!"

The unfortunate had begun to struggle desperately, and Montie heaved like a ship in a seaway. To counteract this

sudden burst of activity, he recommenced his pounding with enthusiastic gusto.

"Hold on!" I exclaimed, bending down. "Who is it, Montie?"

"The lurker, dear boy."

"Yes, but——"

"Leave him to me, Benny! I'm settlin' him beautifully," gasped Sir Montie.

"I'm smashin' him——"

"But you've made a mistake, you ass!" I shouted, as I recognised sundry ejaculations from the victim. "That's Tommy you've got down there!"

"Begad!" said Tregellis-West, ceasing his efforts abruptly. "I thought I heard Tommy's voice, but it wasn't safe to stop, you know——"

"You—you—you dangerous maniac!" gasped the prisoner wildly.

"Tommy boy, I didn't know——"

"Didn't know!" howled Tommy Watson, scrambling to his feet furiously. "Why, you mad fathead! Couldn't you recognise my voice? Look at my nose—look at my collar—look at my left eye——"

"Dear boy, it's too dark—I can't see anythin'," said Sir Montie mildly. "I hope I didn't hurt you, begad!"

Tommy Watson simply choked for a second.

"Didn't hurt me!" he roared. "My only hat! I'll show you whether you hurt me or not—I'm going to smash your silly face to a jelly!"

"Pray, don't be so absurd——"

Tommy Watson didn't wait for any more. Justly enraged, he flung himself at the startled Tregellis-West, and had his head in chancery in a second. Then, with grunts of entire satisfaction, he commenced to "smash Montie's silly face to a jelly."

Needless to say, Montie objected in loud tones.

I grabbed the pair of them.

"Look here, don't be a couple of silly idiots!" I said, grinning in the darkness. "No sense in having a scrap, my sons. Montie only made a mistake——"

"People have to pay for mistakes!" panted Watson wrathfully. "Montie's paying for his now!"

"Oh, begad! I—— Yooooop!" howled Tregellis-West inarticulately.

"I'll show you!" gasped Tommy, hammering away. "I'll teach you to—— Oh, corks!"

Montie, becoming desperate, had given such a heave that Tommy Watson lost his

balance. The pair of them rolled on to the ground, and I gave up any attempt to separate them. If, by any chance, there had been an intruder, he had certainly taken the alarm by this time.

"Shut up, you asses!" I exclaimed. "You'll have a horde of prefects out here in a minute!"

My chums were rolling about on the ground in a deadly embrace, and, judging by the sounds, Montie was giving as good as he received. He probably realised this, for he entered into peace negotiations at once, so to speak.

"There!" he panted. "That'll teach you not to fly at people before you know who they are! Had enough?"

"Too much, dear boy—a frightful lot too much!"

"Well, it was your own fault——"

"But I'm willin' to take some more if you ain't satisfied," went on Tregellis-West obligingly. "Begad! My trousers are ruined——"

"Bust your trousers! What about my face?" roared Tommy.

"Your face ain't ruined, Tommy boy—it'll get right again. Trousers can't heal themselves up, you know," explained Sir Montie. "Oh, dear! Ain't scrappin' an appallin' bore?" I believe I've got two noses—I do, really!"

Watson snorted.

"What did you bring that lunatic out for?" he growled, turning to me.

"We were looking for you, of course," I grinned. "Montie and Yakama told me that you were out here on the track of some intruder. I thought, perhaps, that it was another attempt on Yakama——"

"Oh, let's get indoors!" said Tommy, dabbing his nose.

"Didn't you see anybody?" I asked curiously.

"No."

"Then what made you come out?"

"You always were a curious beggar, Bennett," grunted Watson uncomfortably. "If you want to know the truth, I was looking out of the window, when I saw a form among these trees—so I came out to investigate."

"Well, what did you find?"

"Rats! Let's get in!"

Tommy spoke hurriedly, and I wondered why. In fact, I wasn't going indoors until I knew more about it.

"That won't do, you ass," I said. "Why can't you tell me what you found?"

"Well, if you must know, I suppose I'd better tell you," snorted Watson. "Never knew such a chap for asking questions! What I saw was that fat-headed dead branch, swaying in the wind. It looked just like——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

I simply roared. Quite near us there was a branch of the old chestnut. It was snapped, and hung down nearly to the ground. As I looked at it, it moved gently to and fro in the wind. And Tommy had mistaken it for a man!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Montie, in spite of his bruises, was laughing as well. It was certainly a good joke. Tommy had come out, like a sleuth on the trail, and had discovered nothing but a dead branch. Sir Montie, on the top of it, had mistaken Watson for the lurker, and bruised noses and muddy clothes were the result!

"Anything funny in it?" roared Tommy sarcastically.

"Rather! Jolly funny!" I chuckled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you cackling asses——"

"Begad! A dead branch!" grinned Sir Montie.

"Oh, go and eat coke!"

And Tommy Watson, highly indignant, marched off to the Ancient House. Sir Montie and I followed, chuckling. Tommy couldn't see the point of the joke—but we could.

CHAPTER II.

(Told by Nelson Lee.)

I BECOME NELSON LEE, AND INTERVIEW MR. TOKO NAGAMO, WITH HIGHLY INTERESTING RESULTS.

NELSON LEE sat in the London-bound express.

I intend that to be taken literally. For the time being I had cast aside my personality of "Mr. Alvington," and now I was my old self again. I had worn my disguise for such a long while—for so many months—that I felt quite strange.

Pray, don't imagine that I had removed an elaborate set of false whiskers, moustache, wig, and so forth. That type of disguise generally figures in a melodramatic picture-play, but seldom in real life.

The change from my own identity to "Mr. Alvington" was a comparatively

slight one. It chiefly consisted of false eyebrows, and a tinge of greyness to my hair. This was quite a simple process, and one easily capable of being sustained. In addition, I had always kept a few false "lines" in my face—not with grease-paint, for that was too clumsy, but by the aid of a unique process of my own.

I had thought very carefully before taking this step.

It was my intention to interview the Japanese attache, Toko Nagamo. It was quite impossible for me to approach him in my character as a Housemaster at St. Frank's. By becoming Nelson Lee again for a few hours, I ran very little risk from the Fu Chang Tong, and there would be no connection whatever between myself and "Mr. Alvington." It was highly necessary that the secret of my identity should be sustained.

I was, in fact, grimly determined. The attempts upon the life of young Yakama had angered me exceedingly. My instincts had been aroused, and it was utterly impossible for me to rest while the question hung in the balance.

There was just a slim chance that I was visiting London on a fool's errand—but I did not think this probable.

The fact that Professor Zingrave had lost the diary sheet would make no alteration to the appointment, I considered. The note had been jotted down in the Circle of Terror's secret shorthand; and if Zingrave had discovered his loss, he would naturally assume that the note had not been read.

Indeed, it would have mattered little, in any case. There was nothing whatever incriminating in the scrap of information. A certain Mr. Gerald Brunton was to interview Mr. Toko Nagamo at noon on Tuesday, the twenty-second. Well, it was my intention to have a little chat with the excellent Nagamo at eleven-thirty—half an hour before Brunton's arrival.

Needless to say, I had a reason for timing my visit so accurately. Brunton, as I was well aware, was a powerful member of the Circle—one of Zingrave's chief lieutenants, in fact. Taking into consideration the recent events at St. Frank's, this meeting between Brunton and Nagamo was strikingly significant.

The Japanese official was, in my opinion, the prime mover in the repeated attempts upon Yakama's life. Why those attempts should be made was a considera-

tion which did not enter my thoughts at the moment. My object was to put a stop to the villainy, once and for all.

But I was hampered.

I could not go to work as I would have wished. Had I been free to move about London openly, I should have adopted different tactics, perhaps. But it was necessary for me to accomplish my business in the briefest amount of time possible. Furthermore, I could not very well seek the aid of my official friends at Scotland Yard. To have Nagamo arrested, and put on his trial for attempted murder—even if I had the proofs—would be most unwelcome.

He was in the employ of the Japanese Government, and publicity would have been not only unfortunate, but perhaps dangerous. It was my duty to avoid any official scandal at such a time as this—when Great Britain and Japan were allies in a splendid cause.

Much as I admired Japan as a nation, I could not wink at the dastardly villainy of one of her sons. There are scoundrels in every country, and it is the duty of peaceable citizens to expose them.

Accordingly, my chief object was to put a stop to the roguery without causing any scandal whatever. It was not my policy to bargain with a criminal, and I did not intend to do so. I should give my orders, and if they were not carried out—well, in that case a scandal would be inevitable.

I have been, in a certain measure, theorising. For, to be perfectly frank, I had nothing but suspicions to rely upon. My course of action would mainly depend upon the attitude of Nagamo when I taxed him—as I boldly intended doing.

Arriving in London, I stepped into a taxi immediately, instructing the driver to take me to a huge mansion in the West End. This was not Nagamo's private address, but his official one. He was, after all, an underling, notwithstanding his high position, and occupied merely one suite of offices in the building.

I had timed my arrival nicely, for when I had stepped into the palatial entrance I noticed that the time was eleven-thirty, almost to a minute.

I had half an idea that Nagamo would refuse to see me, but was prepared for this emergency. My card was taken up, and I waited in the lounge. Needless to say, I had presented my own name.

Rather to my surprise, a suave attendant requested me to "step this way," only five minutes after my card had been sent up. I was conducted to a spacious lift, and ascended to the second floor.

Here I was directed along a richly carpeted corridor, and then into a large apartment in which several Japanese clerks were at work. Some curtains were hung over a door on the other side of the room, which hinted at an inner office.

My surmise was correct, for I found myself within the private sanctum of Mr. Toko Nagamo. The door closed, and I was alone with the man I believed to be a scoundrel. Inner curtains had fallen into place behind me. We were quite private.

Certainly there was nothing in Mr. Nagamo's appearance and bearing to suggest the type of rogue I suspected him of being. He was short and somewhat stout, with iron-grey hair and a neatly pointed beard. He regarded me through gold-rimmed pince-nez as I formally bowed.

"I am honoured to meet you, Mr. Lee," he said, in pure English. "Your name is very familiar to me, and I trust that this visit of yours does not portend anything of a serious nature?"

"I am afraid it does," I replied evenly, as I seated myself in the chair he indicated. "My business is, in fact, decidedly grave."

Toko Nagamo lifted his eyebrows slightly.

"I do not wish to hurry you, Mr. Lee," he said. "But you will forgive me if I request you to be as brief as possible. I have an important appointment at noon —"

"Exactly," I said deliberately. "My visit concerns that appointment, Mr. Nagamo."

He did not move a hair. Until this second he had been totally unsuspecting—I was positive of that. He had assumed, probably, that my visit concerned some minor matter of little importance.

But now his eyes suddenly gleamed. It was only a momentary flash, but it told me much. I was treading on dangerous soil, and felt my way cautiously.

"Indeed!" said Nagamo. "Should I be impolite if I asked you to explain why you are interested in a purely private appointment of mine?"

I leaned forward.

"My business concerns Sessue Yakama," I said quietly.

This time Nagamo started perceptibly. He changed colour slightly, too, and his fingers played nervously with the pen which he was still holding. Any doubt which I had entertained was now set at rest. Slight as these indications were, they could mean but one thing.

If Nagamo had been innocent of any plotting, he would not have betrayed the slightest uneasiness. On the contrary, his emotion would have been one of surprise. He would have been puzzled. But he was fully aware of all the facts.

"Sessue Yakama," he repeated steadily. "I do not wish to be rude, Mr. Lee, but I must ask you to speak plainly. What of this boy? I have never heard his name, so far as I recollect."

Nagamo had made a rather bad slip. In one breath he professed to know nothing of Sessue Yakama, and referred to him as a boy! I had given no indication of Yakama's age in my remark. This deliberate falsehood determined me to act boldly, and without further delay.

"You have requested me to speak plainly, Mr. Nagamo," I remarked. "Shall I do so?"

"Please."

"Then my business is simply this: I wish to know why you have deliberately plotted with the Circle of Terror to murder Sessue Yakama at St. Frank's College?" I exclaimed quietly. "I wish to warn you that the whole dastardly business has got to stop. Have I made myself clear?"

Toko Nagamo rose to his feet furiously.

He commenced talking rapidly in his own tongue, but checked himself with an effort. This, indeed, was a certain indication of his perturbation. He was so alarmed that he had not realised the fact at the first moment. But now he turned on me with evil, glittering eyes.

"How dare you!" he exclaimed, his voice vibrating. "What madness have you been talking? What do I know of the Circle of Terror? What do I know of St. Francis's College? I must ask you to take your departure at once, Mr. Lee!"

Just for a moment we stood gazing at one another steadily. Then, as Nagamo stretched out a hand to press a bell-push, I sank back into my chair.

"I shouldn't ring, if I were you," I said quietly.

Nagamo's hand faltered.

"I am going to have you thrown off the premises," he exclaimed.

"I don't think so," I replied. "If you go to such lengths, Mr. Nagamo, you will regret your action! Sit down!"

He sat down.

"I don't know what you mean," he said huskily.

"I fancy you know quite well," was my retort. "Come, Mr. Nagamo, this profession of ignorance on your part is ill-timed. I should not have come here had I not had positive indications. I am fully acquainted with the whole plot. I know that Yakama's life has been attempted on two separate occasions. I know that these attempts were made by secret agents of the Circle of Terror. I know also that their instructions were obtained from you!"

"That is a lie—a deadly lie!" hissed Nagamo furiously.

"Dear me! Why will you pursue this attitude?" I asked. "It may interest you to learn that I am aware of Mr. Gerald Brunton's sinister profession. He is a chief agent of the Circle, as you are well aware."

Nagamo clenched his teeth, and looked at me as though he would like to stab me to the heart. But he sat back in his chair and said nothing. This fact alone was ample evidence of his guilt. Had he been innocent, he would have stormed with righteous indignation.

"Well, have you finished?" he asked at last.

"Not yet!" I said grimly. "I wish to speak plainly to you, Mr. Nagamo. Your official position in London is an important one, and it is not my desire that any publicity should be the outcome of this interview."

The Jap's eyes gleamed for a second.

"What is your intention, then?" he asked.

The very question was a confession in itself. Nagamo had clutched at the chance. He had probably been thinking that I intended laying information before the police. My words, therefore, gave him hope.

"My intention is quite simple," I replied quietly. "This dastardly game of yours must cease, Mr. Nagamo. I am not bargaining with you—I am giving positive orders. Yakama must be freed from your villainous plotting! In a very few minutes Brunton, the Circle chief agent, will arrive."

"Well?"

"I don't know what your business with him was to have been beyond the fact that it concerned Yakama," I went on. "But that is now changed. When Branton arrives, you must tell him that you have dropped the whole scheme. You must give instructions to the effect that the activities against Yakama are to be completely stopped."

"And these, I presume, are my orders?" asked Nagamo, in a hard voice.

"Precisely! They are your orders."

We gazed at one another fixedly for a few moments.

"Furthermore," I continued, "you, Mr. Nagamo, will resign your official appointment at once, and you will leave the country within a week from to-day. Failing this, I shall be compelled to act in a more drastic manner."

Nagamo smiled grimly.

"You have finished now?" he asked.

"I await your answer."

He snapped his fingers impatiently.

"My answer? What did you expect?" he said, with a contemptuous sneer. "Do you suppose that I will admit these absurdities? I will be charitable with you, Mr. Lee, and restrain the anger which fills me. I can only assume that you have been misinformed. I have allowed you to run on in order to obtain a clear insight into your extraordinary business. But now I think it is my turn to speak."

"Pray proceed," I said smoothly.

As I spoke, I extracted my cigar-case and passed it to him. He accepted a cigar, and we both lit up. The man was certainly a cool customer, but I was bent on proving to him that I was not to be outdone.

We eyed one another carefully. The situation was exceedingly interesting to my mind. Nagamo, possibly, held a different view. He was well aware that he was outdone, but he had not yet reached the point of admitting his guilt.

He was attempting bluff. In point of fact, I had been bluffing considerably, but I don't think he was aware of that fact. My theories had proved to be perfectly well founded; but, after all, they were only theories. I had no actual proof of Nagamo's guilt beyond the evidence which satisfied me. That evidence, it is needless for me to add, would not have satisfied Scotland Yard.

"It is for me to speak now," said Nagamo, nodding. "Your story has interested me, Mr. Lee, but I regret to tell you that I know nothing of it. I should be foolish to profess ignorance of the Circle of Terror, since that great criminal society is well known to all. But your accusations are utterly false. My business with Mr. Branton concerns a private deal in railway shares. He is, as you may be aware, a prominent stock-broker."

"Exactly?" I said. "But Mr. Branton has other strings to his bow."

"Well, I wish to tell you, Mr. Lee, that I will close this interview without further delay," said Nagamo. "Your so-called orders are not only preposterous but utterly impossible! That is all I have to say."

I set my lips as he reached his hand out towards the bell-push.

"One moment!" I said sharply.

"Well?"

He turned, eyeing me coldly.

"I have mentioned that more drastic measures would follow if you disregarded this warning," I said quietly. "Believe me, I was not bluffing when I spoke those words. You will ring that bell at your own peril, Mr. Nagamo, for, as sure as you are sitting there, I shall visit Scotland Yard immediately!"

"Do you suppose I care what you do?"

"I think, perhaps, you may be interested," I replied dryly. "You must surely realise that I have very reliable information, otherwise I would never have stepped into this office. That information, Mr. Nagamo, will prove of exceptional interest to the police authorities. In this country attempted murder is a very grave crime. Which is the most preferable—to leave this country as I have directed or to spend several years in a convict prison?"

I spoke grimly, and Nagamo's hand again wavered. Finally, he drew it back and sighed. Then he removed his glasses and polished them with a small square of chamois leather.

"You have won, Mr. Lee," he said quietly. "You have proved yourself to be the stronger. I can do nothing but accept your terms."

"I take it, then, that you admit—"

He waved his hand wearily.

"Is it necessary to pursue the matter?" he asked. "You hold the trump

card, and I must acknowledge defeat. When Mr. Brunton arrives, I will obey your injunctions. You may rest assured upon that point——”

As he was speaking, there came a tap at the door, and one of the clerks entered. He stepped to the desk and placed a card upon it.

Nagamo nodded.

“You will show Mr. Brunton in to me at once,” he said quietly.

The clerk left, and I rose to my feet.

“No, Mr. Nagamo; I am not going,” I said. “You must permit me to speak frankly. I do not trust you, and I intend to be present during this interview with Brunton. I mean to hear with my own ears what you say. There are thick curtains over by the window, which will afford me ample concealment.”

Toko Nagamo shrugged his shoulders.

“As you will,” he exclaimed. “This insult is almost unbearable, but I am not in the position to raise objections.”

“It may interest you to know that I shall hold you covered by my revolver throughout Brunton’s visit,” I said deliberately. “Make no attempt to disobey my instructions, Mr. Nagamo! I am in deadly earnest!”

He made no reply, and I quickly crossed the room and concealed myself behind the curtains, taking care to carry my hat, gloves, and stick with me. Even as the curtains hung motionless again, the door opened, and Gerald Brunton was ushered in. I was able to see clearly from a small aperture.

Brunton was a powerfully built man of about forty-five, with a grim-looking lower jaw and clean-shaven features. He was dressed immaculately. The door closed behind him as the clerk withdrew, and the thick curtains swung into place.

“Well, Mr. Nagamo, I think I am here on time,” said Brunton genially.

“One moment, please!” explained the Jap gently. “I wish you to perform a little service for me before you sit down, Mr. Brunton.”

“Certainly, if you wish.”

“Then kindly push back the curtain on the left side of the window,” said Toko Nagamo smoothly. “You will find a man there, Mr. Brunton—a man with a revolver. He is an insolent scoundrel who goes by the name of Mr. Nelson Lee!”

CHAPTER III.

(Nelson Lee continues.)

NAGAMO’S TREACHERY LEADS TO AN EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURE.

JUST for a moment I stood stock still. I was seriously annoyed. Never for a moment had I imagined that Nagamo would adopt such open defiance. I set my teeth grimly, and realised that I must adopt different tactics.

Without waiting to be fetched out of my concealment, I pushed the curtains aside and stepped into the room, still holding my automatic in a position of prominence.

For a few moments nobody spoke.

Undoubtedly the situation was tense.

Nagamo was smiling, but his eyes glittered with evil. Gerald Brunton, on the other hand, was very far from cool. His face had gone deathly pale, and he stood upon one of the Oriental mats, with his mouth half open and his eyes staring with alarm.

“Nelson Lee!” he muttered hoarsely.

Then, with an oath, he turned upon Nagamo.

“You heathen brute!” he snarled. “This is a trap! You have informed against me! By thunder, I’ll make you suffer as well! The police shall know that you instigated this murder plot against the boy——”

The Jap’s eyes flashed.

“Silence, fool!” he exclaimed, thrown off his balance by this unexpected attitude of Brunton’s.

Nagamo had not anticipated that Brunton would misunderstand the situation.

The Circle chief agent swore again.

“It’s a trap!” he repeated furiously. “Nelson Lee, of all men!”

“You have blundered, my friend,” said Nagamo. “This man Lee is my enemy. He came here to dictate to me.”

I nodded.

“You are very obliging, Mr. Brunton,” I said calmly. “Your words have told me that Nagamo is the scoundrel I suspected him of being. You have given him away splendidly. The position grows clearer.”

Brunton started.

“What’s all this foolery?” he demanded suspiciously. “You are Nelson Lee——”

"I have not denied it," I interrupted. "I do not intend to explain the situation to you, Brunton. Your confederate has simplified matters, for I shall now call assistance and have the pair of you arrested!"

Nagamo shook his head.

"Not yet, Mr. Lee," he said, moving over towards a rich sideboard. "Allow me to suggest a little conference. We will have a quiet, earnest talk. I am anxious to set matters right. Believe me, we can come to an arrangement. Will you join me in a whisky-and-soda?"

"Thank you—no!" I replied curtly. "And you must allow me to say that I will hold no parley——"

"Just one moment, Mr. Lee, please," said Nagamo.

He was squirting the soda-water into his glass; and then, in a flash, he jerked the nozzle of the siphon up, and pressed the lever with full force. A hissing stream of liquid shot clean across the room and struck me fully in the face.

The thing was so utterly unexpected that I was momentarily choked and blinded. I can assure you it is a most unwelcome surprise to have a stream of soda-water projected into your face.

"Hold him, Brunton—hold him!" I heard Nagamo rap out.

Before I could recover myself, my arms were seized. And then, as I opened my mouth to shout, a thick scarf was drawn over my face and pulled tight. At the most I could only mumble.

Nagamo acted as quickly as a monkey. He had already gagged me, and now proceeded to tie my hands with a stout piece of cord. My feet were shot from under me—I could do practically nothing to help myself—and my ankles were also secured.

"I—I say, this is risky, isn't it?" asked Brunton hoarsely. "Those clerks in the other office——"

"We shall not be disturbed, my friend," interrupted Nagamo smoothly. "My underlings ask no questions. They are well trained. We are perfectly secure in adopting this course, which was, indeed, necessary."

"It's a fool's game!" muttered Brunton uneasily.

"Would you have us arrested, you dolt?" demanded the Jap, becoming angry. "This was the only way. There is no danger, I tell you. Are you not pleased to get this man into your power?"

"By George!" muttered Brunton. "If the High Lord can get hold of Leo—— But the thing's impossible. We cannot shift him out of these offices in broad daylight. It's a mad game, Nagamo!"

I was lying on the floor, helpless, and a great rage filled me. I blamed myself for having fallen into the trap.

But, to be honest with myself, I ought not to have taken that view. An adventure of the sort was bound to be uncertain. Although I had been keenly upon the alert, I could not be prepared for every emergency. A detective is not more than human, all said and done.

To begin with, I had never imagined for a second that Nagamo would betray me to Brunton; his cunning was greater than I had estimated. Again, it was little short of amazing that my enemies should adopt such melodramatic methods in a busy office at mid-day.

And this was no ordinary office, either. It was a huge building where a score of visitors were constantly on the premises—not the same visitors, of course. Moreover, there were clerks in the very next room, and it was utterly preposterous to suppose that these clerks were in league with Nagamo. The man was in a high position, and the simple fact was plain. He had taken advantage of the privacy of his own sanctum to act so drastically.

But even now I failed to see what he could do with me. I couldn't be conveniently dropped out of the window, or stuffed into a sack. The position, perhaps, wasn't so desperate, after all.

Nagamo had acted hastily—desperately. Before so very long he would regret the assault. For now, if not before, I had all the evidence I required. Scandal or no scandal, the yellow rascal should pay for his temerity.

Since it was useless being furious, I calmed myself—with something of an effort, I'll confess—and gazed at my captors. They were still standing over me, Brunton looking scared and alarmed, and Nagamo perfectly cool.

The eminent Japanese official seemed in no way perturbed by his villainous actions. An interruption, just now, would have been fatal; but he was quite at his ease. He was evidently confident of privacy being maintained.

His true colours were shown—glaringly. He knew well enough that the game was up, and he had acted as

many a crook will act when cornered. And it somewhat surprised me to see how calmly he behaved.

One point was obvious to me. Nagamo believed that I was the only outsider who knew the inner facts. By dealing effectively with me, therefore, he was rendering his own position safe. If I could only be got out of the way, the coast would be clear.

"It's a mad game, I tell you," repeated Brunton huskily. "What is more, Nagamo, I'll have nothing to do with it. You've made this pit of your own free will, and I'm not going to help you out. I'm going straight away——"

Toko Nagamo snapped his fingers.

"Pray, do not be so absurd, Mr. Brunton," he said patiently. "There is no pit—I am in no danger. You, also, should be elated. Is not this man, Nelson Lee, an enemy of your organisation?"

"That may be," admitted Brunton. "In fact, Lee's an infernal thorn in the Circle's side—has been so for months. He's done more harm than every Scotland Yard detective put together. The Chief would give a ransom to get hold of him."

Nagamo shrugged his shoulders.

"Then why not obtain the ransom?" he suggested.

"Don't talk rot!" snapped Brunton savagely. "Hang it all, you're forcing me to speak brutally, Nagamo. How can I get this intruder out of the way? If it were possible to put him in my pocket, I should be delighted. It would mean a small fortune to me if I could deliver Lee safely into the Chief's hands. But I can't. It's no good talking. We can't do impossibilities."

"I am not suggesting that you should," replied Nagamo smoothly. "The position is surprisingly simple, my friend. You can take Mr. Nelson Lee away with you quite easily, I assure you."

Brunton stared.

"Now—in broad daylight?" he asked.

"Why not?"

"Well, I can name a dozen reasons why not!" said the other grimly. "The thing's preposterous, Nagamo. Talk sense, for Heaven's sake!"

Nagamo smiled, and polished his glasses.

"You can take the man with you at once, Brunton," he repeated.

"Through the outer office—with all the clerks looking on?"

"Yes."

"Down the public lift?"

"With ease."

"And take him away in my motor-car?"

"Certainly."

"With no possibility of being stopped or questioned?"

"No possibility whatever," said Nagamo. "You appear surprised, Mr. Brunton."

The Circle chief agent grunted.

"I think you're mad!" he said candidly.

I, of course, had listened to the interesting dialogue. In some vague way I began to suspect that Nagamo had a diabolical plan in his mind for my disposal. His very calmness and assurance told of some special scheme.

"No, Mr. Brunton, I am not mad," he said, without taking offence. "I am, on the contrary, merely practical. If you will take the trouble to glance over to the wall on your left, you will, perhaps, gain a clearer understanding of my meaning."

I saw Brunton looking.

My own position was such that I could not see the spot without twisting energetically. I lay quite still, and waited. Brunton and Nagamo were still standing almost over me; for the time being they ignored me completely.

Had I been alone I could have freed myself from my bonds in a very few minutes. But any movement on my part would have been seen at once, and an attempt to loosen the cords would probably have resulted in their being drastically tightened.

"Well?" said Brunton impatiently. "I see nothing particular. Confound it, man, why can't you say what you mean in so many words? This thing is getting on my nerves. We shall be disturbed before long——"

"Tut-tut! Nobody will come until I ring," interjected Nagamo. "Cannot you see a large dress-basket, my friend?"

"Well, what of it?"

"It is the solution of the problem, that is all."

Brunton stared for a second, and then whistled.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed slowly—"by Jove!"

Personally a wave of relief passed over me. Frankly, I had feared something far more formidable. But I will not say "feared"—that would be doing myself an injustice. I was not in the least afraid of these rogues.

A dress-basket! So that was the idea? I was to be bundled into the thing, and carried off in broad daylight! The idea was by no means original, but it was certainly a good one. I felt caged; my emotions were something like those of a wild animal which has just been placed in captivity. A great rage filled me, but I could do nothing—nothing at all. My helplessness was appalling.

"Stuff him into the dress-basket, you mean?" asked Brunton.

"Of course."

"Bound and gagged, he'll be as helpless as a dead chicken," continued the Circle agent. "By Jove, it's splendid, Nagamo! There's a stout lock on the thing, I see, so he can't possibly break away en route."

Brunton's whole attitude had changed. The uneasiness had left his eyes; his bearing was more upright. He was thinking, probably, of the great reward which would be his when I was delivered up into the hands of the High Lord.

"There is one point you seem to have missed, Nagamo," he said abruptly. "Your clerks knew that Lee came in here, didn't they?"

"Yes."

"Then there'll be some curiosity, won't there? They know that Lee hasn't emerged, and that might lead to awkward suspicions——"

"Not at all," said Nagamo, smiling.

"It's all very well to talk about your underlings being trustworthy——"

"You have overlooked the fact, Mr. Brunton, that there are some curtains upon the left wall," said the Jap. "Those curtains conceal a door—a door which leads straight out into the main corridor. It would have been quite possible for Mr. Lee to have taken his departure at any moment without being observed. You will, yourself, make your exit by that door; together with the dress-basket."

Brunton nodded briskly.

"That's all right, then," he said. "By Jove, there's a weight off my mind, Nagamo. But what of our business? And when do you intend to tell me what

Lee has been playing at? Is his game connected with this St. Frank's business?"

"We will go into that after our excellent friend has been placed in his snug quarters," said Nagamo smoothly. "Come, help me to place him in the basket. He will be very much alive when you arrive at your destination; the basket, although closely woven, admits an ample supply of air."

As a preliminary, the pair tightened the gag, and made it so secure that no effort of mine would loosen it. I was twisted round by Brunton whilst Nagamo opened the basket and removed a few articles of clothing. The thing was quite large—its proportions were nearly ample enough to admit of my lying down. I should be able to do so, provided I hunched my legs up. For a change of position, I should be able to sit up, with my back to one end.

The very thought of the humiliation caused me to go hot. It was gall and wormwood for me to submit to this treatment. But my enemies had the upper hand for the time being, and I could do nothing but submit.

I was bundled ignominiously into the basket, and the lid was closed down upon my head. I heard the lock snap closed, and the echo of a chuckle from Nagamo reached my ears.

It will be a matter for wonder by some, perhaps, that I should write of these events, that I should set on record an affair in which I was hopelessly outwitted. But why not? Only a super-human being could gain success always. I have told of my successes often enough—so why not of my defeats?

But I am not entirely right in making that statement. I was only defeated for the time being. And, much as I loathed the helplessness of my predicament, I could not honestly blame myself. I had made no slip—no blunder. An under-estimation of Nagamo's cunning cannot rightly be called an error.

For a full twenty minutes I lay in the basket, listening to the murmur of my captors' voices. I could distinguish no words, and so I fumed and worked steadily and patiently at the cords which bound my wrists. Not that I had much hope of getting free—the cords had been cruelly tightened.

At last I heard sounds of movement;

and Brunton and Nagamo talked in normal tones, so that I could hear what they said. Previously, they had been merely murmuring. I heard a door open, and Nagamo spoke.

"Send up two of the porters at once," he ordered curtly.

I knew for what reason the porters were being summoned. They arrived after a few minutes, and the basket was lifted with a jerk. I attempted to kick the side, but my cramped position made the effort impossible. And, even had I done so, I don't suppose any good would have resulted. The one porter would have thought that the other was merely jerking the great basket.

My prison was half dragged, half carried out into the corridor. I heard Nagamo bidding his visitor good-bye.

"You are very good, Mr. Brunton—very good," he exclaimed genially. "I hope you will have no trouble with your bulky luggage. Good-bye—good-bye!"

The basket was placed in the lift, and the latter descended. Then I was dragged across the entrance-hall to the steps.

"Yes, in the tonneau," I heard Brunton saying. "I think it will go in all right—it is an open car. Never mind the cushions—place the basket anyhow, so long as it is secure."

The next few moments were interesting. The gyrations of my prison were wild and jerky. I was tipped about this way and that. And, for the life of me, I could not help bringing to mind an absurdly farcical film I had once seen in a picture-theatre—where one of the usually grotesque characters was being tossed about in the most impossible manner in a trunk.

Unfortunately, however, this was no farce; the reality of it was only too grim. But, at last, I was settled down at rest. The basket was tilting over uncomfortably, my head being much lower than my feet. I could only trust that the motor-car journey would not be an extensive one.

There was a grinding of gears, and the automobile commenced gliding off into the traffic. What lay in store for me? What was to be the end of this unfortunate adventure?

My underestimation of Toko Nagamo's scoundrelism was evidently to cost me dear!

CHAPTER IV.

(Nelson Lee continues.)

PROFESSOR ZINGRAVE IS KIND ENOUGH TO GIVE ME SOME INTERESTING DETAILS OF HIS PLANS.

I WAS under no delusion concerning my position.

By a sheer stroke of mischance, I had fallen into the hands of the Circle of Terror. My bold plan regarding Toko Nagamo looked somewhat sickly in the light of the present events.

I had been in the Circle's power more than once before. I had escaped—the narration of this episode is sufficient evidence of that. Possibly I should escape again. It would have been absurd, indeed, to give up hope.

But my common-sense told me that the odds were distinctly against me. There was only a slim chance of my getting out of this sinister business alive. Why should I attempt to fool myself?

Professor Zingrave, the High Lord of the Circle, would be overjoyed to see me, and he would certainly conceive some plan for my prompt destruction.

I was thankful for one thing. My identity of "Mr. Alvington" had never been disclosed. Nipper, therefore, would be perfectly safe at St. Frank's. Poor lad! I was afraid that he had seen the last of me.

But these somewhat gloomy thoughts did not trouble me for long. It is a habit of mine to look upon the brighter side, no matter how black the horizon may be. I was no novice at the game, and it was a most uncertain one. At any moment I might be provided with an opportunity to turn the tables.

Opportunity, indeed, is generally the keynote of all achievements. Failure to seize a sudden chance frequently leads to disaster. Needless to say, I should be intensely upon the alert.

Notwithstanding Nagamo's statement, regarding fresh air, I found my quarters infernally stuffy. The basket-work was singularly fine, and the air within soon became almost stifling. But there was no possibility of suffocation, and I had long since learned to bear discomforts.

Although I was prepared for the worst, I rather regretted that I had not been able to overhear that conversation between Nagamo and Brunton. What fresh villainy had they planned?

My thoughts were doubly embittered by the almost certain knowledge that

poor Yakama's life would be forfeit as well as my own. That cheerful little lad would be done to death in spite of all my efforts! It was a terrible reflection, and I anathematised myself severely and rather undeservedly.

I made no attempt to estimate the length of my journey. I might be merely bound for the suburbs, or I might be going to Halifax, for all I knew. But naturally I was interested in the sounds of the traffic. I amused myself by attempting to gauge my position by these sounds.

I can't say that I succeeded, for, after an hour's run, I had not the slightest idea of the direction which the car had taken. I might be south, north, east, or west. I could not judge which.

But at last, before I expected it, the car came to a standstill. Everything was quiet, and this led me to believe that I was either out in the country or in a very secluded suburb.

There was a delay of ten minutes or so, during which time, I reckoned, help was being obtained for the removal of the basket. Voices made themselves heard, and then came another upheaval. There were jolts and jars. I knew that my prison was being carried up some steep stone steps.

A door slammed, and there was a short respite. Then the dress-basket was carried bodily down a passage and into an apartment. This door was also closed, and I heard the key turn in the lock. Dim voices sounded some little way from me. Brunton was evidently explaining matters.

A key rattled in the lock of the basket, and the next moment the lid was raised. I saw gazing down upon me the smiling face of Professor Cyrus Zingrave. The High Lord of the Circle of Terror was bare of all disguise, and he was attired in a long, flowing dressing-gown of a purple hue. Upon the surface of the cloth were circles of a deeper purple—the well-known sign of the Circle of Terror.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Zingrave, in his silkiest tones. "How unfortunate! How very unfortunate!"

The professor pronounced the words with infinite relish. He positively gloated over me, and it was only with great difficulty that I held myself in check. To make a display of rage before him would only amuse him the more, so I denied him that pleasure.

"It appears that you have got yourself into serious trouble, my dear Mr. Lee," went on Zingrave smoothly. "Come, Brunton, let us assist the gentleman into a more comfortable position. I am quite anxious to have a chat with him. It is some time since we met—eh, Mr. Lee?"

Zingrave was at fault in making this statement. We had met only a few days before, in the tunnel which ran from the old moor quarry to St. Frank's. But the professor had been deceived on that occasion. He had mistaken me for a simple schoolmaster.

Brunton removed the thick muffler from my mouth and nostrils. The man was smiling with keen pleasure. He was preening himself because of his victory—or supposed victory. If there was any credit to be allotted, it should certainly have gone to Toko Nagamo.

"Ah, that is better—much better!" said Zingrave. "How do you feel, Mr. Lee? I trust you are in no way harmed?"

I smiled calmly.

"It pleases you to be amused, professor," I said, determining to echo his mood. "I derive a certain satisfaction from the fact that it was my own action which led me into this position. Your astute agents have no cause to congratulate themselves, at all events."

"Surely it is of minor importance how you fell into my hands?" said Zingrave. "You are here, Mr. Lee, and that is very satisfactory. Should I be impertinent if I inquired how you came to be mixed up in this Yakama affair?"

"I shall certainly answer no questions, if that is what you mean," I replied. "Naturally, I expect no mercy from you. In the past I have dealt the Circle many severe blows, and it is only to be expected that you will now reciprocate. I wonder how many thousands of pounds you have lost through my efforts, professor?"

For a second Zingrave's smile vanished; his dark, evil eyes blazed with fury.

"You interfering hound——" He checked himself and laughed. "But why should I give way to anger? Frankly, Lee, I admire you. Although you have wrought more damage than any other man, I can feel nothing but admiration for your many exhibitions of astounding shrewdness."

"You are very complimentary!" I said dryly.

"Pray don't imagine that I am sneer-

ing," said Zingrave. "I am quite serious, my dear Lee. Anger is merely weakness. I am great enough to recognise and to acknowledge a worthy foe-man. You have provided me with many interesting tussles, and I have strength enough to admit that I invariably came off second-best. To tell you the honest truth, I have feared you. All my plans, all my movements, were decided upon with you in my thoughts."

Zingrave was speaking quite earnestly. I believed him. Had he been a man of normal brain, had there been no kink in that organ, he would have surprised the world with his undoubted genius. The professor was a most pleasant man to talk to, and even now I found it difficult to realise that he was an arch-criminal of the worst type.

"Is this eulogy quite necessary?" I asked quietly. "I am forced to listen, since I am helpless. It is entertaining, no doubt, but rather a waste of time. I attempted to foil your murder plot against Yakama, and——"

"You failed, eh?" smiled Zingrave. "It is just as well that you acted prematurely, Mr. Lee. Plans are already being put into execution for the accomplishment of my object. Yakama will die to-night. And, since those plans have been made, I see no reason why you should not share his fate in a similar way. It would be pointless for me to formulate a separate scheme for your benefit."

"What will you do with him, professor?" asked Brunton curiously.

Zingrave stroked his chin.

"There is no reason why I should not be candid," he said, turning to me again. "You will be relocked in the basket, Lee, and then placed upon a motor-lorry. This vehicle will convey you to Caistowe Bay."

"Why to Cornwall?" I asked.

Zingrave smiled.

"Dear me, your geography is somewhat poor!" he exclaimed. "Caistowe Bay, Mr. Lee, is in Sussex, only three miles from St. Frank's College."

"Ah, yes, of course!" I said, with a nod.

I had been well aware of the fact, but for some vague reason I wished to lead Zingrave to suppose that I was ignorant of the locality around St. Frank's. Perhaps my idea was to safeguard my identity as "Mr. Alvington." But what did it matter? By all appearances, this

adventure was to be the end of all things for me.

"Caistowe Bay," repeated Zingrave reflectively, "is a very quiet spot, and at night practically deserted. You will be taken by the lorry right to the beach. There a motor-boat will be in readiness, and you will be transferred on board, still within your portable prison."

"And then?" I asked.

"Well, then there will be a slight delay, possibly. My agents will bring the boy Yakama, and the craft will run out to sea with the pair of you. I think you can form a guess as to your ultimate destination?"

"The sea-bottom, no doubt."

"You are shrewd, Mr. Lee," smiled Zingrave silkily. "Exactly! The sea-bottom. You will have company upon your interesting journey. Yakama will make the trip with you. You will, in short, be placed in weighted sacks and dropped overboard. The idea is quite simple and straightforward."

Brunton shifted uneasily.

"Hang it all, professor, there's no need to talk about it!" he muttered.

"Why not?" asked the High Lord. "Our friend is interested, I am sure. He has a particular reason for being interested. There will be no clue, Mr. Lee—no trace. The disappearance of yourself and Yakama will be absolute and complete."

I don't know why, but this candour on Zingrave's part pleased me. Maybe I had a vague hope that I should be able to extricate myself before the fatal moment arrived. If so, it was a subconscious hope. I only know that something stirred within me.

Zingrave's love of gloating over a fallen enemy had led him into disaster before now. Perhaps it would do so on this occasion. At present, however, there was no prospect of deliverance before me. Indeed, I had seldom been in a more hopeless position.

Before being replaced in the basket, I was examined carefully, and my bonds were made even more secure. The muffler was not replaced round my head. A very special gag was substituted. This gag was infinitely more uncomfortable to wear, but absolutely effective.

I had suspected that Zingrave would have adopted some special form of devilry—that I should be drugged or even poisoned. But he was content to let me start my journey without interfer-

ence. He probably thought that the plan of being sent to death in a weighted sack was sufficiently dreadful. Meanwhile, I should be allowed the privilege of thinking over the fate which would shortly overtake me.

I was quite relieved when the lid of the basket once more closed upon me. It was not necessary for me to maintain my attitude of calmness and careless ease. It had been a great effort, but I had succeeded.

In the privacy of my confined prison, my face relaxed, and I allowed myself to set my teeth grimly. There was only one chance for me now, and that was to escape before Caistowe Bay was reached.

There seemed little or no prospect of this. But I commenced working quietly at my bonds at once. If, by some miracle, I managed to get my hands free, it would only be after solid hours of strenuous, exhausting labour.

And thus, less than half an hour later, the great dress-basket was placed upon the waiting motor-lorry. The journey commenced—the journey which was to end in death!

CHAPTER V.

(Nipper continues the narrative.)

IN WHICH YAKAMA ACTS VERY STRANGELY,
AND I BECOME DECIDEDLY ALARMED.

ST. FRANK'S had settled down for the evening.

The absence of "Mr. Alvington" had caused little or no comment among the juniors. It was quite an unimportant event. Housemasters often took a trip up to London for the day, on business or pleasure. The fellows were not much interested in the movements of masters.

But I was different.

I had been worried all day, and was now on the look-out for the guv'nor's return. Sir Montie and Tommy, too, were a bit concerned. They knew most of the facts, and it was only natural that they should be interested.

As a matter of fact, I had been expecting the guv'nor for an hour past, and was now becoming a wee bit worried. Of course, this was silly of me. There wasn't anything to be worried over, so far as I knew.

The evening was cold and miserable. Snow was falling slightly, forming a thin film of whiteness on the ground. I, like

an ass, was standing on the steps of the Ancient House, wrapped up in overcoat and muffler, waiting to spot Nelson Lee when he entered the gates.

People generally do this, I've noticed. But it's potty when you come to think of it. Why shouldn't you wait indoors, in the warm? It only makes a few seconds' difference, anyhow. But yet there's something satisfactory in hanging about outside, especially if you're particularly anxious.

I had full confidence in the guv'nor, and wasn't idiot enough to get in a stew. In a few minutes he'd turn up, as large as life, cheerful and triumphant. That's what I expected.

But somehow he didn't come!

At all events, I was feeling more comfortable about Yakama. I reckoned that he was as safe as eggs now. How the dickens was I to guess that the Circle of Terror had already made plans, even before Nelson Lee went on his trip to London?

The snow came down a bit faster, and I became fed up at last. I told myself that it was a mug's game to stop out there and catch a cold. And so, after a last look across the Triangle, I went indoors.

The weather had been rather queer all day. It had been dull all the morning, and heavy rain had fallen in the afternoon. Then, as soon as darkness came, a hard frost set in, making the wet roads as slippery as ice. And now, on the top of this, snow was descending.

In the lobby I ran into Handforth and Church and McClure, of Study D. They regarded me with some surprise.

"Been out?" asked Edward Oswald Handforth.

"Oh, no!" I said sarcastically. "I got this snow on me from the fireplace in the common-room—and I usually wear an overcoat and muffler indoors!"

Church and McClure grinned.

"Nothing to cackle at, you asses!" snorted Handforth. "I didn't know Bennett was a funny idiot. Where has he been too, anyhow?"

"Little boys shouldn't be curious!" I said impatiently, brushing past.

Handforth gasped and pulled me back.

"Was that meant for me?" he demanded warmly.

"Oh, don't be an ass!"

I wasn't in the mood to argue with Handforth, just then, and I shook him off irritably. But Edward Oswald com-



Just for a moment both men were struck motionless. Nelson Lee! And He had been locked in the basket, bound hand and foot. The next second the pair were fighting furiously.—(See page 27.)

menced to roll up his sleeves, in the mistaken idea that the process would cause me grave uneasiness. I walked away.

"Hi, come here!" roared Handforth.

"I want you, fathead!"

"What for?" I asked, turning.

"I'm going to smash you for calling me a little boy——"

"Oh, rats!"

And, leaving Handforth in the grasp of his two grinning chums, I passed along to Study C, in the Remove passage. I spotted De Valerie further along, and my temper wasn't improved. The Rotter generally made me wild, somehow.

I stamped into my study, and glared round. Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson were roasting chestnuts before the fire, and Yakama was reading at the table. The little apartment was very cosy.

"Begad! There's a storm brewin'," murmured Montie. "Who's been upsettin' you, Benny boy? What's the meanin' of that frightful-lookin' frown? You ain't in a sweet temper——"

"Oh, dry up!" I grunted, peeling off my overcoat. "It's a rotten evening—snowing like the deuce now. I've been waiting on the steps. Mr. Alvington hasn't appeared yet."

"Oh, he'll turn up soon," said Watson. "Have some of these chestnuts, old son. They're ripping. Don't look so blue."

In the cheery atmosphere of Study C I soon lost my irritability. Yakama, I noticed, glanced at the clock occasionally; and he asked, once, if it was right.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Tommy, at last. "Expecting something?"

Yakama smiled blandly.

"What is it that I should expectantly await?" he asked. "Oh, no, Watson, there is nothing I am anticipating. But the wonder was within me regarding whether I should go to the august library for the delightful purpose of borrowing a magnificent volume of reading."

Yakama generally used fifty words when he only needed five, and we smiled at his floweriness. He was a regular little bounder for books, and we didn't think anything when he left the study five minutes later.

"He'll come back with some giddy old

book that's been stuffed away on the library shelves for years," chuckled Tommy Watson. "Jappy seems to pick out all the old ones, and generally uninteresting. I suppose he wants to improve his English."

"Dear boy, did you say improve?"

"Yes."

"You're wrong, Tommy boy," smiled Sir Montie. "Yakama's English is too good now, begad! It's a shockin' thing to admit, but I've heard Yakama say words that I've never even seen before—I have, really!"

"He's a learned little bounder," I said, glancing at the clock. "But never mind Jappy for the minute. I'm rather glad he's gone out of the room. He isn't in the secret as you two chaps are, and so I can speak freely now. I'm jolly anxious about the guv'nor, to tell the truth."

"Gone to London, hasn't he?" asked Tommy, peeling a chestnut.

"You know he has, you ass——"

"Well, he'll come back all right—by the last train, I expect," went on Watson cheerfully. "No need to get worried."

I grunted.

"You don't understand, Tommy," I said. "The guv'nor may have dropped into some danger, and he may want help, and he may be in a hole——"

"That's right, dear boy," agreed Montie, with a nod. "He may be dyin' in frightful agony—he may be even dead, begad! It's a horrid thing to say, but it's just possible that he's buried! You know, Benny, you're a splendidly cheerful chap at times!"

I couldn't help grinning.

"I deserved that, Montie," I exclaimed. "Of course, I am an ass to get worried. Mr. Lee will turn up before long, you bet. Hallo! What's wrong with Handforth? Can't you recognise his baby tones?"

The megaphone-like voice of the one and only Handforth sounded out in the passage. He was arguing—as usual. He was arguing with Church and McClure. There wasn't another fellow in the Ancient House who would "stick" his jaw as his two especial chums would. They were used to him, and didn't mind it.

"Gone to the gym, p'raps," I heard McClure say.

"Don't be an ass!" snorted Handforth.

"Well, I don't care where the young fathead's gone, anyhow——"

"That's not the question," Handforth interrupted, as he and his chums passed the door of Study C. "I just remarked that it seemed queer—and you go and start an argument——"

"I started an argument?" gasped McClure.

"Yes, you did!" snorted Handforth. "Didn't you say it was rummy for Jappy to be going out in all this snow, with his overcoat and muffler on? If you ask me, the young bounder is up to no good. Going out on a night like this! Huh! It's something shady, I'll bet——"

"Oh, rats! He's gone to the gym——"

"In his overcoat and muffler?"

"I don't know, and I'm blowed if I care——"

We couldn't hear any more. Montie and Tommy were grinning; but I sat with a fixed expression. And then, suddenly, I jumped up and grabbed my cap.

"Did you hear?" I asked tensely.

"Dear boy, you're gettin' excited——"

"Yakama's gone out!" I cut in sharply. "Don't you understand, ass? Yakama's gone out—dressed for a long walk, by the look of it! And he led us to believe that he was going to the library!"

"Great pip!" said Watson blankly.

"What does it mean, dear fellow?" asked Montie.

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out," I replied grimly. "The young bounder, leading us on like that! He's sneaked out—after locking-up, too! There's something queer about this, my sons!"

"I dashed to the door.

"Benny boy——"

"There's no time to waste," I interrupted. "Come on!"

"But——"

"Come on!" I repeated urgently.

Tregellis-West and Watson saw that I was in earnest, and they grabbed their own caps, and followed me out into the passage. Handforth and Co. were just disappearing in Study D.

I didn't wait to speak to them. I knew that Yakama had gone out, and that was enough. I was angry as well as anxious. Why had the Japanese junior gone off in this mysterious fashion? Why hadn't he told us of his

intentions? Somehow, I couldn't help thinking of the Circle of Terror.

Was this a trap of some sort? Had the guv'nor failed?

I scarcely knew what to think beyond the fact that Yakama had to be stopped. He had only just gone out, I judged. Handforth and Co. must have passed him in the lobby a minute ago. If Yakama wasn't in the Triangle, he could only be a very short distance down the road.

Montie and Tommy and I hurried out. Snow was still descending—in fine flakes, driven by a cutting wind. We could see the gates fairly clearly, for there was a lamp set in the wrought-iron arch overhead.

"There he is!" said Tommy quickly.

A small figure, well wrapped up, was just turning from the gates. It was Sessue Yakama. He had evidently gone to the gates, forgetting that they were locked, and now he was about to make for the low part of the wall.

We simply streaked across the Triangle.

Yakama saw us coming, and hesitated for a second. He seemed about to scoot off, but changed his mind, and waited. He probably realised that escape was impossible. We halted before him, panting.

"What are you doing out here, Jappy?" I asked sharply.

The Japanese boy smiled.

"I was about to expeditiously take my departure from the magnificent school grounds," he said blandly. "The splendid gates were secured, however——"

"What were you going out for?" I interrupted.

"It is with extreme and extraordinary regret that I must decline to acquaint you with the explanation that you so urgently desire," smiled Yakama sweetly. "I am sorry to a tremendous degree——"

"Bogad! Is it a recital?" murmured Sir Montie.

"Oh, rats!" I said impatiently. "Look here, Jappy, you're not going out!"

"I have a different idea, Bennett," said Yakama, remaining perfectly calm. "I shall take my leave immediately——"

"Where are you going?" demanded Watson.

"I am wonderfully sorry——"

"Oh, rot! Why can't you tell us?"

"It is impossible," said Yakama quietly.

I simply glared at him.

"Impossible, is it?" I exclaimed grimly. "Well, my son, it's impossible for you to go out, too—unless we come with you."

Jappy shook his head.

"It is imperatively necessary that I should go alone," he replied. "My sorrow is extreme, but it is impossible for me to delay my departure further."

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "Aint this where we do things, Benny?"

"It is!" I said. "This is where we yank Jappy back into the Ancient House!"

As a matter of fact, I was thoroughly exasperated. Yakama had never attempted to have any secrets before this. I couldn't help feeling somewhat uneasy about the business. Why did the Japanese junior wish to slip away on the quiet? It was impossible to suppose that he was up to any mischief, but it was quite on the cards that he'd been tricked in some way.

So I grabbed hold of him, and Tommy and Montie lent their aid. We twisted Yakama round, and commenced marching him back across the Triangle, through the finely falling snow.

I had expected that he would resist, but he calmly went with us, smiling, all the time. Apparently he realised that it would be a hopeless tussle—three to one. But the young boulder was more cute than I had suspected.

Without the slightest warning he twisted like an eel, wriggled away, and attempted to bolt. I grabbed him desperately—for he could run like a hare. Just then it seemed as though an earthquake had happened.

I turned a complete somersault, my arms and legs flying, and landed with a thud on my back. And as I sat up, half-dazed, I saw Montie repeat my uncomfortable performance. Unfortunately, he fell right on the top of Tommy Watson, and the pair went sprawling.

Yakama himself dodged away into the darkness.

"Begad! What was it, dear fellows!" gasped Tregellis-West.

"Ju-jitsu!" I rapped out. "By Jingo! That kid is an absolute wonder—and he's got away, too!"

The others were on their feet by this time, and they were very little hurt. We dashed away in pursuit of Yakama, whose agility was amazing. I just

spotted him getting over the wall near the masters' gate.

"Come on!" I panted.

And at that moment the little gate opened and three dim figures came in. Tommy and Montie and I were going at such a speed that we couldn't pull up in time. A collision was unavoidable—and it happened!

We ran bang into the three newcomers before we could pull up. There were several grunts, and we were all collared roughly.

"You young sweeps!" rapped out a harsh voice. "What the deuce do you mean by rushing about like this? Bennett and Tregellis-West and Watson, I see. You'll come indoors at once——"

"Oh, don't be an ass, Starke!" gasped Tommy Watson. "We're in a hurry——"

"Shut up! You'll go indoors!"

"Look here, you're not going to detain us," I said angrily. "We didn't hurt you, Starke. "It's jolly important that we should go at once——"

"I don't want any cheek!" rapped out Starke. "Stop struggling, you young rotter! By George, I'll make you sit up for this! Just about to break bounds, weren't you? Well, your game's nipped in the bud!"

I had been struggling to get away, but Starke, of the Sixth, was a hulking great fellow, with the strength of an ox. He was the most unpopular prefect in the Ancient House. His companions were prefects also—his two chums, Kenmore and Wilson. All three were bullies.

Kenmore and Wilson were holding Tommy and Montie, and they were grinning with pleasant anticipation. At the slightest excuse they were always ready to "drop" on Removites.

We had bumped into them by accident, and the mishap couldn't have taken place at a more unfortunate moment. Yakama had slipped away—and we couldn't follow. We couldn't explain, either. The position was simply awful.

I had a horrible feeling that the Japanese boy was running into a trap. He had been left in my charge—and I had failed!

"Confound it, I'm not going to be kept like this!" I roared furiously. "Let me go, Starke, you cad!"

I struggled with all my strength. But Starke had dug his fingers into the back of my neck, and was gripping my collar firmly. With his other hand he clutched

my arm, I'm fairly strong myself, and I've wriggled away from men twice my size on many an occasion. But Starke had got hold of me tightly.

"No, you don't, you little bounder!" he grated out. "None of your tricks! You're coming indoors with me, and I'm going to give you a liberal taste of the cane. Understand?"

"You—you rotter!"

"That means another two cuts!" snapped Starke harshly. "Come on!"

Sir Montie and Tommy were already being marched off, and I was forced after them in the same ignominious fashion. It was galling and humiliating. My blood fairly boiled.

At any ordinary time I shouldn't have cared a toss. But this occasion was absolutely exceptional. Yakama had gone out on a secret mission, and I feared that he would meet with some disaster or other. It was even possible that his life would be forfeit for Starke's high-handed action.

And I couldn't explain!

I couldn't explain and I couldn't get away. The position was not only exasperating but positively alarming.

CHAPTER VI.

(*Nipper continues.*)

IN WHICH WE TRACK YAKAMA—ONLY TO MEET WITH FAILURE AT THE FINISH!

WALTER STARKE chuckled with malicious amusement.

"Thought you'd get away, didn't you?" he said nastily.

"I've had my suspicions about you for a long while, Bennett. Pretend to be quite a good boy, don't you? This time I caught you attempting to break bounds, and I've a jolly good mind to report you to the Housemaster!"

"I wish you could!" I panted angrily. "Mr. Alvington's away, though—that's why you're doing this, you cad!"

Starke scowled.

"I don't want any of your dashed cheek!" he snapped. "This is going to be a lesson to you!"

The prefect was making a mountain out of a molehill, so to speak. If he had caught Fullwood and Co. breaking bounds, he wouldn't have said a thing. But Starke was of very much the same calibre as the Nuts—only a bigger black-guard in every way. He ought to have

been sacked from St. Frank's long since.

He had taken advantage of this opportunity to vent some of his spite upon my chums and myself. It wasn't often he got a chance to be down on us, and he was acting within his authority. Being a prefect, and his two friends being prefects, they could cane us if we deserved punishment. We didn't, but that made practically no difference.

Having failed to get away by force, I swallowed my indignation, and tried other tactics.

"Look here, Starke," I said earnestly. "This is a jolly serious matter. If you'll let us go now, we'll take any old caning you like later on. You can report us to the Housemaster——"

"Yes, begad, that's a good idea, Benny."

Kenmore grinned.

"Don't take any notice of the young sweep!" he said.

"I'm not going to," replied Starke. "That game won't work with us! The three of them are going to be caned—two cuts each for Tregellis-West and Watson and four cuts for Bennett."

I clenched my teeth desperately.

By this time we had reached the Ancient House steps, and were forced into the building, like pickpockets being marched to the lock-up. Once inside, Starke kicked the heavy door to and then released me.

"Go to my study and get the cane out of the corner!" he ordered curtly.

"Hallo! Whose getting it in the neck?"

Owen major and several other juniors were on their way to the common-room, and they paused to look on with interest. Fullwood and Co. hove in sight, too, and they grinned with pleasure.

"Quite an interestin' little scene," said Ralph Leslie Fullwood languidly.

"What have they been doin', Starke? Up to some sneakin' game, I'll bet."

"Fullwood, I'll punch your nose after this! I will, really!" gasped Sir Montie.

"No threats!" snapped Kenmore.

"Go and get that cane, Bennett!"

Owen major snorted.

"More rotten bullying, I suppose," he muttered to Canham.

Starke heard the words and he scowled.

"Take fifty lines, Owen!" he snapped.

"I—I say, Starke——" stammered Owen major.

"That'll do! Take fifty lines!" snarled the prefect. "And clear off the

lot of you! Give Owen a cuff for me, Wilson!"

Wilson stepped forward to oblige, but Owen major wisely dodged aside, and went to the common-room with a gloomy face. The other Removites melted away, with the exception of the noble Nuts—Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell and Merrell.

"Give 'em beans, Starke!" grinned Fullwood.

"You hold your tongue!" said Starke. "Now then, Bennett, cut away and fetch my cane! And if you're not back in two minutes I'll give you two extra strokes!"

During the last few seconds I had been considering things quickly in my mind. Almost any tactics were justifiable just now. Attacking a prefect was a very severe crime, and one I wouldn't have dreamed of committing at any ordinary time. But I was sure that the guv'nor, and the Head himself, would uphold me when they knew the whole truth.

So when Starke spoke I acted.

"Come on, my sons!" I shouted sharply.

And as I spoke I charged at Starke full-tilt. The bully hadn't been expecting anything of the sort, and he staggered drunkenly as I planted my fist right in the middle of his chest.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tommy Watson, aghast.

Starke fell against Wilson, and the next second the pair of them were sprawling on their backs, yelling with rage. I was in no mood for half-measures, and shoved my shoulder against Kenmore with all my strength. He simply went over like a ninepin on the top of his two pals.

"Now—outside!" I panted quickly.

Montie had already opened the door, and we simply scooted out into the Triangle.

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped Fullwood from inside.

"Stop them!" shrieked Starke, nearly foaming at the mouth. "Stop them, you young idiots!"

But we had got into the open, and we raced across the Triangle at express speed. The darkness swallowed us up, and over by the wall I paused. Snow was coming down, but only thinly. Starke and Co. were standing at the door of the Ancient House, shouting frantically and furiously. But they made no attempt to venture out.

"Done 'em!" I muttered hoarsely.

"Benny, my boy, it was top-hole! It was, really!" breathed Tregellis-West. "But there's trouble brewin', dear boy—heaps an' heaps of trouble! It's a shockin' thing to bowl a prefect over, you know. It'll mean a floggin'—a public floggin', begad! But I don't mind. I'm willin' to stand the racket."

"You won't be flogged, Montie——"

"I don't know so much!" put in Tommy Watson. "Perhaps Montie won't, but you will! It was you who knocked Starke over, Bennett!"

"My dear innocent kids," I exclaimed, "do you think we shall be punished when the guv'nor knows everything? Ain't we looking after Yakama? The poor kid might be in the hands of the Circle, for all we know! I was justified in knocking Starke over—and old Alvy'll be the first to agree with me."

Sir Montie brightened up wonderfully.

"Begad, I hadn't thought of that," he said. "But I'm frightfully fogged, dear fellow. What are we goin' to do? Jappy ain't here; he's gone long ago. It's no good searchin' for him in this darkness."

"What about the snow?" I asked keenly.

"The snow, old boy?"

"Oh, you fathead! Isn't the snow lying on the ground?" I exclaimed. "Can't we follow Yakama's footprints? It's as easy as winking!"

"My hat! Real detective work!" said Watson excitedly.

"It's wonderfully interestin'! It is, really!" murmured Montie.

"It'll be interesting if we can find Yakama—and serious if we can't!" I said grimly. "Never mind about Starke! Let him rip for the moment."

The door of the Ancient House had closed again, and we leapt over the wall and stood in the lane. There was only a film of snow upon the ground, but it was ideal for showing footprints. In a moment I had my electric torch out, and in another Yakama's tracks were found, leading towards the village.

"Come on—at the double!" I said crisply.

But Sir Montie hung back.

"Just a moment, old fellow!" he said.

"I've been thinkin'——"

"No need to exert yourself now!" I snapped. "Leave thinking till afterwards, Montie. We haven't got a second to waste!"

Tregellis-West nodded.

"That's why I've been thinkin'," he said mildly.

"Oh, don't be an idiot!"

"You're shockin'ly rude, Benny," protested Montie, in a pained voice. "Just when I've got a really rippin' idea——"

"What is it, you dummy?" roared Watson exasperatedly.

"Well, dear boys, Jappy has been gone for five or six minutes, you know. An' he might be runnin', too," explained Montie. "We should never catch him up, begad! But the bike-shed's just handy——"

I slapped my noble chum's back heartily.

"Good idea, old scout!" I declared.

"Pray be more careful, Benny," protested Montie. "You nearly knocked my glasses in the snow! But I'm glad you like the idea——"

I didn't wait for him to finish, but leapt over the wall again. Tommy and Montie followed, and in a few seconds we were fumbling in the bike-shed. It was really a good idea of Montie's, for, as he said, Yakama might be running, too. On our jiggers we should soon catch him up, and his tracks were so clear that we could ride at high speed.

Our bikes were soon out, and we lifted 'em over the wall and hastily lit the lamps. Then we started off at a good speed. Yakama had very small feet, and his footprints were outlined with great distinctness in the snow. There were other sets of footprints, but there was no danger of getting confused.

The roads were slippery, for the frost, following the rain of the afternoon, had left a film of ice upon the surface. The snow rather intensified the slipperiness.

But we made good progress. I led the way, and kept my electric torch over the handle-bars, pointing downwards. My bicycle-lamp was hardly powerful enough to see the tracks by.

Just before we got to the last bend before the village, I suddenly let out a yell.

"Pull up!" I shouted. "The trail's gone!"

Yakama's footprints were no longer visible. We all dismounted, and walked back about twenty yards. And here the snow told its own story—told it quite clearly. There was no mistaking the marks.

"What's happened?" asked Watson huskily.

"My dear chap, can't you see?" I asked. "Look at all these smears here! Yakama was attacked by two or three men, I should say. And then he was shoved into a motor-car and taken away!"

"Begad!"

"My hat! You can see the wheel tracks!" gasped Tommy.

The motor-car had come to this spot and then turned round, nearly backing into the hedge in order to do so. There was a confusion of footprints near the spot. But ten yards farther down the snow was almost clear. Only the tracks of Starke and Co. could be seen; and they, of course, were pointing towards the school.

"Jappy's been carried off in that car!" I said, between my teeth. "I knew it was serious. I felt sure it was a trap! And we were stopped from helping him because of that beastly Starke!"

"It's appallin'!" said Tregellis-West quietly.

"But what's to be done?" asked Watson, in his practical way. "It's no good standing about here, is it? Hadn't we better tell the police——"

"Blow the police!" I snapped. "Look here! That car can't have been gone more than five minutes at the most, and I should say it was travelling fairly slowly. The roads are fearfully treacherous. If we ride hard, we might be able to overtake it!"

"We'll try!" declared Sir Montie promptly.

Every second was of value, and we rode on at full speed, risking side-slips. But I knew quite well that the chance was a forlorn one. If the situation hadn't been so desperate, I shouldn't even have made the attempt.

But there was nothing else to do. As we rode through Bellton, I called Starko dozens of uncomplimentary names. But for his interference, we could have stopped Yakama easily.

The motor-car tracks were quite clear, right through the village and along the road to Caistowe beyond. I had feared that there would be other automobile tracks, but this wasn't so.

Cars didn't come to Bellton very often, especially at night. There was one thing in our favour. The road for quite a distance led slightly downwards, and we were able to go speedily. The fugitives'

motor-car, on the other hand, had probably proceeded with caution.

And, as we turned a sharp corner a mile beyond Bellton, I caught my breath in with a hiss. Not five hundred yards away was the rear light of the motor-car! It was proceeding down a fairly steep hill at quite a moderate pace.

"By Cæsar!" I exclaimed tensely.

"You were right, Benny—but what's to be done?" panted Sir Montie. "I don't suppose we shall be able to follow far, you know. An' supposin' this ain't the right car?"

"You ass—it must be the right one!" I exclaimed. "There are no other tracks, are there? Yakama's in that car—and it'll get up speed as soon as it gets to the level. Oh, lor'! What a position!"

I couldn't think of any plan—I didn't know what on earth to do. Some mad impulse brought me to a decision, however, and I suddenly pedalled away for all I was worth, leaving Tommy and Montie behind.

I simply let myself go, risking everything.

I could feel the back wheel skidding gently, but the front was all right—and it's front-wheel skids that one has to fear. My bike simply shot down the hill at full tilt; and, steadily, I overtook the motor-car.

I was too set upon my task to think about my chums. By hook or by crook, I meant to see whether Yakama was in the car, a prisoner. And, by acting boldly, I might cause the men to stop—and then, with luck, we should be able to rescue the prisoner. Anyhow, action was better than seeing our quarry slip away.

The motor-car, which was a closed limousine, was travelling at about twenty-five miles an hour. The hill was fairly steep, and I reached the same speed easily, and then forged ahead.

After a minute I was right behind the car, travelling only slightly faster. I steered so that I should pass it on the off-side, where there was plenty of road space.

It seemed ages before I drew alongside. I glanced up at the closed windows. A small light was glowing within the car, but the blinds were down, and only a chink showed. I couldn't see anything.

Just then my bicycle began to skid; I had taken my attention from the road.

And in that flash I decided what I should do. Having decided, I accomplished my object so quickly that I had no time to hesitate.

Flinging both my hands up, I grabbed the door-handle with all my strength. I'm blessed if I know how I managed it. For a second I seemed to be whirling through space; then my feet found the footboard, and I crouched there.

A clatter sounded behind me as my bike fell upon the road. But I didn't care what happened to it at the moment. Panting heavily, and with the wind driving the snow into my face, I looked through the chink between the blind and the woodwork. There, seated between two men, was Sessue Yakama!

He was bound hand and foot, and there was a handkerchief tied round his face!

"By Jingo! I knew it—I knew it!"

All this had happened in about three seconds. Even as I gazed through the chink one of the men rose up and turned towards the door. I attempted to slip back along the footboard, but there was a spare wheel lashed on, and I couldn't move an inch.

The very next moment the door opened wide.

There was absolutely no escape for me. The opening door pushed me clean off the board backwards. I gave a gasp as I fell, but made no outcry. One thought flashed through my brain in that infinitesimal space of time. Should I be killed by the terrific concussion?

Then I hit something soft, and disappeared into a mass of icy snow. I was simply smothered, and turned over and over like a shot rabbit. But, so far as I could tell, there was practically no damage.

At last I found my feet, and staggered away dazedly. The first thing I saw was the red light of the motor-car, growing smaller and smaller. And, behind me, Tregellis-West and Watson were dismounting from their machines.

"By Jupiter! Ain't I injured!" I gasped, in amazement.

I looked round—and then saw the reason for my lucky escape. The car, at that very moment, had been near to the off-side hedge. Here a deep ditch lay, and this was simply filled with snow—the remains of a deep drift. There had been a tremendous amount of snow lately, and the rain of the afternoon had hardly affected the drifts along the country roads.

"Oh, you ass—you fathead!" gasped Watson, his voice shrill with anxiety. "What the dickens did you do that for? You might have been killed!"

"I know," I replied. "I couldn't help it!"

"Couldn't help gettin' on that car?" asked Sir Montie. "Dear boy, you've given us a shockin' fright. Why do you do these things?"

"My bike was skidding, and I had to go somewhere!" I exclaimed huskily. "One of the rotters in that car opened the door, and it pushed me clean off. By the way, I suppose my bike's an absolute wreck!"

"It's hardly touched," declared Watson. "Handlebars bent a bit, that's all. I say, what shall we do now? That car's gone completely."

I stared up the road.

"Yes," I said dully. "It's gone completely. But I saw Yakama in it—he was bound hand and foot, a prisoner. Circle agents have got him, you chaps—they'll kill him if we don't go to the rescue!"

"Good heavens!" panted Tommy Watson.

I was smothered in snow from head to foot, but I didn't even trouble to shake myself. What did a bit of snow matter, anyhow?

"You—you saw Yakama, Benny boy?"

"Yes—I was sure he was a prisoner," I replied. "Look here, we'd better go straight on. This road only leads to Caistowe, and it seems to me that Yakama's been taken down to the sea. Even now we might be in time to prevent the worst. Anyhow, we should be mad to give it up."

"Did those chaps see you?" asked Watson.

"I don't know—I suppose they did," I replied grimly. "They must have seen your bicycle lights, in any case. But they think, probably, that we're ordinary cyclists. Let's get on!"

My bicycle had fallen quite a little way back, but Tommy and Montie had rescued it. Except for twisted handlebars and a slightly bent pedal crank, the machine was unhurt. Both lamps were out, and I didn't stop to light them.

I found, as soon as I started riding, that I was hurt a bit, after all. My left leg was stiff, and it pained a lot when I put pressure on it. This didn't deter

me from pedalling as hard as I could go, however.

There was a stiff hill to climb after a bit, and we were forced to walk the latter portion of it—mainly because our back wheels skidded helplessly on the slippery road. Once on the top, however, we had another down-hill stretch.

Caistowe Bay was now fairly close. A thought struck me, and I told my chums to put their lamps out. We then went on in the dark.

It was rather rummy, but only two minutes later the headlights of a motor-car came into view. Quickly dismounting, we dived through the hedge, and crouched there. Montie and Tommy protested, but I was firm.

The car flashed by. It was the same limousine!

"A jolly good thing we had our lamps out!" I exclaimed. "The chaps in that car don't know anything, now——"

"But Yakama's in it!" yelled Watson excitedly.

"He isn't! Do you think they took him to Caistowe and back just for a joy-ride?" I asked briskly. "He was left there, as sure as Fate. Didn't you notice that the blinds were up? Yakama's been taken down to the sea for some reason. We must rush on as hard as we can go!"

"Dear fellow, I'm bewildered—I'm in a hopeless muddle," confessed Sir Montie. "I'm in your hands completely."

Ten seconds later we were pedalling onwards again. The vague suspicion which had prompted me to suggest putting the lamps out had proved well-founded. Yakama had been taken to the sea-shore. Had he been drowned—had he been cast over the cliffs? I couldn't believe it—I daren't trust myself to think.

We knew the road well, for we had often cycled to Caistowe in the summer. The road here bore round to the left presently—to Caistowe village itself. But a smaller lane led straight onwards, down to the deserted bay. And the tracks of the motor-car led straight down this lane.

"I was right!" I shouted, as we rode. "Come on!"

We shot down the rutty lane. The distance to the sands was only short, and, almost before we knew it, we arrived at the gap which led on to the beach. Here the sand clogged our wheels, and we were forced to dismount.

The tide was nearly up, and the waves were breaking noisily upon the shingle. But the sea wasn't particularly rough. We could see the white foam, in a broken line, stretching round the bay.

The place was gloomy and dreary. There wasn't a light to be seen, or the slightest sign of a human being. I went cold all over, and shivered slightly. What had happened to Yakama?

"There's somethin' out there, dear boys," murmured Montie.

"Out where?" I asked sharply.

Tregellis-West pointed—and I saw.

A black shape, with a whiteish wake showing in its rear, was making out into the open channel. At the same time the faint beat of an engine reached my ears. The black shape was a motor-boat!

Sessue Yakama had been carried off, and there was absolutely no means of continuing the pursuit. After all our efforts we were too late!

I felt as though I could sit down and cry with rage and disappointment and impotence. Yakama was practically in sight—and we couldn't help him!

CHAPTER VII

IN WHICH THE THREADS ARE DRAWN TOGETHER, AND THE TRUTH REVEALED.

NIPPER'S feelings, as he has himself described, were truly terrible as he stood upon the beach with his chums, and saw the motor-boat making out to sea. After all their efforts, the three plucky boys had gained nothing. But they had done their best, and Fato had been against them.

Only a few minutes before Yakama had been transferred from the motor-car on to the powerful, sea-going motor-boat. If Nipper and his chums had been a little earlier, they might have acted; but it was, perhaps, as well that the boys did not reach the beach in time. There were desperate men to deal with, and things might have gone badly for Nipper and his chums.

There were only two men on the craft—that is, two men controlling it. One was the Circle chief agent, Gerald Brunton, and the other Toko Nagamo himself. The Japanese rascal had decided, after due deliberation, to take a part in the last act of the drama. He had done so because there was practically no risk of discovery; and because he would make sure of Yakama dying.

The decree of Zingrave, the High Lord, was being carried out.

Sessue Yakama and Nelson Lee were to be cast to the bottom of the channel in weighted sacks. It was an appalling crime to commit. Nagamo himself was serene; his Oriental nature concealed his emotion completely. But Brunton, hardened criminal though he was, was showing the effects of the contemplated devilry.

He was nervous and uneasy, but attempted to calm himself by giving all his attention to the engine.

Yakama lay, bound and helpless, upon one of the cushioned seats. The big dress-basket, containing Nelson Lee, lay in the bows. The helpless detective was still bound and gagged; he had apparently found it impossible to release himself, or even to loosen his bonds.

The situation was quite hopeless.

No pursuit was possible, and the criminals would have easy work with their two bound and helpless victims. From the point of view of the Circle of Terror, the venture had been an entire success.

"How far out must we go?" asked Nagamo, in a low voice.

"About three miles, I should say," replied Brunton. "The water's tremendously deep out there, and there'll be no fear of anything being washed ashore by a heavy tide. It's a rotten business, Nagamo, and I'm sorry I took part in it."

The Japanese official smiled.

"You are nervous, my friend," he said. "Think of the reward you will get for the destruction of our excellent friend in the basket. You have me to thank for that reward."

"I am not thinking about Lee," muttered Brunton. "He's been asking for this trouble all along. But that kid—well, it's dirty, Nagamo."

"Bah! We will not talk," said Nagamo fiercely.

By this time the boat was well out from the shore, although the dark masses of rock around Caistowe Bay stood out grimly.

A surprising thing happened.

Both Brunton and Nagamo were suddenly startled by a rending crash from the bows. Almost before they could look up, Nelson Lee stepped forward. He came swiftly and deliberately.

"Why, what—— Good heavens!" gasped Brunton.

He stared in amazement, and the steering-wheel almost fell from his hands. Just for a moment both men were struck motionless. Nelson Lee! And he had been locked in the basket, bound hand and foot!

The great detective said nothing at all. He stepped across and took Brunton by the throat. It was such a calm, deliberate action, that Brunton made no attempt to defend himself until Nelson Lee's fingers were actually in contact with his flesh.

"Now, you scoundrel!" said the detective, with grim quietness. "You'll have to pay for this infernal villainy!"

Brunton gave a choking cry.

At the same second he realised the stunning truth. Lee had escaped; Lee was free; Lee was attacking him.

He struggled like a wild cat, and broke away from his antagonist. The next second the pair were fighting furiously. It was a grim, terrible battle. Nagamo attempted to assist his companion, but was unable to do so. Lee was furthest from him, and Brunton's big form intervened. There was not sufficient room for Nagamo to get round. He had to stand there, watching helplessly—almost dazedly.

The motor-boat was circling round erratically, and swayed and tossed as it forged ahead without a steering hand.

The fighters continued their battle grimly.

Nelson Lee was decidedly calm. For hours he had been cooped up in the basket, and now he was enjoying the freedom of movement. He was taking extreme pleasure in attacking the miserable ruffian who desperately faced him.

Lee was fighting for his own life and Yakama's. Brunton was fighting like a madman. Although the detective was sure of winning in the finish, he knew that he had a grim, deadly fight before him, and he delivered his blows heavily and slowly.

Brunton, on the other hand, was wild and savage. He hit out at random, showering blows upon Lee which were difficult to guard. Meanwhile, the motor-boat was tossing and swaying. Masses of spray came flying inboard, splashing the fighters continuously. They only kept their feet with difficulty.

Nelson Lee gave all his attention to Brunton. Nagamo was further towards the stern, and couldn't help. Although the detective took no interest in

Nagamo's movements, he knew that the Jap was helpless for the time being. If he attempted any trickery, Lee would see it in a moment.

The combatants closed, and swayed to and fro in the narrow space like wild savages. Much as Nelson Lee tried to make the affair a straightforward fight, he found it impossible. Brunton was kicking and scratching, and even attempting to bite, and Lee was obliged to adopt different tactics.

At last he managed to free himself from the other's clutch. He was panting heavily by this time. He had had some hard blows, and his shins were raw in places. It was agony for him to stand.

"I'll finish you yet!" snarled Brunton hoarsely.

As he spoke he suddenly bent downwards and picked up a heavy spanner. Then he raised his arm in order to deliver a smashing blow upon Nelson Lee's skull.

But the detective acted like lightning. His left fist shot out with full force. While Brunton's arm was still in the air, Lee's knuckles crashed upon the scoundrel's jaw. It was a clean, direct blow. Brunton went over like a felled ox.

He collapsed in a heap at the bottom of the boat, and lay there motionless. Gerald Brunton was beaten.

But what of Toko Nagamo?

Lee shook himself and prepared for the next onslaught. He was extremely doubtful as to the result of the attack. The fight with Brunton had been severe, and Lee was half spent. Nagamo, on the other hand, was as fresh as paint, and he probably knew all the tricks of ju-jitsu.

Frankly, Lee was afraid that he would fail.

But then something happened which took the detective quite by surprise. Nagamo uttered a wild cry as Brunton went down. Then he leapt clean overboard, and sank like a stone!

"Good heavens!" muttered Nelson Lee huskily.

The motor-boat was still travelling at a good speed. The spot where Nagamo had vanished was just faintly visible astern—a little smother of foam. But the Jap did not rise to the surface again.

And Nelson Lee knew the cause. Toko Nagamo had deliberately thrown himself to death! Rather than face the consequences of his villainy, he had chosen suicide!

Lee had noticed some heavy objects

dangling from Nagamo's waist, and he realised that these objects were some of the weights which had been provided for Lee's own benefit! Nagamo had gone to the bottom like a stone!

Nelson Lee felt the motor-boat shiver from stem to stern as her prow dug deeply into the shingle of Caistowe Bay.

The detective had brought the little vessel to land, practically to her starting-point. For ten minutes he had searched round in the vain hope of rescuing Nagamo, but the man had vanished completely, and had paid the full price for his sins.

Brunton was a prisoner at the bottom of the boat. He had shown signs of coming to, and Nelson Lee had lost no time in binding him hand and foot. And now, as the motor-boat came to a dead stop, Nelson Lee lifted Brunton and deposited him in the dress-basket.

"Quite a reverse of positions, eh?" said Lee, with grim humour.

"I'm beaten!" murmured Brunton brokenly. "You've done me, Lee!"

Yakama was free; his ropes had been cut at once. But he had sat beside Lee, silent and dreamy. He seemed to be stunned by the shock of what had occurred. And his rescuer made no attempt to question him now.

The main thing was to get back to St. Frank's without loss of time.

"Come, my boy," said Lee kindly, "shall I help you out?"

Yakama shook his head.

"It is easy for me to alight without your honourable assistance, sir," he said huskily. "I find it extraordinarily difficult to choose words which are adequate enough to express my stupendous gratitude."

"You needn't trouble about that now, Yakama," said Nelson Lee, smiling. "And you mustn't think that I was fighting merely for your life. I had my own to think about—and I value my own skin highly!"

The pair got ashore, and then three black forms came running down the beach from behind a rock. In a flash Nelson Lee raised his empty hand and pointed it, as though he held a revolver.

"Stop, or I fire!" he shouted sternly.

"It's Mr. Alvington!" came a gasping cry of triumph. "Begad, he's goin' to shoot us if we ain't careful."

"The guv'nor!" came Nipper's choking cry.

Nelson Lee lowered his hand, and stood waiting. Yakama, of course, was unaware of his true identity, but the matter was of little importance. He would attach no significance to the fact that Nipper addressed him as "guv'nor." Under the circumstances, Nipper could not contain his excitement.

"Well, my boys, what are you doing here?" asked Nelson calmly.

"Great Scott!" said Tommy Watson blankly. "We—were wondering what you're doing here, sir! We—we thought

"Well, what did you think, Watson?"

"Those rotters had got hold of Yakama, sir," put in Nipper. "We couldn't help believing that something dreadful was happening."

"Your belief was well founded, young 'un," agreed Nelson Lee. "But we cannot enter into any explanations here. We must walk into Caistowe as quickly as possible and hire a trap or some conveyance."

The arrangements were soon made. While Lee and Nipper and Yakama remained with the boat, Tommy Watson and Sir Montie hurried off to Caistowe to bring the constable back with them and to hire a trap.

They returned after about half a hour. The constable was a raw country fellow, with a very small imagination. He took charge of Brunton stolidly, and assured Lee that the man would be placed safely in the lock-up, and that the inspector at Bannington would be informed without delay.

Lee and the boys then started off in the hired trap to St. Frank's. They arrived while the fellows were at supper, and went straight to Nelson Lee's study. The detective was particularly anxious to get in unobserved, for he was still without his disguise. The darkness had concealed his face from Yakama so far, and now he had his hat pulled down and his coat-collar turned right up.

Leaving the boys in his study, he hurried downstairs and quickly made the simple alterations which converted him into "Mr. Alvington." Then, feeling satisfied, he went downstairs.

Nipper and his chums were talking together in low voices. Yakama sat apart, still with that dreamy expression in his eyes.

Lee tapped him upon the shoulder gently and reassuringly.

"Now, Yakama, tell me why you left the school," he said quietly.

And the Japanese boy immediately related the truth. His story was quite short and simple. That morning he had received a letter from his uncle, who was none other than Toko Nagamo. The boy had suspected nothing from that letter, which was written in Japanese. It had merely stated that his uncle would arrive on a visit by the evening train. Yakama was asked to meet the train, and to go alone, without telling anybody of his intention. This, of course, explained Yakama's strange conduct.

Lee questioned the boy closely, but Yakama could offer no explanation of his uncle's scoundrelism. If Yakama died, his uncle would inherit an estate in Japan; but this estate was a very ordinary one, and worth little. Surely Nagamo had not plotted with the Circle of Terror in the hope of gaining so little?

Lee's story was quite interesting. He told Nipper and Montie and Tommy all about his adventures after Yakama had left the study. The Japanese boy was half-stunned by the shock. He had never suspected his uncle of such terrible treachery, and Nagamo's tragic death had somewhat unnerved him.

Nipper and his chums listened with spellbound interest while the school-master-detective told them of his interview with Toko Nagamo and the subsequent events.

"I knew there was something wrong, guv'nor," declared Nipper, shaking his head. "I could feel it in my giddy bones. But how the dickens did you manage to get out of that basket, sir? How did you turn the tables so neatly?"

Nelson Leo smiled.

"Well, it was partly due to my own efforts, but mainly due to the slippery state of the roads," he replied.

"The slippery state of the roads, sir?" repeated Tregellis-West wonderingly. "Begad, I can't see the connection—I can't, really!"

"You will in a moment, my boy," went on the detective. "As I told you, I was locked in the basket, bound hand and foot. This basket was placed upon

a motor-lorry, and two men were in charge. Well, the lorry skidded very badly on a hill—so badly that both men were flung off, and the vehicle nearly overturned. The basket was hurled clean over a low hedge into a snowdrift."

"Great Scott!" gasped Nipper. "And what about you, guv'nor?"

"Needless to say, I was considerably bruised," continued Lee. "But I didn't mind it in the least. At the time the accident happened I had nearly freed my wrists. The sudden shock gave me my liberty, and at the same time it twisted the basket so badly that the lock was smashed. The lid was flung right back."

"Then why didn't you escape, sir?"

"The main reason was because I had no wish to be recaptured," Nelson Leo replied quietly. "My feet were still bound, you must understand, and I could do nothing but hop. The two men were uninjured, and were picking themselves up even as I raised myself out of the basket. So I simply closed the lid with a jerk, and jammed it. The men did not notice the breakage. The lock had been smashed off entirely, and so, to all appearances, the fastening was intact."

"Begad, it was a cute dodge, sir!"

"I easily freed myself," continued Lee, "but thought it wise to rearrange my bonds so that they still looked intact. I did not wish to act until the right moment. Thus, on the motor-boat, I was able to spring out of the basket without warning. I took the enemy by surprise, and that ensured success."

Needless to say, Nipper and his chums received no punishment for bowling Starke and Co. over. Nelson Lee put that matter right in a very short time.

And some days afterwards fresh light was cast upon the affair. News came for Yakama that the estate in Japan had turned out to be of immense value. The ground, it had been discovered, contained extremely rich deposits of valuable minerals. Nagamo must have known this beforehand in secret, and had plotted to obtain the property. This, indeed, could be the only explanation. For his pains Nagamo had received death.

And so the whole matter ended.

Once again Nelson Lee and Nipper had beaten the Circle of Terror.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!—(See p. iv of cover.)

BEGIN OUR NEW SERIAL TO-DAY!

In the Hands of the Huns.

A Magnificent Tale of Thrilling Experiences in Germany.

By **CLEMENT HALE.**

The Chief Characters in this Story are:

GEORGE GRAY and his brother **JACK**, who are the English Staff of the Berlin Rovers, a football club in Germany.

OTTO BRACK is a scoundrelly German member of the team. But another German, named **CARL HOFFMAN**, is friendly, and advises the Englishmen to leave Germany, which they refuse to do. The Grays are betrayed the next night by their landlord Kutz. They manage to leave the house, but are surrounded by a hostile crowd. Luckily the American Ambassador takes them in his car to the Embassy, and gets them passports. The next morning they go to the station.

(Now read on).

ARRESTED!

AS George Gray and his brother walked along the platform, mingling with the groups of anxious travellers, who, white-faced and hungry, stood about discussing the situation, they saw railway officials and German officers questioning and bullying the unfortunate Englishmen and women.

Close at hand, ready to render any assistance that might be required, hovered an armed guard.

It was a dismal, depressing scene.

The lights in the waiting train had all been switched off, plunging the compartment into darkness. The edges of the platform, the metals on each side of it, the roof of the waiting express were rainsoaked, and the rain still slanted down as if it never meant to stop.

On the island platform adjoining a crowd of German soldiers, bound for the front, loaded with pack and equipment, stared in curiosity at the English who were being bullied by the Prussian railway and military officials, and seemed to derive great pleasure from the sight.

For the purposes of the examination, the passengers were driven to the northern end of the platform. The

southern half of it was kept clear and guarded, and as each passenger, or batch of passengers, was released from examination, they were ordered there, some to be detained under guard, others to be driven into the compartments of the waiting train, which seemed to have come to a stand for good.

"I wonder why some of them are being detained, George?" asked Jack, as he eyed the few forlorn figures who stood or sat under armed guard upon the damp and draughty platform.

"Oh, they haven't been able to satisfy the authorities, I suppose. Germans are madmen on the spy question."

Jack flashed a quick glance at his brother.

"Think we've got anything to fear, George?" he asked.

"Of course not, old chap. Our hands are clean. We've never done anybody any harm."

"Don't forget that row in the Berlin café, George."

The footballer laughed gaily. His blood ran warm at the recollection of that little turn-up, and how he had struck the bullying German down.

"Glad you reminded me of that, old fellow. It was an achievement I shall always be proud of. But these beggars aren't likely to know anything about it. Besides, look at the vouchers we carry? To-morrow we shall be safe across the frontier, and Fritz can go and hang himself."

George spoke with the utmost assurance; yet Jack Gray could not help feeling apprehensive with regard to the examination which every minute brought nearer to them.

Many of the passengers, timid, nervous, shrinking souls, kept in the background, hoping that they might be able to continue the journey when the train did start, without having to put up with the unpleasant ordeal the authorities were inflicting on their fellows.

Neither George nor Jack did this. Both of them felt that the sooner they faced the trial, and got it over, the better.

Progress was slow. The Germans took their time. They were thorough in this work at any rate.

But at last a blustering-looking officer beckoned sternly to them.

"Come along, you're next," he growled in excellent English, and the scowl that accompanied the words was no friendly one.

He was a short, thick-set man, inclined to greyness. His face was seamed and lined beyond his years, and a pair of beady eyes peered out from under beetling eyebrows. A heavy jowl, and a Kaiser moustache added to the aggressive expression of his face.

"Are you friends?" he demanded.

"No. We are brothers."

"Very well. I'll take you two together. Show me your tickets and your passports."

The articles in question were produced and passed for examination.

The officer scanned them, turned them over and over, as if by doing so he hoped to come upon some wonderful secret, took careful stock of the names, and then referred to some paper he carried. Swiftly he glanced at the brothers.

"Where is your luggage?" he demanded.

George hesitated.

"Come, come, we have found no luggage belonging to any passenger of your name on the train——"

"Ah! You have been examining the luggage then," ejaculated George, his eyes flashing fire. "It's abominable——"

The officer tapped him fiercely on the chest.

"Where is your luggage? Come, come, answer me," he demanded. "I have no time to waste on you."

"It's in Berlin, I suppose."

"Where in Berlin?"

"We had the greatest difficulty in boarding the train. We could get no porters. The confusion was indescribable——"

"You mean you left it behind?"

"Yes." George spoke the strict truth here.

"Ah! You and your brother must have been in a hurry to leave Berlin to have started without your luggage."

The words were spoken with a sneer, and the suspicious glance that accom-

panied them told George that he wasn't getting on very well.

"We were advised to leave without delay," he explained.

"By whom?"

"Oh, by some German friends, and by—the—er—American Ambassador."

"These are not your original passports?"

"No."

"Why?"

"The station officials refused to issue tickets on the old ones. We obtained these yesterday."

"Ah! How, when the British Embassy is besieged? I do not understand. Where was your influence?"

"The American Ambassador procured them for us," said George, hoping to impress the Prussian.

As a matter of fact, he did, for the officer, turning to some of his companions, held a hurried consultation with them.

The conversation was carried on in whispers, and in guttural German, and George could only catch a word here and there. However, what he did hear, seemed to convey the impression that all was safe. No so, as events proved.

Suddenly the Prussian bully swung round.

"You have been living in Berlin?"

"Yes."

"And you are going back to England? Why?"

"Because war threatens!"

"Ah, you know that?" and the thick-headed bully's brows contracted. "What is your profession?"

"I am a footballer. My brother and I were tutors or instructors to the Berlin Rovers, and——"

"Ah-ha!" The German burst into a laugh, and rubbed his fat hands gleefully.

"That is sufficient," he muttered; "quite sufficient. You and your brother must consider yourselves under arrest."

George started, and a cry of anger burst from his lips.

"Under arrest, what for?" he blurted.

"It is necessary to detain you until we have received further information. A mere precaution. No doubt everything will be satisfactory. Go along to the other end of the platform."

If the words were intended to reassure, the man's manner certainly wasn't. The gleam of his beady, treacherous eyes, and

the glee with which he rubbed his hands together betrayed his delight too plainly.

All George's fighting instincts were aroused.

"Before I submit to your bullying, sir," he said, and his voice was firm and defiant, "I must protest. You have no right to detain us. Our passports are in order. We have been given our tickets to the frontier. There is nothing whatever against us. I demand that you let us continue our journey without further molestation."

The bully chuckled.

"And I refuse," he said. "Obey orders. Get to the other end of the platform."

"First of all, I want to know why we are being treated like this?"

"Because"—and the words were fairly hissed at him—"you are English spies!"

IN THE HANDS OF THE HUNS!

SO. The blow had fallen! George stood stock still for a moment gazing into the livid and triumphant face of the leering Prussian officer.

An almost irresistible desire to drive his clenched fist into the smug features of the bully overcame him, but he held his hand in time.

"It's a lie!" he said, with an effort at self control. "Even if it were true, I should want to see your proofs."

"We do not show our proofs to suspects. But so far I will satisfy you." Here the Prussian officer drew a document from his pocket, which he held out under the light of the lamp above, pointing to certain passages with his forefinger. "You are wanted. I have received information from Berlin that you and your brother are desperate characters, that you tried to create a riot in a café in Berlin two nights ago. Yes, yes. Here are your descriptions—you are English football players, of the name of Gray. Is it enough?"

George glanced at his brother, and saw that Jack's face was drawn and pale.

So that unlucky episode in the Berlin café was to cause them further annoyance, it seemed. George Gray cursed Otto Brack under his breath as being the cause of their misfortunes.

"We're in for it, George," murmured Jack. "What can we do—make a bolt for it?"

Make a bolt for it! George had to smile at the irresponsibility of the suggestion.

Here they were, a hundred miles from anywhere, surrounded by German enemies, with no possible chance of tramp-ing a single league without exciting comment and suspicion. Make a bolt for it, indeed.

"No, old boy, it is not possible."

"Stop that whispering," roared the Prussian officer, motioning to the armed guard.

Four of the vicious-looking brutes stamped forward, and took their places on each side of the prisoners.

"Now—march," stormed the officer, and George and Jack were seized by the arms, and forced round.

With a wrench George freed himself. Jack, equally combative, broke away.

"Keep your hands off me," he snarled.

"Perhaps," said George, "you will permit me to explain."

"Your explanation can be made at the proper time, and in the proper place."

"I should prefer to make a statement now. Perhaps it will satisfy you. I admit that there was a scene in the Berlin café. One of the players of the Rovers' team, Otto Brack by name, who had his knife into us, denounced us as German spies. The patrons of the café were in a war delirium. They made for us, and we had to defend ourselves. An officer tried to cut me down with his sword, and I felled him with a chair. I'm sorry it happened, but I had to defend my life."

The Prussian bared his teeth in a triumphant smile.

"Your confession confirms the information I have received," he declared, "and it leaves me no option but to detain you until the case has been fully inquired into."

"Does that mean," blazed Jack, "that in the event of war breaking out between Germany and Britain we should be unable to pass the frontier?"

"Jah! You would be detained in Germany, of course, until the war is over. What would you haf? This is the last train. That is why we are so careful. I am sorry, but the times demand firm action. You must consider yourselves prisoners."

"It is a shame," blazed Jack, beside

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himself. "The Germans are supposed to be a civilized nation, and yet they behave in this blackguardly fashion. I——"

"Steady, Jack," cried George, trying to restrain his brother.

"It's no good, George. I'm going to speak out. I'm going to let this Prussian bully know exactly what I think of him. It's not fair, it's not just. It's not right. War hasn't broken out between England and Germany yet, and we have a perfect right to leave the country. We ought to be allowed to go even if it had. A year ago enough fuss couldn't be made of us in Berlin. Now see how we're treated. It's a shame, and I won't be detained a prisoner."

"We'll see about that," said the Prussian with a snarl. "Remove the prisoners. If either of them attempt to resist, you have my authority to reduce them to order——"

In a moment George Gray and his brother were seized and firmly held.

Strong fingers dug into the fleshy parts of their arms, and strong arms urged them forward. The men who handled them were used to the job. Jack was hurried along as if on air. George, much the stronger of the two, even, could hardly resist.

Inwardly he raged. To submit seemed cowardly. To resist was foolish.

Cries of dismay and anger rang from the lips of their fellow-passengers, who loathed to see them so treated.

Presently, whether their guards thought they had done sufficient to prove that resistance was worse than useless, or that they were confident in their numbers, they released their hold.

Instantly Jack was free.

"All right. I'll go with you quietly," he raged, flashing defiance at the soldiers on each side of him. "But don't touch me——"

"Learn obedience, you English dog!" said one of the brutes, kicking at him, and then as Jack screamed from the pain inflicted, he drove the butt end of his rifle into the youngster's back.

It was more than flesh and blood could stand.

With a howl of rage Jack Gray swung round, and, striking the German soldier full on the nose, produced a flow of the ruby in a flash.

The sight of the blood only served to madden the boy more. Might as well

go the whole hog, he thought, and show the German what he thought of him.

And so blow followed blow like rain.

George Gray, with a low cry, burst from his guards. As the bruised and bleeding Hun fell back howling in fury, and his companion raised his rifle intending to strike Jack down with a blow of the stock, George flung the fellow backwards. Down he sprawled upon the concrete platform.

Instantly there was an outcry, a series of ringing commands, and the click of bayonets. A moment later cold steel flashed in the rays from the station lamps, and a dozen bayonets were presented at the breasts of the Englishmen.

Up ran the irate officer who had cross-examined them.

"If they attempt to escape, or show any further signs of resistance," he bellowed, "cut them down!"

George and Jack faced their enemies like lions at bay. They were surrounded. No chance of escape remained.

"We've done it now, Jack, old fellow," sighed George.

"I don't care! I hurt that coward, and now they can do what they like with me."

A bayonet was thrust within an inch of George's chest. Another touched his back. He almost felt the prick of it. To have moved would have brought an inevitable wound.

At the same time Jack was roughly seized and maltreated.

It seemed all over with them.

Now, while they were being examined by the German officer, a train had steamed in and pulled up alongside the adjoining platform.

It had discharged a load of soldiers and officers in field grey uniforms, all fully equipped for the Front.

It had then backed slowly out leaving these fresh troops en masse at the junction.

The new arrivals had gazed curiously across at the stranded English travellers, and one of the officers in particular, had shown a close interest in the proceedings. He had seen the two Englishmen removed in custody, and he had witnessed all that had followed.

When he saw that their lives were in danger, he did a strange thing.

Down on to the metals he leapt, and, with a few strides, cleared them.

(Continued overleaf.)

To draw himself up on the other platform was the work of a moment.

Instantly he advanced, and, thrusting the startled guards aside, glanced at George Gray.

A startled cry of recognition burst from his lips.

"Gray!" he exclaimed, and then he sternly ordered the guards to stand away.

"Go back to your own affairs, lieutenant!" stormed the officer who had ordered Gray's arrest.

"Presently, presently!" was the cool reply. "These Englishmen are friends of mine. And I will not have them ill-treated!"

"Hoffman!" ejaculated George Gray, with a glad ring in his voice.

"Yes, old friend," was the grave answer. "And I'm sorry to see you in trouble. This is the last service I shall be able to render you. I am bound for the Front with my regiment."

The startled guards stared at him open-mouthed.

Lieutenant Carl Hoffman now ordered the men who were ill-using Jack Gray to set their prisoner free. Sullenly they obeyed.

"And now," stormed the lieutenant of the 94th Regiment, "may I ask why you have arrested these gentlemen?"

There followed a long and furious argument and explanation to which Carl Hoffman listened quietly, interjecting explanatory sentences here and there.

At the end of it he turned to George and shook him by the hand.

"I have done my best!" he cried.

"But I cannot free you from custody. That unhappy affair at the cafe is at the bottom of it. You must resign yourself to your fate. Go with the guards to the military prison. You will be detained for examination. I should say you would obtain your freedom easily if it were not for striking the officer," and this other business. You know the respect we Germans bear for the uniform. But hope for the best. I have said much in your favour. Good-bye!"

Brusquely he shook them by the hand, and brusquely he departed.

The brothers knew that he was hiding all he would have liked to say.

At any rate, he earned their gratitude, and they watched him re-cross the lines to the island platform.

Then they were marched away guarded on all sides. They descended the broad flight of stairs to the tunnel below, and passed out into the rain.

Finally, they arrived at a large and sombre building, whose gates they passed. Into an office, or small room they were conducted, and there particulars about them were taken at tedious length, and recorded.

Finally, they were marched along many corridors, until they reached the doors of some cells, two of which were open.

Into the cells they were bundled, sans ceremony, and the doors clanged to behind them, bolts were shot home, and the keys turned, and they found themselves—prisoners in the hands of the Huns.

(To be continued)

NEXT WEEK'S STORY

Will be Entitled :

The Mystery of the Unstamped Letter!

It is another Magnificent Adventure of NELSON LEE and NIPPER AT ST. FRANK'S, in which the "CIRCLE OF TERROR" plays a dramatic part. When you have read this Story give it to a friend; or hand it in at the nearest Post Office, so that a Soldier or Sailor may read it.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

PRICE ONE PENNY.