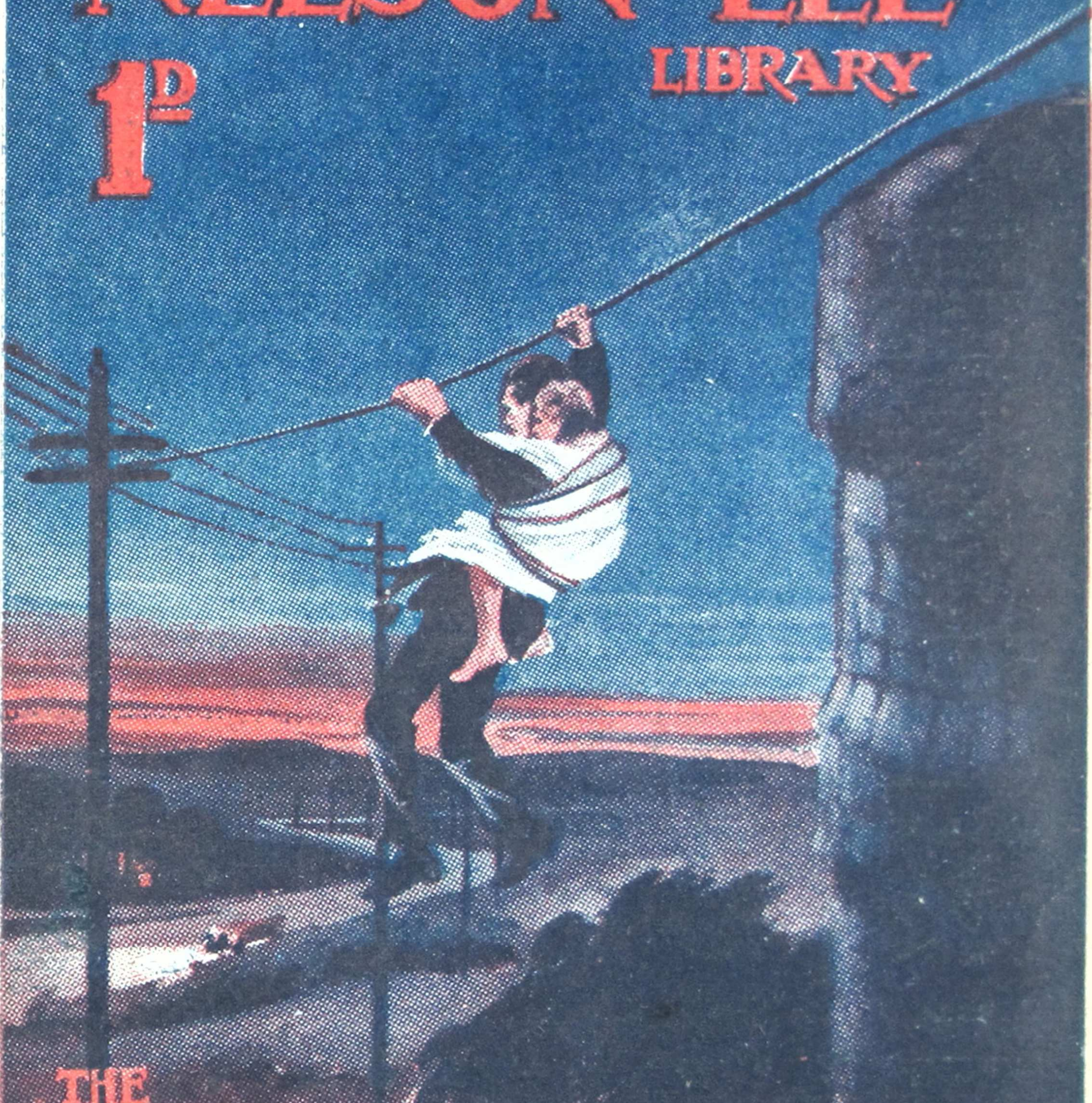


NO. 60. LONG COMPLETE DETECTIVE STORY. 1^D. *Week ending July 29, 1916.*

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THE MYSTERY OF THE TURRET

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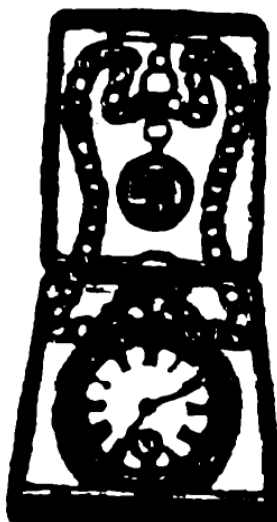
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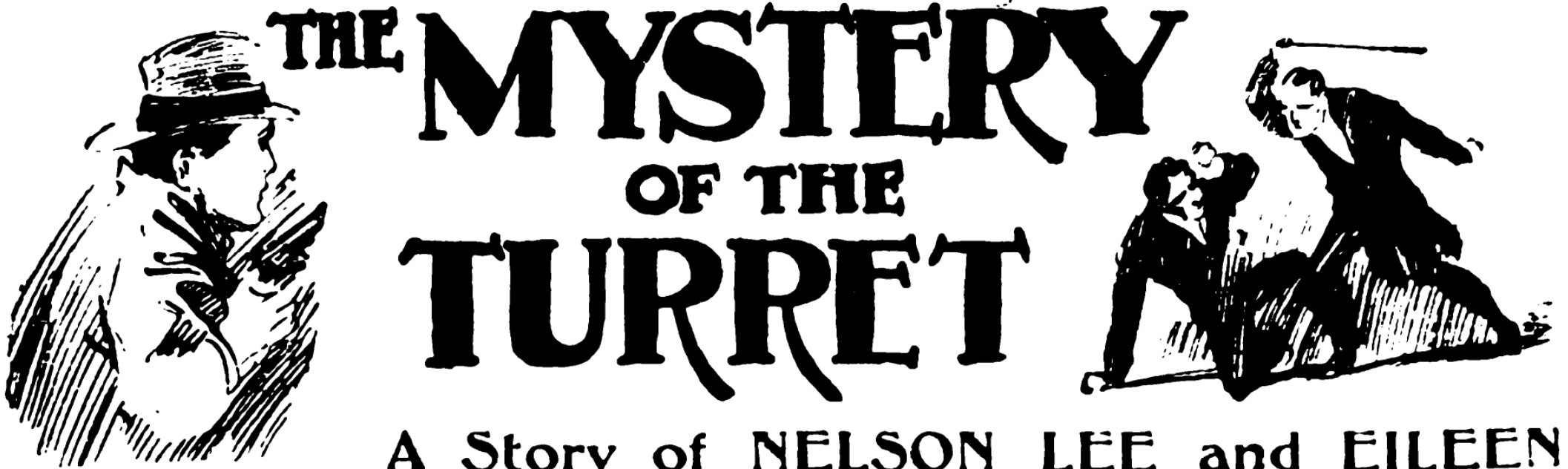
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THE MYSTERY OF THE TURRET

A Story of NELSON LEE and EILEEN DARE, the Girl Detective.

By the Author of "Nelson Lee's Lady Assistant," "The League of the Green Triangle" Series, etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

A Welcome Visitor—Eileen's Intentions—An Early Call.

"WELL, I reckon we look pretty lazy, guv'nor—you and I!" It was Nipper who made the languid remark, and his observation was addressed to Nelson Lee, the celebrated detective and criminologist. To tell the truth, Nelson Lee and Nipper were taking things extremely easy.

It was about seven o'clock in the evening, and the summer day was still brilliant and sunny. This was partially due to the Daylight Saving Act, but mainly because the weather was unusually clear and bright.

The sun's rays slanted into the detective's consulting-room in Gray's Inn Road, and the air was delightfully cool after a broiling day. Both windows were open to their widest extent, and a fresh breeze gently moved the curtains to and fro.

Nelson Lee himself lay in a great arm-chair, with his feet resting upon a stool. He was airily attired in a flannel suit, and he was conning over the evening-paper and smoking an excellent cigar.

Nipper was sprawled full length upon the window-table, and apparently in imminent peril of tumbling out into the street below.

Nelson Lee looked up as his young assistant spoke, and frowned.

"Are you anxious to end your reckless young life?" he demanded.

"Not for about sixty years, sir," replied Nipper promptly.

"You'll do so in sixty seconds if you don't look out for yourself! That table, young 'un, was not placed there as a couch! If you want to lie down, go to bed. If you happen to roll sideways, you'll be hurtling down——"

"Don't you worry your head, guv'nor. I'm safe enough," said Nipper easily.

And, to prove how safe he was, he wriggled round, and as near as possible disappeared through the window into space, for the consulting-room was up on the first floor.

Nelson Lee jumped to his feet.

"You silly young ass!" he shouted, grabbing the seat of Nipper's trousers and hauling the lad into the room. "Upon my soul, Nipper, you'll make me angry one of these days!"

Nipper grinned, and sang softly:

"Some of these days you'll miss me, honey——"

"But I shall certainly not miss you now!" said Lee grimly, interrupting

the lad's song and instinctively rolling up his sleeve. "And as for being lazy, I will demonstrate to you that I am capable of being exceedingly active!"

Nipper dodged round the table.

"Easy, guv'nor!" he chuckled. "None of your larks! I wasn't——"

Exactly what Nipper's fate was to have been must be left unrecorded, for at that moment the door opened, and the comfortable figure of Mrs. Jones, the landlady, appeared. She was bearing a card.

"There's a young lady waitin' to see you, sir," she observed.

Nipper set his tie straight.

"A young lady, eh? Hallo, guv'nor, have you been——"

"Name of Miss Eileen Dare," volunteered Mrs. Jones, glancing at the card.

"Oh, Miss Dare! Show the young lady up immediately, Mrs. Jones," said Lee briskly. "This is an unexpected pleasure!"

"Miss Eileen!" exclaimed Nipper heartily. "She's one of the right sort, sir."

The lad dodged round to the mirror, and hastily brushed his hair with a clothes-brush which happened to be lying handy. Nipper was not at all particular. At the moment of Mrs. Jones's appearance, the lad had been more or less untidy; but he effected a rapid change. He brushed his hair, he jerked his collar into position, and remade his tie. Then he slipped into a light flannel coat, and sat down with a book in his hand, as though he were the most innocent person in creation. Even Nelson Lee glanced at his reflection in order to make sure that he was quite presentable.

Who could this distinguished visitor be that she should cause such preparation? Certainly no ordinary client, however exalted in position, moved Nipper to improve his personal appearance.

But this was no ordinary visitor. Miss Eileen Dare herself entered the consulting-room just after Nipper had become seated. She paused in the doorway with her hand on the knob.

"May I come in?" she inquired softly.

For one second both Nelson Lee and Nipper looked at the girl without replying. Truth to tell, they were struck by the extraordinary delightfulness of the picture. Eileen was a girl of singular charm and beauty. She was not yet twenty, and she possessed one of the daintiest figures imaginable. Her position at the present moment was one which revealed her very decided feminine charms to the full. Her face, oval and healthily flushed, wore a sweet smile. Eileen was a very pretty girl indeed, and just now she was at her best.

After that one single second, Nelson Lee walked forward, with outstretched hand. Nipper bobbed out of his chair like a Jack-in-the-box, and nearly tripped over a mat in his haste to cross the room.

"This is a delightful surprise, Miss Dare," exclaimed Lee gladly. "We haven't seen you for several weeks now, and I am overjoyed to observe that you are looking the picture of health."

Eileen flushed a little.

"You are giving me a wonderful welcome," she said gently. "Oh, yes, I am quite my old self again now. The glorious weather we have been experiencing lately has done me a world of good."

Eileen took a seat close to the window, and the evening sunlight slanted upon her, and made her rich brown hair glisten wondrously. She wore a white voile dress, trimmed at the collar, waist, and cuffs with black. The effect was exceedingly pretty, but at the same time it gave an impression of mourning.

"I wasn't sure whether it was right of me to call," said the girl, turning her large, expressive eyes upon Lee. "You are such a very busy man, Mr. Lee, that I am so awfully afraid of disturbing you at a time when you wish to be——"

"My dear Miss Dare, pray let me hasten to put your mind at rest," the detective interrupted smilingly. "For this evening, at all events, both Nipper and I are taking things easily. Indeed, Nipper only remarked, just before you were announced, that we were disgracefully lazy."

"None of your exaggeration, gov'nor!" exclaimed Nipper. "I said 'pretty lazy.' But if you like to call it anything else—well, you know best! You see, Miss Eileen," Nipper went on, "the gov'nor and I have been hard at it for the last fortnight, and we finished an important case to-day; for the moment we are hard-up for a job."

Eileen laughed merrily.

"I don't think you will be hard-up for long," she remarked. "I'll warrant there are plenty of commissions waiting to be undertaken—plenty of clients anxious to obtain your services."

Nelson Lee bent forward.

"Please do not think me inquisitive," he said quietly, "but I have been wondering lately what your intentions are, Miss Eileen. You displayed such wonderful detective ability in that sad affair at Birmingham that I have been almost hoping you would lend me your assistance occasionally."

There was a far-away look in the girl's eyes, and her expression had become grave and somewhat sad. Then she shook herself slightly.

"I don't know that I deserve such a compliment," she said simply. "But surely you have not forgotten what I told you some weeks ago, Mr. Lee? I intend to devote myself in the immediate future to the accomplishment of the vow I made my dear father."

Both Nelson Lee and Nipper looked grave. They well remembered what that vow was, and they knew that Eileen was a girl of exceptional determination and ability.

It seemed only the other day that Nelson Lee and Nipper had been in the large manufacturing town of Birmingham, in the Midlands. The case they had inquired into there had ended sadly and unsatisfactorily. The story itself was quite simple.

Eileen's father, Mr. Lawrence Dare, had occupied the position of consulting engineer to the important Haverfield Steel Company, Limited, one of the largest steel works in the town. Roger Haverfield was a scoundrel to his finger-tips, and he was in association with a number of rich City financiers, all of whom were unscrupulous to a degree. Haverfield had inherited the business from his father, and had allowed it to decay almost to the verge of ruin. In order to avoid the seemingly inevitable crash, he had obtained finances from these questionable City men. They had placed piles of money into the business, because they knew they would see every penny of it back.

It did not matter to them or to Haverfield whether the name of the firm suffered. It was money they were after, and they cared little how it was obtained. Lawrence Dare had invented a new submarine engine, and the priceless plans of this had been stolen from him by Roger Haverfield himself. The employer had burgled his engineer's safe, and, mainly owing to investigations which were masterfully carried out by Eileen herself, it was made clear to the girl and Nelson Lee that Haverfield was guilty.

But to produce proofs was impossible. Haverfield and the men behind him had made their position secure, and had then performed a consummate act of fiendish devilry.

To make use of the invention, it was necessary to rid themselves of Law-

rence Dare, and they had faked plenty of evidence which made it seemingly clear that Dare was a traitor to his country—that Eileen's father was a spy in the pay of Germany!

Nelson Lee and Eileen had worked frantically to disprove the monstrous charge, but so cleverly had it been engineered that their efforts were useless. Lawrence Dare was condemned to be shot as a traitor, and Eileen, during a last sad interview, had made a solemn vow to her father that she would bring Roger Haverfield and every one of his associates to disgrace and ruin. She would be revenged for the foul thing they had done.

But Dare had died from heart-failure the same night, and so the scoundrels were cheated of their complete victory. The end, however, was the same. They were in possession of the engineer's invention, and it was impossible for Eileen to prove that it had been the work of her father's brain.

The poor girl had been very ill after the dreadful tragedy, but her wonderful constitution and fierce determination had brought her rapidly back to health.

Her father had left her a splendid income, and she now lived in London in a delightful little flat close to the river at Chelsea.

An elderly maiden aunt, her only relative, was Eileen's sole companion. The keen edge of the blow had dulled somewhat now. The sparkle had returned to Eileen's eyes; the pretty, winning smile was once more on her lips. She was naturally a girl of sunny disposition, and her spirits were as high as those of a child. Her optimism was unbounded.

Yet, as Nelson Lee well knew, Eileen was remarkable for her great ability, and for her surprising powers of deduction and mental concentration. There was something in her deep brown eyes, too, which spoke of a set purpose to be accomplished.

Lee admired her greatly. He admired her for her detective propensities, and for the ready manner in which she grasped significant points which any other girl would have missed. He felt that he could trust her with any task, and that she would acquit herself triumphantly.

There was no doubting the actual fact—Eileen Dare had a natural talent for Nelson Lee's own intricate profession.

"Yes, I am well aware of the vow you made," exclaimed the detective, replying to Eileen, "and, to tell you the truth, I have been thinking rather deeply on the subject once or twice. Don't you think, Miss Eileen, that you under-estimate the difficulties? I am convinced that it is no work for a sweet girl such as you to——"

She laid a small, dainty hand upon Lee's arm.

"Please don't talk in that strain, Mr. Lee," she said quietly. "I assure you I fully realise the stupendous nature of the task I swore to accomplish. This man Haverfield and his rascally associates murdered my father! Yes, that is true. They murdered him in cold blood! But for their plotting, dad would have been alive now!"

"Yes, I fully believe that."

"Then why should they go free? Why should they be allowed to live comfortably, with all the privileges of honest citizens?" asked the girl, with flashing eyes. "They are murderers, assassins all! And, since they are beyond reach of the law, I must work to bring about their punishment. It can be done—and it shall be done!"

There was something fine in Eileen's bearing as she made that fierce statement. Nipper, whose admiration for the girl knew no bounds, drew a deep breath, and told himself that she was even more splendid than he had imagined.

"There will be many risks, many perils," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Both

you and I know who these men are. We know that many of them occupy important positions. Some, indeed, are titled. But they are criminals of a class who are never called upon to answer for their crimes. If you can bring them to justice, my dear young lady, you will not only be avenging your father, but you will be performing a service to all humanity. But I don't like it! I don't like it at all! I am so afraid your efforts will only result in great perils and possible disasters."

Eileen laughed merrily.

"Have you no more confidence in me than that?" she cried, with mock severity. "There is no particular hurry, Mr. Lee. I will wait my opportunity. I will get to work in my own way."

"Do you mean that you will go for the rotters bald-headed?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"I don't think I know the exact meaning of the term," laughed Eileen, to Nipper's confusion. "But I certainly don't mean to plot against my enemies—that would only place me in the wrong. But they are villains, and sooner or later they will place themselves open to exposure. I mean to watch them; to watch them carefully. And when one of them leaves bare an unprotected spot, I shall strike. Their downfall shall come, not through my plotting, but because of their own villainy. It will be a long business, probably, but I am determined. One by one they shall suffer."

"I am exceedingly glad that I am your friend," observed Nelson Lee. "Somehow, Miss Eileen, I am sure that you will carry through your campaign to the bitter end. You will be successful, too. It would be madness for any ordinary girl to attempt such a programme; but you are so different. Outwardly, you are one of the most delightful of girls; and, indeed, the same applies in all respects. But you possess extraordinary talent, if you will allow me to state an obvious fact."

"I don't suppose I can prevent you," laughed Eileen, flushing again. "But you will make me awfully conceited, Mr. Lee."

But the detective shook his head.

"It is only flippant girls who become conceited. Those who possess real ability always estimate their own value at its true worth. And there is one thing I wish to say."

"What is that?"

"If ever you need advice or help, I want you to come straight to me," replied Lee. "Or, if I am out of London, communicate with me. It matters not where I am or what I am engaged upon. I will give you all my advice and assistance with the greatest of pleasure. For I, too, am anxious to see your enemies crushed into the dust."

Eileen took Nelson Lee's hand frankly.

"Thank you," she said, in quiet tones. "But I expect it will be the other way about. You will take charge, and I shall assist you. I am prepared now for work; I am well, and my determination is as fierce as ever. You are very good to me, Mr. Lee."

"No, no. I consider that I never brought the Birmingham case to a satisfactory conclusion," was the detective's reply. "Indeed, it was a terrible failure. So, if only for the sake of my own self-respect, I intend to help you with all the resources that lie in my power."

"And don't forget little me," put in Nipper. "I'm game right through."

Eileen's eyes sparkled, and they were inclined to be moist.

"I am indeed fortunate to have two such staunch friends," she said, with singular sweetness. "Somehow, I believe that we shall have many,

many adventures. I am glad I came this evening, for now we understand one another perfectly. If you discover any loophole in the enemy's armour, you will let me know, won't you?"

"Without a moment's delay."

"And I make a similar promise," said Eileen. "I have an idea that we shall get to work very soon. It ought not to be difficult to find a weak spot which is open to attack."

Exactly how soon the girl was to get to work she did not guess; but the moment for decisive action came with really surprising promptness. It was almost as though a strange trick of Fate had led her to pay this call this evening.

After Eileen had taken her departure, she left a wonderful impression behind her. Nelson Lee was even more positive that she was a girl who would do amazing things. She was so supremely confident, so simple and delightful; and yet so strong. Yes, that was the word—strong.

She was physically strong, and mentally strong. There were few girls who could lay claim to Eileen's athletic accomplishments. And within that pretty head of hers was a brain of remarkable power.

Nelson Lee and Nipper went to bed fairly early that night, for more often than not they had to snatch rest just when opportunity occurred. When it was possible to have a long night's rest they took advantage of the chance.

Lee was up very early, and he set out for a long walk. Nipper, he knew, would snore away until breakfast was just upon ready.

The morning was beautiful. The fine weather held, and the early sun shone down from a sky of vivid blue. Later on it would become unbearably hot in the streets; but now a brisk walk was altogether desirable.

Lee did not light a pipe or cigar, for he wished to drink in the pure, cool air. He walked easily, and did not care particularly which way he took. As it happened, his stroll was not destined to be of long duration.

He was thinking of Eileen's determined programme when he heard his name hailed. He turned his head, and saw that a large, open motor-car had pulled to the side of the road. A big man in the rear seat was grinning cheerfully.

"We're both early birds this morning, Lee," exclaimed the stranger. "Anything particular doing, or are you just out for the air?"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"A mere before-breakfast stroll, my dear Fuller," he replied. "You, I observe, are taking your fresh air more luxuriously. A walk, however, is more beneficial to the constitution."

"I'm out on business. Just off to Leatherhead."

Nelson Lee had recognised the big man in the motor-car as Detective-inspector Fuller, of Scotland Yard. The two men were good friends, and had worked together on many an occasion. Lee knew Fuller to be a hard-headed, blunt man, of considerable ability. And the inspector always valued his unofficial colleague's advice.

"Off to Leatherhead—eh?" said Lee. "Well, that's not far. I wish you luck."

"You say you're not particularly busy?"

"I am merely taking a stroll."

"Then jump in here beside me," invited Inspector Fuller. "The ride'll do you more good than a walk through London streets. Think of the country air! I don't suppose we shall be very long. Back about ten, anyhow."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I rather like the prospect," he said. "I'll gracefully accept, Fuller."

"Good man!"

And in another minute Nelson Lee was sitting beside the Yard man, and the big motor-car was speeding towards the Surrey countryside.

Lee little thought of the real significance of that spur-of-the-moment journey.

CHAPTER II.

The Turret House School—Sir Ambrose Shore, Bart.—A Surprise.

THE detective was rather amused. He had sallied out for an early morning walk; and before he had been going ten minutes he found himself speeding countrywards on an errand which would probably prove of trivial interest.

But, after all, the case itself was no concern of Nelson Lee's. He had undertaken the trip mainly for the sake of the ride. The morning was so glorious that he simply could not refuse Fuller's invitation.

Nipper, of course, wouldn't be surprised in the least. Often enough he had risen to find that his master had mysteriously disappeared. And this morning Lee would be back soon after breakfast. The hour was still very early.

Detective-inspector Fuller was glad of Lee's company. He had very little to tell. A special telegram had arrived from a Miss Ridsdale, who, it appeared, was head-mistress at a small school for children not far distant from Leatherhead.

One of the children had disappeared under dramatic circumstances, and there was every reason to believe that a tragedy had occurred. The case was too important for the local police to handle, and so a Scotland Yard man had been sent down. Fuller believed that there was something "big" in it; for the Leatherhead police were responsible for the telegram to the Yard.

"They wouldn't have sent up for me if this affair had been just ordinary," said the inspector. "The place is called the Turret House School, and it's about three miles beyond Leatherhead, I believe. It stands quite alone, down a little-used lane, and with woods on every side."

"What sort of a school is it?" asked Lee.

"I looked up the details in one of the reference books," was Fuller's reply. "It's fairish small, and is more of a kids' kindergarten than anything else. Pity that we haven't got a good English word to describe a children's school, by the way. A German word like 'kindergarten' ought to be barred."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Well," he asked, "how many children does the Turret House accommodate?"

"Only about thirty-five or forty. They're mostly mere kiddies—between five and ten. It's mainly used, I believe, by people who are going abroad for a time, and wish to leave their children in good hands during their absence. A Miss Ridsdale is the head-mistress, and it's her show altogether. Quite a select place of its kind."

The journey down was not a long one. Through Brixton and Streatham, then on past Norbury and Thornton Heath Pond—where a solitary swan was preening itself in state—to Croydon. From this latter town it was a short run to Epsom, and Leatherhead was only a little way beyond.

Before reaching Leatherhead the driver steered the large car on to a by-road, and in about fifteen minutes the Turret House School came into view, between two thick clumps of chestnuts.

The building stood quite alone, and in winter, Nelson Lee judged, it would appear singularly desolate and dreary. At present, however, in the height of summer, the spot was delightful in the extreme.

The main house was not very large, but at the south corner, and connected to the house only by a low school-room, a high, square tower arose to a considerable height. It was bare and ugly, and there was no green creeper to cover the nakedness of it. The top was flat, and a plain parapet of stone formed the summit. In the centre of the roof a flagpole had been erected, but it was innocent of any flag.

"Not a very cheerful-looking place," remarked Lee. "Its name, I observe, is derived from that square tower. The turret, I presume, is a small room, from which a magnificent view of the surrounding country can be obtained. I think the tower is of much greater age than the rest of the building."

"I'm not a judge of architecture," was the inspector's reply. "It doesn't matter a rap to me whether the show was built in Elizabeth's time, or in the twelfth century. I'm here to investigate the disappearance of a child."

Nelson Lee chuckled. Fuller was exceedingly matter-of-fact and blunt.

The motor-car turned a bend in the road, and then entered a narrow drive which led up to the main steps. Apparently another car had only just entered, for Lee saw it coming to a standstill at the top of the drive.

"I wonder who the other visitor can be?" said Fuller curiously.

"The child's parents, probably."

"Oh, yes, very likely. We'll soon see."

The police car came to a standstill just at the rear of the other automobile, and as the pair got out, they saw that a fairly stout gentleman was regarding them with some interest. He was well-dressed, and about forty-five years of age. His clean-shaven face wore a worried, anxious expression.

Nelson Lee and Fuller approached him.

"Well, who are you?" asked the well-dressed man abruptly.

There was a directness about the query which could not be mistaken.

"I am Detective-inspector Fuller, of the Criminal Investigation Department, New Scotland Yard," replied Fuller readily, as though he were beginning a recitation. "My business here is connected with the disappearance of a young child from this school. Perhaps you will be kind enough to tell me who I am addressing."

The other nodded to Nelson Lee, ignoring the inspector's question.

"And who is this man?" he asked, with delightful bluntness.

"That is Mr. Nelson Lee——"

"Indeed!" interjected the stranger sharply. "What is he doing here, pray?"

"Well, at the present moment he is in the act of lighting a cigar," replied Fuller somewhat sarcastically, for he did not care for the stout man's overbearing manner. "I personally requested Mr. Lee to run down with me."

The stranger eyed the great detective with obvious disfavour.

"On principle, I strongly object to interfering civilians meddling with any affair of mine," he said sourly. "This matter is for the police to investigate. Mr. Nelson Lee is a private inquiry agent, and has nothing whatever to do with the official force."

"That is so," said Lee smoothly.

"You will oblige me, therefore, by taking no part in this inquiry——"

"And why?" demanded Fuller curtly. "Mr. Lee is here at my invitation, sir. Allow me to inform you that I am in sole charge of this case; and if I choose I can invoke the aid of anyone I please. Scotland Yard, sir, is in no need of advice as to how it should conduct its business."

"You are insolent!" snapped the other. "You may not be aware who I am?"

"That, my dear sir, is no concern of mine!"

"Come, gentlemen—come!" said Nelson Lee pacifically. "Surely there is no necessity for this scene? I am sorry to be the unwitting cause of any unpleasantness."

The stranger passed a hand across his brow.

"I am sorry," he said. "I am afraid the fault lies with me. I was called out of bed at an early hour, and I am worried. It is my child which has disappeared so strangely. My name is Sir Ambrose Shore."

The inspector's frown straightened out somewhat.

"We don't want any bother," he growled. "I don't suppose Mr. Lee will care twopence about the case, anyhow—it's not his sort. Did I understand you to say, Sir Ambrose, that the missing child is your son?"

"The little boy is not my son—he is my ward," replied the baronet. "I am a bachelor. But I am naturally anxious and ill at ease. Can you tell me exactly what has occurred? Personally, I only know that the youngster has vanished under sinister circumstances."

"That is the limit of our knowledge," said Fuller. "We had better get along inside, and learn more of the facts."

The three men mounted the steps. The door was already open, and a local constable was standing there, looking as grave as an image. He saluted somewhat confusedly when the inspector made known his identity—for Fuller, of course, was in ordinary clothes. Scotland Yard detectives do not wear uniform.

The hour was only just after eight-thirty even now, and the school was waking up for the day. It was evident, however, that something was wrong, for there was an air of subdued excitement about the place.

As Sir Ambrose and his companions entered the big hall, they saw a couple of under-teachers at the head of the wide stairs. The two women were rather pale, and they were evidently curious and excited.

Just then, however, an elderly lady emerged from a side-room, and came forward. She was comfortably proportioned, and looked a motherly old soul. She was quite calm, and seemed in no way perturbed. But there was an anxious look in her eyes, and a paleness upon her cheeks which told of her worry.

"Oh, I am glad you have come, Sir Ambrose," she said respectfully. "These gentlemen, I believe, are from Scotland Yard?"

"One is, at least, Miss Ridsdale," replied the baronet. "The other is Mr. Nelson Lee, the private detective."

"Will you please step into this room?" asked the head-mistress.

A minute later they were all within the apartment, and the good lady stated her intention of telling exactly what had occurred, and how the matter stood at the present moment.

"There is something dreadfully wrong, I know," she began. "Just before six o'clock this morning I was awakened by the crying of one of the children in the main dormitory. It is a large room, accommodating twenty boys, all under eight years of age. Many of them, indeed, are

quite infants. I at once attired myself in a dressing gown, and went along the passage to the dormitory."

"Do you sleep close by, then?" asked the inspector.

"Yes; just across the passage. The child, I found, was crying for no particular reason, and I soon made him comfortable," went on Miss Ridsdale. "It was, of course, broad daylight, and the early sun was shining through the windows. The lower sash of one of these was partially open, and I walked across to open it wider, for the morning air was by no means cold."

"It was quite usual for the window to be open?"

"Oh, yes. As I was walking back I noticed something which had escaped my attention before. The third bed from the window was unoccupied, and the bedclothes were all thrown back in confusion. I was rather surprised, for I wondered what little Jack had been up to."

"Little Jack?" asked the inspector.

"Jack Hillford—that is the name of Sir Ambrose's ward," explained Miss Ridsdale. "It was his bed that was empty. I crossed——"

"One moment. Does the lad always occupy that particular bed?"

"Always. Each child is allotted his own particular bed."

"Thank you. Please go on."

"Well, I was more than a little astonished, but in no way alarmed," said the head-mistress. "I merely thought that Jack was up to some prank or other—perhaps hiding beneath one of the other beds. He was always a playful little lad. But then I suddenly made a discovery which seemed to chill me to the marrow."

"Indeed! What did you discover?"

"As I stood over the bed I saw, upon the sheets and the pillow, several horrible smears of blood," replied Miss Ridsdale, with a little shudder. "Oh, Mr. Fuller, I received a terrible shock! The blood was everywhere! And not only smears, but large spots."

"What did you do?" inquired the inspector sharply.

"For a few moments I could do nothing. Cannot you imagine my consternation and alarm? The boy was missing, the bed-clothes in dire confusion, and blood everywhere. But when I did realise the awful significance of what I saw I made a still further discovery. Upon the floor were more traces of blood, and they led to the window. Rushing across the room, I then found a ghastly smear upon the window-ledge outside."

Inspector Fuller pursed his lips.

"H'm! The thing begins to look ugly," he remarked grimly. "From what you have said, it is quite obvious that the lad was brutally taken from his bed and carried away through the window. Could it be possible for the boy to climb out himself? It did not strike you that he might have caused himself an injury and——"

"Oh, no. The windows are very high—at least, for little children," replied the head-mistress. "Jack could not possibly have climbed out himself. Besides, when I gazed out, and below, I found positive proof that somebody had entered."

"What was that proof?"

"A ladder was resting against the wall just below the window-ledge. I was, of course, very excited and upset. I scarcely knew what to do, for the discovery was so appalling and so extraordinary. Who could possibly have kidnapped the child? And why was he injured—perhaps murdered—before being taken away?"

The inspector was looking thoughtful.

"That ladder," he remarked. "Why didn't you see it when you opened the window?"

"Because I didn't lean out. The ledge being high, the ladder couldn't be seen unless one leaned right out."

"Did you notice the condition of the blood-marks?"

"I am afraid I don't quite understand what——"

"Were they quite fresh?"

"Oh, no; they were not absolutely fresh," replied Miss Ridsdale. "The child must have been taken away soon after midnight, I should judge."

Fuller, who was making notes, looked up.

"What of the boy's clothes?" he queried.

"At the moment I forgot about his clothes. But I discovered, afterwards, that they had been taken from the chair beside his bed."

"H'm! That points to Master Jack being quite alive," said the inspector, with a nod. "The clothes wouldn't be wanted if he was dead, would they? Those blood-marks rather puzzle me. It strikes me he was injured accidentally. What do you think, Lee?"

Nelson Lee, who had been listening in silence, shook his head.

"I don't think I will venture an opinion at this early stage," he said quietly.

"It is amazing—amazing and terrible!" exclaimed Sir Ambrose Shore huskily. "I have listened to your story, Miss Ridsdale, in absolute horror. I cannot think of any possible explanation. The little lad was a dear child, and it is a mystery why anybody in this world should wish him harm."

The baronet's voice quivered somewhat, and it was easy to see that he was greatly affected. It was also apparent that he was as greatly puzzled as anybody. The thing was so extraordinary. Why had the child been kidnapped?"

"The time of your startling discovery, I understand, was just before six?" asked Fuller.

"Yes. It was the striking of the hour which brought full realisation to me," replied the head-mistress. "I had been somewhat stunned, and hardly knew what I was doing. But as six o'clock chimed I rushed out of the dormitory, and at once fetched John, the coachman."

"You sent for the police, I presume?"

"Yes, at once. John went to Leatherhead in the trap, and brought a sergeant back with him. The sergeant was a foolish man, and seemed as flustered and as excited as my own maidservants. I suggested that Scotland Yard should be informed, and he said that the case warranted a London detective being sent down." Miss Ridsdale paused. "That is all I know," she added. "I immediately sent you a wire, Sir Ambrose, for it was right that you should know at once."

The baronet nodded.

"Of course," he agreed gravely. "I motored down without delay. What the explanation of this mysterious and terrible affair can be is more than I can fathom. I only hope you, Inspector Fuller, will be able to probe to the bottom of it."

The inspector rose to his feet.

"We had better have a look round," he began.

Miss Ridsdale, however, interrupted him.

"I have not told all yet," the school-mistress exclaimed. "There is something more; and I am sure it will come as a surprise. In a way, it only makes the mystery deeper, and certainly no less terrible. You, Sir

Ambrose, will be delighted, but the load of worry and anxiety is merely shifted."

"What do you mean?" demanded Sir Ambrose sharply.

"An hour after I sent you the wire I made a surprising discovery," replied Miss Ridsdale gently. "The child who was kidnapped was not little Jack Hillford, but a boy named Tommy Reeve. Jack is at this moment in an adjoining room, safe and sound."



CHAPTER III.

Another Surprise—A Possible Explanation—Lee's Conviction.

SIR AMBROSE SHORE started to his feet.

"Are you joking, woman?" he shouted hoarsely. "You say that Jack is here, safe and sound? Great Heaven! What foolery is this?"

"Sir Ambrose! What is the matter?" cried Miss Ridsdale, in alarm. "I am sorry if I startled you, but I thought it better to tell my story in its proper sequence. It is astounding, but I have told you the simple truth. Your little boy has not been harmed in the slightest degree."

The baronet looked round him in a bewildered manner.

"Upon my soul! You spring your surprises too suddenly, Miss Ridsdale," he exclaimed. "I was quite taken aback. But your revelation is splendid—splendid! So little Jack has been here all the time?"

"Yes."

Sir Ambrose reseated himself, and Detective-inspector Fuller also sat down. He looked at the head-mistress curiously.

"You'd better let me hear the rest," he said. "We don't want to get mixed, do we? How do you account for this astonishing state of affairs? You told me that Jack Hillford always slept in the same bed, and that it was Jack's bed which was rumpled and blood-stained."

"Obviously, two of the children changed beds," remarked Nelson Lee drily.

Miss Ridsdale nodded.

"That is just the truth," she responded. "But, of course, at the time I had no idea of it. The children always sleep in their own particular beds, and little Jack's was the third from the larger window."

"I suppose it would be easy for anyone outside to obtain that knowledge?"

"Oh, quite easy. All the servants, of course, must know the exact position of the beds, and who their usual occupants are. But how was I to know that things were different this morning?"

"When did you learn the true state of affairs?"

"Not until seven-thirty. At six o'clock I saw the third bed from the window empty, as I have explained, and I immediately concluded that little Jack was the victim of this unaccountable outrage," replied Miss Ridsdale.

"Very naturally, as you will admit, I at once wired Sir Ambrose Shore that his ward had met with a great misfortune. At seven-thirty, when the children were being dressed, the astonishing discovery was made that Jack was sleeping peacefully in Tommy Reeve's bed."

"And who," asked the inspector, "is Tommy Reeve?"

"He is a little boy of seven, whose parents are at present on the way home from South Africa," replied the head-mistress. "I really do not know what to do, for I cannot communicate with them, and they will receive a terrible shock when they arrive——"

"Possibly, and possibly not," interrupted Fuller grimly. "Before the steamer sights British shores, Miss Ridsdale, I hope to have the young lad safely back under this roof. After learning the true state of things it was too late, I suppose, to inform Sir Ambrose that everything was all right—so far as he was concerned?"

"Of course. It was getting on towards eight o'clock then, and the telegram had been sent some time before seven," was the reply. "I thought it best to explain to you, Sir Ambrose, when you arrived."

"Quite so—quite so," said the baronet. "I am greatly relieved."

"Jack told me that he and Tommy had exchanged beds, just for the fun of the thing," went on Miss Ridsdale. "There is really nothing surprising in that at all, for the children are up to all sorts of pranks, young as they are. I learned, too, that the two boys had done the same thing once or twice before."

The inspector nodded slowly.

"The question is, did the kidnappers make a mistake, or was the abduction deliberate?" he exclaimed musingly. "What do you think, Lee? Did the man or men think that the bed contained Jack Hillford? Or did they come with the fixed intention of taking away the lad Reeve?"

"From all appearances, I certainly think the kidnappers made a mistake," replied the great detective quietly. "But it is really impossible to arrive at any explanation until we learn of a motive——"

"But the poor little boy was injured," interrupted Miss Ridsdale with grave concern. "Sir Ambrose is relieved, of course, but those poor parents on the way from South Africa——"

At that moment a loud tap came at the door, and the school-mistress frowned a little, and sharply invited the unknown visitor to enter. The door opened, and a burly country constable stood in the doorway.

But not one of the room's occupants looked at the worthy minion of the law. Their attention was centred upon a little boy whom the constable was propelling before him.

"Tommy!" cried Miss Ridsdale joyfully.

She leapt from her seat with wonderful alacrity, considering her ample proportions.

"Tommy, my dear little lad! What does it mean? Thank Heaven they have found you and brought you back safe and sound."

She clasped the youngster in her arms.

Nelson Lee, Inspector Fuller, and the baronet were all on their feet, and there was a little smile on Lee's lips. The Yard man scratched his head perplexedly, and gave a queer kind of grin.

"Well, this affair has certainly provided some surprises," he remarked. "Before we've finished making inquiries the kidnapped youngster turns up. It seems to me, Lee, we shall have to get back to London."

They turned their attention to Miss Ridsdale and the boy. He was attired very carelessly, without collar and with his boots unlaced. His hair, too, was untidy, and his face grimy. There was a suspicion of blood smears on his cheeks.

"Are you hurt?" Miss Ridsdale was saying anxiously. "Tell me, Tommy, what has been happening to you?"

The little lad gave a deep sigh.

"Oh, miss, I've been havin' such an awful time!" he exclaimed fearfully. "I'm so glad to be back! I—I thought I'd been stolen by gipsies!"

"You're quite safe, Tommy dear. Can you tell me what happened this morning?"

The child was evidently in possession of his full wits, and was an intelligent youngster, into the bargain. He told his story in a straightforward manner, and in simple words.

"I was woke up right early—oh, ever so early," he began. "Some man with a nasty beard was bending over the bed——"

"Was it daylight, young 'un?" asked Fuller gently.

"Oh, no, sir. It was in the middle of the night," replied Tommy Reeve. "Very early in the morning, I think. The moon was shinin', and I was ever so frightened when I saw that horrible man with the beard. He had taken hold of me, and I tried to shout. But he slapped me right in the face with a terrible bang, and held his hand over my mouth. And oh, miss, my nose started bleeding most awful——"

"Ah! The blood-marks!" murmured Lee. "A very simple explanation, after all. It is rather unwise to assume that a dreadful tragedy has occurred before knowing the actual facts."

The inspector smiled.

"So you weren't really hurt at all, kiddie?" he asked kindly.

"Wasn't I?" objected Tommy, with indignation. "I was hurt awful! Oh, miss, I haven't had my nose bleed so much since Teddy Doyle punched it last week! But it was a lot worse this time. I was ever so frightened. The nasty man lifted me right out of the bed, and bound one of my stockings right round my mouth so that I couldn't shout. Then he carried me down a ladder into the garden."

"And after that?" asked Miss Ridsdale gently.

The boy looked somewhat bewildered, and was inclined to be tearful.

"I don't know nothin' more," he said. "Oh, I am so glad to be back. I—I haven't had any breakfast, and I'm ever so hungry!"

Fuller bent down nearer to the little lad.

"You'll have a huge feed in a minute, young 'un," he said gently. "Try and remember what the man did to you after he took you into the garden. Did he carry you away along the road, or put you in a cart, or motor-car——"

"A motor-car!" exclaimed Tommy quickly. "He carried me along the road, and he and another man dressed me. Then we got into a big motor-car. Oh, I was so frightened!"

"What was the other man like?"

"I—I didn't see him properly."

"H'm! That's not surprising," was Fuller's remark. "Where were you taken in the car?"

"Don't know."

"But, surely——"

"I don't know nothing," went on Tommy, tears starting to his eyes. "I—I went to sleep, and when I woke up I was in a dry ditch against a hedge, and—and this policeman was standing over me."

The country constable nodded.

"That's right, sir," he corroborated. "I had orders from the sergeant to scour round the country on my bicycle. And I suddenly came across the boy in the ditch lying fast asleep. Poor little nipper, he was just about done up, I reckon. Didn't seem able to do anything but cry when I woke him up."

"How far away was this?" asked Nelson Lee.

"About seven miles to the south, sir. The road where I found the boy is just a quiet country lane, leading to nowhere in particular."

No further information could be obtained either from the constable or

the boy. It was, of course, quite unnecessary for the Scotland Yard man to pursue his inquiries here, at the school. Detective-inspector Fuller had intended making a thorough investigation of the dormitory. But that was unnecessary. The blood-stains were explained, and the child was back, safe and sound. The whole affair, in fact, was explained.

"Well, we don't seem to be able to do much more here," said the inspector, after little Tommy had been taken away. "In fact, I'd better get straight back to London and report. The case has fizzled out. Seems to me more like a practical joke than anything else."

"Indeed, what other explanation is there?" asked the head-mistress. "I believe it is some senseless prank, done on purpose to cause a sensation. If the lad had been really kidnapped, he would not have been left on the road."

Sir Ambrose Shore nodded.

"Well, we must be thankful that nothing serious has happened," he smiled. "As you say, Miss Ridsdale, some practical joker has been at work. I think I'll return to London at once; but I should like to have five minutes with my little ward first."

But Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I don't think you have grasped the full significance of this affair," he remarked quietly. "You, Inspector Fuller, surely know what I mean?"

"Well, I think I do," was the inspector's reply. "Upon second thoughts, I am convinced there has been no practical joke here, Sir Ambrose. The explanation is quite obvious, but by no means satisfactory. As far as I can see, we have not probed the mystery to the bottom."

The baronet frowned.

"I don't quite grasp your meaning," he said curtly.

"Well, I should think it was clear enough. The kidnappers, whoever they are, came to this school with the express intention of taking away your ward, little Jack Hillford," said Fuller grimly. "They had already obtained information as to the exact position of the youngster's bed. Accordingly, when they broke in, they went straight to that bed—the third from the window—and carried the boy away in the darkness, being positively certain that he was Jack Hillford. Later on, however, they discovered their mistake. Their work, of course, had been futile—they had no use for Tommy Reeve. So, naturally enough, they placed him beside the road while he was sleeping, and drove off. They didn't want the kiddie, and so they abandoned him."

"I am sure you are right, Mr. Fuller," said Miss Ridsdale. "But why should anyone wish to take away dear little Jack? He is certainly nobody of any importance, and it could not be a case of holding him for ransom in these modern days."

"Perhaps you, Sir Ambrose, can suggest an explanation," said the inspector quietly. "Being the lad's guardian, surely you'll know if there is any reason why his disappearance should be wanted. There may be somebody who will benefit——"

But Sir Ambrose shook his head.

"No; you're got quite a wrong idea, inspector," he interjected. "Let me tell you who the lad really is. You will then realise more than ever how strangely unaccountable this affair is. As Miss Ridsdale just remarked, Jack Hillford is of no importance—a nobody. I only appointed myself guardian out of generosity to an old servant. Some little time ago a fellow named Hillford, who was formerly in my employ, returned to England from the West Indies—Jamaica, I think. He was in a very weak state of health, having contracted some sort of fever out there. Well, he had no relatives,

and he knew very well that he was booked. So he came to me and begged me to look after the boy after his death."

The baronet paused and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, Hillford had been a good servant, and I was sorry for him," he went on. "He died and, according to my promise, I had his little son sent to this school. That is all. He is nothing to me; but I like the child well enough."

"But has he no money coming to him——"

"Hillford, the valet, died in poverty," interjected Sir Ambrose. "The boy has no relatives, and has not a penny in the wide world. Why on earth he would be kidnapped is quite beyond my apprehension."

Fuller stroked his chin.

"It is queer," he muttered—"infernally queer! But there must be some explanation. Children are not abducted from schools for the mere fun of the thing."

There was a short silence, and then Miss Hillford uttered an exclamation and looked at her three companions eagerly.

"I wonder if there can be anything in this!" she asked. "Little Jack is amazingly clever with a violin. For a lad of seven, he can play astoundingly well. Finding that he was talented in that direction, I paid very special attention to his music teaching, and he progressed so wonderfully that he is already the talk of the district."

"H'm!" the inspector murmured. "I don't think there is much in that, Miss Ridsdale. The lad, of course, only plays in an elementary fashion——"

"Oh, no! On the contrary, he has a singular command over the violin," said the head-mistress quickly. "Several of my friends in Leatherhead and elsewhere have told me that he will one day become a world-famous musician. The child is an absolute genius in that direction. He plays with purity and sweetness, and only last week he attended a war-fund concert in Leatherhead and acquitted himself admirably. The applause he received was ample evidence that his talent was appreciated. He is only seven, you must remember, and child violinists are very rare."

"'Pon my word, I believe you've struck the nail on the head!" said the Scotland Yard inspector grimly. "The lad's genius was publicly known, and it is more than probable that some infernal gang—foreigners, as likely as not—got the idea of kidnapping him and smuggling him abroad. Once out of England, they would be fairly safe, and they could exploit the lad to their own advantage."

"But surely nobody would risk their liberty upon such a speculation?" asked Sir Ambrose incredulously.

"My dear sir, I have had twenty years' experience of criminals and crooks of all classes," said Fuller. "There are always gangs ready to work such a dodge. And if the boy is really as clever as Miss Ridsdale declares, there are piles of money to be made out of him—especially in the States. I shall have to have this affair sifted right to the bottom."

"Do you think there is any further danger?" asked Miss Ridsdale anxiously.

"No. Having blundered so badly, the kidnapers won't attempt another abduction yet awhile," replied Fuller. "They'll lie low, if I know anything of their breed. They're rather particular about the safety of their own skin, those gentry, and they won't endanger it by remaining in this neighbourhood."

"Quite so! My opinion exactly," said Sir Ambrose, with emphasis. "Have no fear at all, Miss Ridsdale. You need take no precautions. Go on exactly as you have been doing. The attempt has failed, and nothing

more will come of it. It is my express wish that you should carry out those instructions."

"Very good, Sir Ambrose!"

"It would only frighten the little lad if he thought that he was in danger," added the baronet.

"I have not told Jack anything at all," Miss Ridsdale said. "He has no idea that it was he who should have been kidnapped."

"Ah! That is all the better! He will certainly not be nervous," said Sir Ambrose. "It will be wise, I think, Miss Ridsdale, if you give out the impression that little Jack was taken away by some foolish practical joker. We have no evidence, indeed, to prove that such is not the case."

Very soon afterwards Jack Hillford was brought in by the school-mistress and he proved to be rather a simple lad, with a dreamy expression in his eyes. He did not seem particularly pleased to see his guardian, and was not at all enthusiastic about going out to see Sir Ambrose off.

The baronet departed ten minutes later, and, after a consultation with a local inspector who had just arrived, Nelson Lee and Fuller also prepared to leave. The Scotland Yard man was quite convinced that this was a case for the local authorities. There had been sinister signs of a terrible crime at the outset, but these had now been swept away. There was nothing at all intricate in the affair.

The morning was still fairly young when London was reached, and Nelson Lee bade the inspector good-bye in Whitehall, close against Scotland Yard.

The detective did not immediately go home to Gray's Inn Road. He spent two hours upon a certain matter, and was hardly satisfied with the result. He had, in fact, made careful inquiries concerning Jack Hillford, and he had found that Sir Ambrose's story was perfectly true. The youngster was, indeed, the son of a penniless fellow, and had arrived from Jamaica only two or three months before. He was a nobody. His disappearance would cause no upheaval in any direction.

Nelson Lee was positively convinced upon one point. The theory that Jack had been kidnapped for the purpose of exploiting his talent was ingenious but unconvincing. Lee was sure that such a theory was far from being the actual state of affairs. There was something much deeper in this case than appeared upon the surface, and Nelson Lee had very good reason for being positive.

When he arrived at his rooms, he briefly told Nipper what had occurred, and then immediately rang up Eileen Dare, who had had a telephone installed just recently. Twenty minutes later Eileen herself, fresh and dainty, and looking a picture of delightful health, presented herself in the consulting-room.

CHAPTER IV.

Suspicious—Eileen's Mission—On the Scent.

"WHAT is it, Mr. Lee?" Eileen asked quietly, as she seated herself. "You didn't explain anything over the 'phone, but I know that it is something important."

"It may be very important indeed," replied Nelson Lee. "It all depends Miss Eileen. But I believe that I have not brought you here on a fool's errand."

The girl looked very interested.

"I am ever so curious!" was her smiling remark.

"So am I, guv'nor," put in Nipper. "I'm in the dark, too."

"Well, let me cast some daylight upon the situation," observed Nelson

Lee pleasantly. "You told me yesterday, Miss Eileen, that when an opportunity presented itself to strike at one of your father's enemies you would take advantage of it at once. To be brief, I believe an opportunity has come about already."

"Oh, how splendid!" exclaimed Eileen, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

"You have heard, doubtless, of Sir Ambrose Shore?"

"He is one of the men who are closely associated with Roger Haverfield; one of the men who plotted to send my father to a disgraceful death!" exclaimed the girl, with surprising fierceness. "Sir Ambrose Shore is one of my biggest and most dangerous enemies, Mr. Lee."

"Let me tell you what has occurred this morning," said the detective quietly. "As you have said, this baronet is one of the chief members of the precious 'combine' which planned your father's ruin. He is up to some villainy, I am sure, and you may possibly be successful in exposing him."

Lee soon told his pretty visitor what had happened at the Turret House School. When the story was told, Eileen was rather puzzled, and her forehead puckered delightfully.

"But I can't see what villainy Sir Ambrose has been up to!" she said. "This little lad who should have been kidnapped is only his ward, and it is not possible that Sir Ambrose would plot to have him stolen."

Lee thoughtfully stroked his smooth chin.

"I do not profess to know the nature of the plot," he said. "Indeed, I can form no sort of guess. But let me add one or two facts, and you will probably see things in a different light. It is certain that the wrong child was kidnapped purely by a matter of chance, and when Sir Ambrose arrived at the school he was under the impression that little Jack Hillford was missing."

"You all thought that, didn't you?"

"Yes. Well, to begin with, there was quite a little scene outside the nurse," proceeded Nelson Lee. "Before we knew who Sir Ambrose was, he objected most strongly to my taking part in the investigation. Why? Why should he object to me? If he really wished the child to be found, surely he would be only too pleased for all efforts to be made. But my appearance was not welcome. I am vain enough to believe that he feared me. He feared that I would discover something which would not be healthy for him. For, Miss Eileen, I am positively sure that Sir Ambrose himself instigated the kidnapping plot.

The detective paused and lolled back in his chair.

"Inspector Fuller very properly put our friend the baronet in his place," pursued the great detective. "He then realised that he was in the wrong, that he was showing his hand by objecting to me. He told us who he was, and I at once became suspicious. I knew how closely connected he was with your father's ruin, and knew also that he was—and is—capable of any villainy. Well, I have told you what happened within the house—how Miss Ridsdale sprang a surprise on us that Jack Hillford was perfectly safe, and that the wrong boy had been kidnapped."

"I'll bet the rotter turned a bit blue, gov'nor!" exclaimed Nipper shrewdly.

"My dear lad, that is just the point I am going to emphasise," was Lee's quiet reply. "I was not facing Sir Ambrose, but I had a clear view of his face in a mirror which hung upon the opposite wall. For one second the baronet lost complete control of himself. His lips parted cruelly, and he displayed the most prominent signs of inward fury and alarm. I have never, in the whole course of my experience, seen a plainer case of surprised

anger. Sir Ambrose Shore, instead of being pleased with the news, as one would expect, was simply boiling with fury. By a supreme effort, he regained control of himself, but not before he had started to his feet and had uttered a hoarse exclamation. He explained his action by saying that he was taken by surprise. But what is the inference to be drawn from these facts?"

Eileen looked very grave.

"You have said, Mr. Lee, that there is much to make it fairly evident that Sir Ambrose planned the abduction," she said. "But I can't for the life of me understand why he should do so. As you have yourself discovered, his story of the boy's parentage was quite correct. How could Sir Ambrose gain by causing the boy's disappearance?"

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"That is what we have to discover," he replied; "or, to be more exact, that is what you have to discover, Miss Eileen. There's a chance here that you can bring disgrace upon the rascally baronet, and you will thus strike your first blow at your enemies. I have already mapped out a plan of campaign for you to follow. I was struck by the fact that Sir Ambrose insisted on no precautions being taken to guard against a second attempt. That was very significant, was it not? Although the inspector was unsuspecting, I fully believe that another attempt is to be made to kidnap the child. What the motive can possibly be, I don't profess to know. That is for you to find out."

"I am only too anxious, only too willing to get to work without delay," said Eileen eagerly. "Oh, Mr. Lee, you cannot realise how impatient I am! I don't think I am a vindictive girl, but I mean to keep the vow I made my poor father, and the sooner I can strike a blow the better I shall like it."

There was a short pause.

"Well, it is necessary that Miss Ridsdale should be taken into our confidence," said Lee presently. "She is as honest as the day, and I think we shall be able to rely upon her discretion. I learned while I was at the school that one of the under-teachers was ill, but could not be spared until a substitute was obtained. You, Miss Eileen, will go down to the Turret House School, and will take up your post as under-teacher."

The girl's eyes gleamed with inward excitement.

"Oh, how splendid!" she exclaimed. "It will be quite an adventure, Mr. Lee. Of course, I know why I am going. You want me to keep an eye on Master Jack? You want me to be there so that I can frustrate any further attempt at villainy?"

"Precisely! Under the circumstances, I think we can take it for granted that a second attempt will be made. Well, my dear young lady, it will be your duty, your task, to discover the actual truth, to unmask Sir Ambrose. How the case will end is problematical; but you, I need not say, will acquit yourself excellently."

Nipper was rather disappointed with the plan, for, so far as he could see, he and his master would take no part in it. But Nipper was to find before long that there would be work for all.

By lunch-time Eileen Dare was ready to start on her expedition. She was armed with a long letter from Nelson Lee to Miss Ridsdale, explaining everything, and she had arranged with Nelson Lee to use a cipher should she wish to communicate with him.

Eileen travelled down to Leatherhead by an early afternoon train. Upon arrival she hired a four-wheeler and rattled out along the country lanes to the lonely situated school. Miss Ridsdale was surprised to see the girl, but

her surprise changed to concern and alarm after she had perused Nelson Lee's letter.

"Dear me! Then you are one of Mr. Lee's assistants?" asked the homely old lady.

Eileen smiled.

"Yes," she replied quietly, "I am working for Mr. Lee. And you must realise, Miss Ridsdale, that my task is also favourable to the welfare of your establishment. In a way, I shall be looking after your interests."

"Yes, I can see that; but I am shocked. I am amazed, Miss Dare. Can it be possible that you suspect Sir Ambrose Shore of perpetrating the crime? I don't like the man, I will admit; but it is monstrous to suppose——"

"I think you will understand that Mr. Lee would not act without excellent cause," interrupted Eileen quietly. "Both he and I believe that a second attempt to kidnap little Jack Hillford will be made, and I am here to keep my eye on him, and to be on the watch generally, and I must impress upon you the necessity for absolute secrecy. You must not breathe a word to a soul about my real reason for being here."

It was some little time before Miss Ridsdale could fully grasp the situation, but when she did so she proved herself to be very sensible. She knew that the good name of her school was at stake. Another kidnapping affair would probably cause many parents to remove their children from her charge; and that, as the schoolmistress well knew, would spell ruin for her. She was only too anxious to assist Eileen in every way possible. And the knowledge that Nelson Lee himself was behind everything made Miss Ridsdale quite easy in mind.

"Of course," said Eileen, "I may be here for days, weeks, before anything happens; but, sooner or later, Sir Ambrose will act, and then I shall have him trapped!"

"It sounds very terrible," said the old lady mildly. "But I have always disliked that man. And, now I come to think of it, I can see that he acted very strangely this morning! I am very glad you have come, my dear. I am much easier in mind, and you can rely upon me to be discreet. You are simply the new under-mistress, and your name during your visit here will be Miss Knowles."

Eileen was very pleased with the way the plan had worked. But when she was alone in the little bedroom which was allotted to her, she wondered whether she had come down on a wild-goose chase. She wondered if she would, indeed, succeed in proving anything shady against Sir Ambrose. She was quite prepared to remain at the school for weeks, for it was hardly likely that another effort would be made for some time.

As it happened, however, Eileen made the astounding discovery that a further attempt to kidnap Jack Hillford was to be made that very night!

And the discovery was not made by chance. Eileen learned of it through her own sagacity and sharp-wittedness.

During the evening she ventured out for a walk round the delightful country lanes. In spite of the fact that she was sure that nothing was likely to occur, she was keenly on the alert, and ready for instant action if necessary.

The evening was wonderfully quiet, and the sunset was eloquent of fine weather to come. Eileen drank in the pure, fresh air, and felt that this trip, even if it had no other effect, would benefit her health splendidly.

She paused against an old gateway which led into a small, grass-covered private lane. The very instant she did so, she saw something which had so far escaped her notice. The tall hedges had hidden the view completely.

Some little distance up the lane two men were approaching her, were



"The nasty man lifted me right out of the bed, and bound one of my stockings right round my mouth so that I couldn't shout. Then he carried me down a ladder into the garden."—(See page 14.)

coming towards the roadway. They were talking in low tones, and their heads were bent down. Both were solely occupied in their earnest conversation.

Eileen had only just appeared, and they had not seen her. In one instant the girl made up her mind. She acted with astonishing promptitude, and did not pause to ask herself why she should do so.

Just against the gateway, on the right-hand side, stood a high old oak. As Eileen had approached she had seen that the tree was hollow. The trunk was large, and there was a big knot about three feet from the ground. Eileen performed a very surprising action.

She stepped quickly to the oak-tree, and with rare agility nimbly climbed up into the tree. One glance showed her that the hollow trunk was spacious enough to accommodate her dainty figure, and was deep enough to completely conceal her.

She dropped lightly down on to a bed of dry, dead leaves, and stood perfectly still. From outside she was unseen. Exactly why she had acted in this way she did not know herself. Perhaps it was intuition; perhaps it was her natural instinct of precaution and curiosity.

But she was there—hidden, and yet able to use her ears.

“Oh, I am sure I am mistaken!” she told herself. “The men are probably innocent farm-hands.”

Yet she felt that some presentiment had bidden her act as she had done. The men had not seen her, and so she had been provided with the opportunity to conceal herself in time. If she had not acted with really surprising promptitude and agility, she would have been forced to reveal her presence.

And, after all, she had only displayed a wonderful sense of precaution. Here were two strange men, talking with unusual earnestness, strolling in a quiet lane not far from the main roads, and obviously under the impression that they were quite alone.

There was a chance—a bare chance—that they were connected with the Turret House School affair, and that possibility was sufficient excuse for Eileen's action. She was to find at once that her instinct was not at fault.

The first words she heard were disconnected and almost inaudible.

“The car . . . hidden. Ready when we want it,” said one of the men. “Going to be no failure this time.”

Eileen breathed quickly between her little, parted lips.

“My dear chap, it's all plane sailing,” exclaimed the other man, the voice now clear and low. “The kid is in a separate room. The window is the fifth from the north corner of the main building. We simply can't make a mistake.”

The hidden listener heard the two men clamber over the gate, and when one of them spoke again the voice was once more indistinct and disconnected.

“Yes, I . . . two o'clock . . . best time for the job. If we are cautious
_____”

Eileen could hear no more.

But what she had heard was sufficiently conclusive evidence that she had not come to the Turret House on a fool's errand. Who the two men were, she had not the faintest idea. But she rapidly memorised the vital points in the conversation she had overheard.

“There is a motor-car hidden somewhere about here,” she told herself. “That, of course, will be used for the escape. The child is in a separate room, the window of which is the fifth from the north corner of the building, and the abduction is timed to take place at two o'clock. How splendid! I shall be able to upset the scheme at the very outset.”

She raised herself slightly, and was able to look over the edge of the hollow

trunk. The two men were just disappearing round a bend, in the opposite direction to the school. She had had no time to make note of their appearance, but that was of little account.

A moment later the men had disappeared, and Eileen lost no time in emerging from the tree. It was rather a task hauling herself up, for she was hampered somewhat by her skirts; but the girl was as active and nimble as a schoolboy, and in less than half a minute she was on the road once more. Without delaying a second, she hastened away, knowing full well that her presence had never been suspected.

As she walked she reviewed the situation, and told herself that good fortune had been with her. No doubt there was a certain amount of luck in the discovery, but it was largely due to the girl's own smartness and quickness of wit. If she had not acted on the very instant, the opportunity would have been lost. Eileen had proved herself to be very well worthy of Nelson Lee's trust.

Outwardly she appeared as calm as ever, but in her heart she was simmering with excitement. It was clear to her that if these two men were caught red-handed at their work they would probably be trapped into revealing the identity of their employer, and Sir Ambrose Shore would find himself in a tight corner.

Eileen met Miss Ridsdale in the main lobby of the school. She at once drew the headmistress into the latter's sitting-room, and asked if there had been any alteration regarding the sleeping quarters of Jack Hillford.

"Why, yes!" replied Miss Ridsdale. "He is to sleep in a separate room, next to my own."

"Is the window of that room the fifth from the north corner?"

The schoolmistress considered for a moment and then nodded.

"Yes, I suppose it would be," was her reply. "I told Sir Ambrose this morning that I should at least make that alteration."

"Have you mentioned the new arrangement to anybody else?"

"No; not a soul."

Eileen nodded quietly.

"Thank you," she said. "You'll forgive me if I hurry, won't you? I will explain my reasons for these questions later. I must hasten to the post-office without a moment's delay."

Half an hour later a long telegram in cipher had been dispatched to Nelson Lee.

CHAPTER V.

The Turret—Caught Red-Handed—An Amazing Surprise.

NELSON LEE nodded thoughtfully. "You have acted with splendid judgment, Miss Eileen," he said. "Frankly, I must admit that I had no idea that you would get on the track so quickly. I fancy there will be some exciting happenings to-night."

"Are you not surprised that another attempt is to be made so soon?"

"Well, I am—and I am not," replied the detective. "When you come to think of it, is it not the safest course for the kidnappers to pursue? They know well enough that the police are on the alert; that the police do not anticipate further activity so soon after the fiasco of last night."

"And the fact that they knew of the change regarding little Jack's sleeping-room proves that Sir Ambrose Shore is closely connected with the plot," said Eileen keenly. "Nobody else knew, so we have proof that Sir Ambrose

gave his men the information. But what motive can there be for the abduction?"

"Ah, we shall have to dive deep down to learn that!" Lee replied. "At present our object is to entrap the would-be kidnappers—the tools of Sir Ambrose."

The great detective was seated in the sitting-room at the Turret House. Eileen was the only other occupant of the apartment, for Nipper had gone off with Miss Ridsdale on a certain mission to another quarter of the school.

Nelson Lee had arrived twenty minutes before, and the time was now about eleven-thirty. The school was practically asleep, and nobody knew of the coming excitement except Miss Ridsdale and Eileen Dare. Children, servants, and teachers were all in bed.

Lee had journeyed to Leatherhead by car, and then he and Nipper had finished the journey on foot, entering the school grounds by a private path at the rear. The detective had no intention of warning the enemy that anything was afoot.

"Your learning of the plan was in no way accidental, my dear young lady," continued the detective. "I really believe I should have failed to discover anything had I been in a similar position. There was nothing to show that the two men were connected with the abduction affair, yet without hesitation you concealed yourself. I should probably have stood there until I had been seen, and would consequently have learned nothing. It must have been your feminine intuition, Miss Eileen—which places us poor male folk at a decided disadvantage."

The girl laughed softly.

"Perhaps I have brought you down for nothing," she remarked. "Perhaps the plan I overheard will be altered."

"I don't see why it should be," responded Lee. "Those fellows had no inkling that you were on the spot, and fondly imagine that everything will go smoothly. Ah, Nipper, what have you to report?"

The lad had at that moment entered the room, closely followed by Miss Ridsdale.

"The turret's the very place, gov'nor!" replied Nipper. "It's miles high, and can't possibly be reached from outside without a fire-escape; and there aren't any of those knocking about here. At the foot of the stone staircase there is a big door with a strong lock. If the kiddie's put in the turret, he'll be as safe as a convict in his cell at Dartmoor."

"If Miss Dare will come and help me, I will take a small camp bedstead up in the turret," said Miss Ridsdale. "The lad is asleep now, and there is no reason why he should know of the change. I can carry him up while asleep, and he will be none the wiser."

Eileen at once jumped to her feet, but Nelson Lee and Nipper volunteered to carry the camp bedstead up in the turret. The detective had an excellent reason for changing little Jack's sleeping apartment.

The detective and Nipper were going to be on the watch in the boy's original bedroom, so that they would catch the scoundrels red-handed. And the turret seemed to be the safest possible place in the whole school, since it had only one door and was extremely high. Once that door was locked, there was no chance of anyone entering.

Out in the lobby, Lee and Nipper found a small camp bedstead. Lee grasped the bedstead itself, and Nipper took possession of the mattress and bedclothes. Then they proceeded to the turret, Eileen leading the way with a lamp.

To reach the tower, it was necessary to traverse a long passage and then

cross the main schoolroom. At the farther end of this apartment was a heavy door, giving on to a very small space, which was windowless and perfectly dry. It was, in fact, the foot of the tower.

Eileen opened a heavy oaken door which was set into the brickwork, and a flight of circular stone steps was revealed. They led upwards steeply.

There was not a single window in the whole of the staircase--not even a slit. But before the top was reached, Nelson Lee advised Eileen to extinguish the light. There were windows in the turret itself, and the detective did not wish the enemy to guess what was afoot. It was more than probable that somebody was on the watch.

The night was starlight, and it was quite possible for Lee and Nipper to set the bedstead in position in the dim gloom. It was a small apartment, perfectly square except where the staircase door projected at one corner. It was bare of furniture, but perfectly dry.

There were two windows, facing one another. These were small and heavy, and were fitted with effective catches. Above, in the ceiling, a small skylight could be seen, and this, too, was secured by a catch.

The ceiling was very low, and by standing upon the bed Lee could easily reach the skylight catch. He slipped it back, pushed the framework up, and lifted himself so that he could gaze out on to the roof.

This was flat, and a stone parapet, two feet high, surrounded it. Close against the skylight, the unused flag-pole was fixed.

Lee lowered himself again, and left the skylight open a matter of three inches. Eileen and Miss Ridsdale had descended again, and Nipper was gazing out of one of the windows on to the dark grounds.

"Well, gov'nor, I'd like to meet the chap who could kidnap Jack Hillford to-night!" exclaimed Nipper. "Nothing but a fly could climb to this turret, for the walls are smooth, and there's not even a creeper. And it's quite impossible for anybody to get up from inside."

"Oh, we needn't have any fears!" Nelson Lee said confidently. "As you say, Nipper, this turret is quite inaccessible. Moreover, we have only just decided to make the change, and the kidnappers cannot possibly know of it."

The detective and Nipper descended, and within ten minutes Miss Ridsdale had carried the sleeping boy into his fresh quarters, and had left him slumbering peacefully, unconscious of the change.

Lee then insisted that the schoolmistress and Eileen should go straight to bed. He and Nipper would remain on guard, waiting for the visitors. But Eileen demurred. She, in turn, insisted upon a different course.

"I don't think we can be too cautious, Mr. Lee," said the girl quietly. "I am not going to bed. I am going to take up my post just this side of the great door which opens upon the turret stairs. Then, if our enemies have got wind of the change, I shall be able to give the alarm at once. To enter the turret from outside is, of course, impossible."

Nelson Lee hardly liked keeping Eileen up through the night; but her suggestion was an excellent one, and he knew that she was determined to carry it out. A comfortable chair was placed against the staircase door. A small lamp rested upon a wicker-table, and here Eileen sat reading. She did not suppose for a moment that anything would happen; but, as she had said, precaution was advisable.

The situation was now interesting.

Miss Ridsdale had gone to bed, and Nelson Lee and Nipper were waiting in the bedroom which had been allotted to little Jack. They were in total darkness, and the window was invitingly open a little. When the kidnappers came, they would find themselves accorded a hearty welcome.

Not a light gleamed from any window, and the school was perfectly quiet

and still. It was not really necessary for Lee and Nipper to be on guard until two o'clock, but it was far better to be prepared for any emergency.

A second attempt to kidnap Jack Hillford was to be made, and Nelson Lee was determined to frustrate it at any cost. And this time the scoundrels would not escape. The trap was well set.

Lee had dismissed the thought of obtaining police assistance. The enemy would certainly have seen something, or heard something, for it was morally certain they were keenly on the watch, and at the least sign of unusual activity the projected scheme would be abandoned.

As it was, the preparations had been made quietly and in secret.

One o'clock boomed out from a far distant church. The night was still, and Lee and Nipper heard the chime distinctly. Neither of them spoke, and the vigil continued.

That hour between one and two seemed almost interminable. Nipper was quite sure that the half-hour was about to strike when the quarter chimes came distinctly to his ears. Waiting is always a trying job; but when one is sitting in a pitch-dark room, waiting for an unknown intruder, the suspense is greatly intensified.

As it happened, the eagerly awaited visitors put in an appearance just before two o'clock. Both Nelson Lee and Nipper stiffened tensely as a slight sound came from outside. It was almost inaudible, but enough to give the waiting pair warning.

Two minutes later, the head and shoulders of a man were outlined against the starry sky. He pushed the sash up with extreme caution, and then stepped into the room.

"Now!" murmured Nelson Lee, with hissing breath.

He and Nipper sprang forward at the same second. This was no abrupt attack. They had laid their plans carefully beforehand, and each knew exactly what to do. Consequently the intruder had not the slightest chance of evading the attack.

Nipper brought a thick blanket over his head in one swift movement, and effectually smothered any outcry which the man might have made. At the same time, Nelson Lee jerked the intruder's hands together and snapped a pair of handcuffs over his wrists.

It was a neat capture.

Not a sound was made, and before the fellow could recover from his surprise he found himself manacled, gagged, and thrust into a corner, with bound ankles. Both Lee and Nipper were somewhat warm after their exertions.

"We will wait now, young 'un," panted Lee softly. "The other gentleman is sure to come up in a few minutes, when he finds this beauty doesn't reappear. I am sure he has not taken alarm."

"We'll give him beans!" murmured Nipper generously.

The detective's surmise was correct. Five minutes passed, and then the waiting pair gathered themselves together again. A sound had come from outside the wide-open window. The captured man's companion was coming up to investigate the cause of the delay.

His capture was as simple as the first. He blundered right into the trap. But this time there was no necessity for silence. The very instant the fellow's head and shoulders appeared, Lee and Nipper dashed forward and literally yanked the man into the room. In next to no time he found himself in a similar predicament to that of his confederate.

"Phew! Warm work while it lasted, but we've got 'em!" said Lee comfortably. "Let's have some light on the subject, Nipper. I don't think there are any more of these gentry knocking about, so it is safe to light up."

Nipper struck a match and lit a big duplex lamp. Then he and his master examined their prisoners. They were both smallish men, roughly attired, and with frightened-looking eyes and pale faces. Obviously, they were completely unnerved.

Lee had no intention of questioning them at this hour. One of the cellars had already been prepared for their reception, and they were immediately bundled off to this unsavoury region to await the arrival of the police.

The cellar was small, and Lee had fitted a couple of strong bolts to the door. Imprisoned here, handcuffed and bound about the ankles, there was no possibility of their escaping without outside assistance—and that was not likely to come.

“Come, Nipper,” said Lee, as he shot home the bolts, “we will go along to Eileen and tell her what has occurred!”

They were soon at the foot of the tower. Eileen was reading, and had apparently heard nothing unusual, for she looked eagerly and with some amount of anxiety as Nelson Lee and Nipper appeared.

“You have not caught me dozing at my post, Mr. Lee,” she said, with a bright smile. “Has anything happened? Surely it is past two?”

“Just seven minutes after the hour,” replied Lee. “Our visitors were early, Miss Eileen. We have taken them in, and have given them a night’s lodging. But I am afraid they will find the cellar somewhat uncongenial.”

“Oh, how perfectly splendid!” cried the girl. “You have captured them?”

“As easily as netting a couple of butterflies!” chuckled Nipper. “They’re about the most surprised pair of rogues in England, miss. You seem to have been taking things comfortably!”

Eileen laughed.

“Yes, I have been out of it all!” she replied regretfully. “Things have been frightfully dull here. I didn’t hear a sound.”

Nelson Lee unlocked the big staircase door.

“I shall not be a moment,” he said. “I have remembered that the child’s bed is right beneath the skylight. If a shower comes on, he will be somewhat sprinkled. I will close the skylight and open one of the windows.”

The detective mounted the stairs, feeling very elated. The capture had been effected without a single hitch, and there was every reason for him to congratulate himself. He entered the turret, and smiled as he glanced at the bed.

“Asleep!” he murmured. “It is just as well——”

Nelson Lee paused suddenly, with a short, gasping cry.

Then he bent down swiftly over the bed. The clothes were in confusion, and thrown right back. The child was not there!

Little Jack Hillford had vanished!

CHAPTER VI.

A Baffling Mystery—No Clue—Another Shock.

FOR several moments Nelson Lee was so utterly amazed that he was hardly capable of action; then, with a hoarse intake of breath, he whipped out an electric-torch and flashed it round the bare apartment. It was absolutely empty except for the bed.

“Good heavens!” gasped the detective. “What can this mean? I—I—— The child has been kidnapped, after all! Am I dreaming, or is this actual fact? He has gone, and yet there is no means by which he could have been taken.”

He glanced underneath the bed, having a faint suspicion that the youngster might be hiding. But he soon satisfied himself that he was the only occupant of the room. Then he made another surprising discovery.

The windows were fastened as before, but the skylight was secured, too! The glass frame was in position, and the catch was tight home in its place. It was obvious in a moment that nobody had left the turret by means of the skylight.

The kidnapper, whoever he was, must have entered the turret from the staircase; and it was equally certain that he had left that way. But Eileen Dare had been on guard the whole time!

Lee snapped his teeth together as a suspicion came into his mind, and he quickly descended to the bottom of the tower. He was altogether startled, and inwardly furious. In spite of all his precautions, little Jack had been spirited away.

He found Nipper and Eileen chatting easily, discussing, in fact, the book which the girl had been reading. Nipper, looking up, saw in a moment, by the tense expression on his master's face, that something was amiss.

"Hallo, guv'nor, what's wrong?" asked the lad quickly.

"I am not quite sure," was Lee's quiet reply. "Perhaps Miss Eileen will be able to suggest an explanation. The child is not in the turret!"

There was a silence for several seconds; then Eileen smiled.

"You are joking surely, Mr. Lee?" she asked.

"I am not joking. Little Jack has disappeared," Lee replied. "Moreover, he left the turret by means of the staircase. He must have done so, since there is no other exit. Can you explain, Miss Dare?"

The girl seemed dazed for a moment.

"Do you seriously mean this, Mr. Lee?" she panted. "The child gone! Oh, it is impossible! I have been here ever since you left me, soon after midnight. And the door has been locked!"

"Great Scott!" gasped Nipper. "What's happened?"

"That is what I wish to find out," was the detective's answer. "Did you leave your post for any reason, Miss Eileen? Did you leave——"

"No, no! I have been here every second!"

"Then there can be only one explanation. You fell asleep, and slumbered while the abduction took place. I do not blame you, for your vigil was extremely lonely."

Eileen's eyes flashed.

"Mr. Lee!" she exclaimed indignantly.

The detective was somewhat taken aback by the girl's tone.

"How can you suggest such a thing?" went on Eileen. "Oh, it is unfair of you! You left me here, guarding the staircase. You trusted me to watch. Do you think I should betray that trust by falling asleep at my post? It is cruel of you to think of such a possibility!"

Nelson Lee felt somewhat uncomfortable.

"But perhaps you dozed unknowingly."

"Oh, how can you say that?" cried Eileen, her large eyes filled with excited indignation. "Am I no better than a child that I cannot be trusted? I have not dozed for a single second! I have been wide awake, and not a living soul has been near me during the whole time of your absence—not a suspicious sound has reached my ears!"

The detective was impressed by Eileen's vehement words, and he felt rather ashamed of his unjust suspicions.

"I am sorry, Miss Dare," he said quietly. "I apologise. I should have known you better. I believe you implicitly when you say that you have not slept. But what can be the explanation of this amazing puzzle? The child has gone, and yet—— But come and see for yourself?"

Eileen and Nipper quickly followed Lee up into the turret. They looked round in astonishment and something akin to awe. There was no getting over the obvious fact—Jack Hillford had disappeared.

But the mystery was simply baffling.

Nobody had entered by the staircase, and nobody had left that way. The stone staircase was the only means of exit, and they were narrow and without opening until the bottom was reached. And Eileen had guarded the door the whole time.

To enter or leave the turret by means of the interior door was an impossibility. And yet, was it not an impossibility also to enter or leave by exterior methods? The walls of the tower were bare and smooth, and no ladder could reach to that height—no ladder, at least, in the neighbourhood.

“I must frankly admit that I cannot read this astonishing riddle,” said Nelson Lee quietly. “When we left the child the skylight was partially open. Now it is closed and fastened. That proves that the intruder left the turret by means of the staircase. Exit any other way was impossible.”

“But anybody didn’t leave by the staircase!” protested Eileen Dare. “Or, if they did, there must be a secret entrance this side of the big door. That, indeed, can be the only explanation, Mr. Lee.”

“By gum! I wonder if it’s possible, sir?” asked Nipper.

“Well, I don’t think it is,” Lee replied. “But I shall certainly make a most careful investigation. Supposing, for one moment, that there is another entrance, how did the kidnappers learn of the change in the boy’s sleeping quarters? And what of the two men who we captured? I am beginning to think that I have been cleverly tricked.”

“You mean that those two men came purposely in order to distract your attention while the real abduction was taking place,” suggested Eileen shrewdly. “Oh, but they would not allow themselves to be captured for the sake of that! I—I hardly know what to think. It is all so amazing.”

Nelson Lee gripped his electric-torch.

“I will make an examination,” he said, “and then visit our two prisoners. If a trick has been worked, they will certainly know of it, and their manner will betray them. Upon my soul, the whole thing is very disconcerting.”

The detective lost no time in getting to work. He examined every inch of the turret, and then slowly descended the stone circular steps. But the very formation of them and the solidity of the walls told him that there was no such thing as a secret entrance. The only way of getting into the turret was by means of the heavy door at the bottom, and Eileen had been on guard at this door the whole time.

What could be the explanation?

Lee was positive now that the girl had not slept at her post. But she had heard nothing—seen nothing. The whole thing seemed uncanny and unreal. It seemed as though the child had been literally spirited away.

Yet there must be some reasonable solution. There must be. On the surface the whole affair appeared to be singularly mysterious. But Lee was sure that a comparatively simple explanation would be arrived at after careful inquiry.

As he walked through the schoolroom, with the intention of visiting the cellar, he saw a glow beyond the doorway, and the next moment Miss Ridsdale appeared. The good lady was fully dressed, and seemed anxious and perturbed.

“I couldn’t sleep, Mr. Lee,” said said nervously. “Have you secured those two horrible men? I somehow feel that——”

“I had better be frank with you, Miss Ridsdale,” interjected Lee grimly. “The child has been kidnapped, in spite of my elaborate precautions for his safety.”

And he told her of the astounding discovery. The head-mistress was greatly upset, and confirmed Lee's conviction that there was no secret way into the turret. She was inclined to be hysterical, and declared that she had dreaded something of this sort.

While she went on to the turret, Lee himself descended to the cellar. And here he received another stunning shock. He had certainly not been prepared for the discovery he made.

The cellar door was wide open, the bolts drawn, and the prisoners had escaped!

Nelson Lee uttered a short, bitter laugh as he flashed his light about the bare cellar. It was clear to him in a moment that there was a traitor in the school. These men had been deliberately released. But by whom?

It was a tangled knot to unravel. The deeper Lee probed, the more complex the problem became. He made his way up to the turret with a firm tread, his eyes keen, his muscles taut. Difficulties, no matter how seemingly insurmountable, always acted like a tonic to the great detective. He was more than ever eager to go forward with his investigations.

He found Eileen talking excitedly to Miss Ridsdale and Nipper.

"I have another shock for you," said Lee quietly. "The two prisoners are not in the cellar. They have both been released."

Nipper gasped.

"Oh, my hat!" he blurted out. "Do you mean to say— Great Scott, gov'nor! What the dickens has been happening? I'm beginning to feel dizzy with all these surprises?"

"What do you mean—'they have both been released'?" asked Eileen keenly.

"I mean that they could not have escaped without assistance," was the detective's reply. "There is a traitor amongst us, Miss Ridsdale. I can understand now how the enemy obtained the information regarding little Jack's change of sleeping quarters."

"A traitor?" repeated the head-mistress. "Who—who could be a traitor here?"

"Have you engaged any new servants lately?"

Miss Ridsdale started.

"Why, yes. The scullery-maid has only been here ten days," she replied, with a catch in her voice. "She does not seem very suitable for the work, but she has excellent references——"

"My dear lady, references are the easiest things in the world to fake," said Nelson Lee. "The scullery-maid, probably enough, is the cause of all these misfortunes. Will you please go along to her bedroom and ascertain if she is there?"

Miss Ridsdale went off, flustered and excited. And Nelson Lee, turning to Eileen, saw a keen light in her wonderful brown eyes.

"Well, we must not be glum," said the detective cheerfully. "These setbacks only add a zest to the work. Have you anything to tell me, Miss Eileen? I think I can detect a certain eagerness in your manner."

"I believe I know how the kidnapper entered and left, Mr. Lee," replied Eileen quietly. "That is all."

CHAPTER VII.

The Loose Catch—How It Was Done—A Vain Search.

BEFORE Nelson Lee could make any comment, Eileen pointed to the skylight. Miss Ridsdale had left her lamp in the turret, so there was plenty of light.

"That's how the child was taken, Mr. Lee," said the girl.

"By the skylight, you mean? But the catch is securely home——"

"Will you please open the glass frame, and then close it?"

Nelson Lee got up on to the bed, and grasped the iron rod which projected downwards for about eighteen inches. With his other hand he pushed back the catch, and opened the skylight.

When he closed it again a very simple thing happened; a very ordinary thing, to tell the truth. But it was extremely significant, all the same. The metal catch—merely a common cast-iron affair, fixed to the woodwork by one screw—swung round, and fastened itself! The skylight was placed at such an angle that the heavy part of the iron handle caused the catch to drop into position automatically.

"Ah, I understand!" said Lee. "After leaving, the man closed the frame, and this happened. At first sight, therefore, it appeared as though nobody could possibly have left by means of the skylight."

"That's all very well, gov'nor," objected Nipper. "But, as I was saying to Miss Eileen, the rotter who pinched the kiddie couldn't have flown on to the roof of this turret! Kidnappers don't have wings, do they?"

"I admit the affair is puzzling, but perhaps a careful search will enlighten us," replied the detective smoothly. "So far as we know, there is no possible method of reaching the roof of this tower. But, since the child has disappeared, it proves that our conclusions were at fault."

Lee was about to climb through the skylight when Miss Ridsdale reappeared. The good lady was puffing laboriously, for her comfortable figure was not quite up to the task of mounting and re-mounting the steep turret steps.

"Mercy on us, Mr. Lee!" she gasped breathlessly. "Emma's gone!"

"Oh! Emma's gone, has she?" was the detective's comment. "Well, I am not surprised in the least. In fact, I fully expected to learn that Emma had taken her departure. It was the scullery-maid who betrayed us."

There was scarcely a doubt on that point. Emma had been a confederate of the kidnappers, and had sought the situation solely for her own purposes. In the previous affair she had not shown her hand. But to-night it was obvious that a traitor had been at work—and so the scullery-maid had thought it wise to disappear.

Lee had certainly never considered the possibility of a spy being within the school. And Emma, who was a woman of twenty-eight, declared Miss Ridsdale, had obviously been keenly on the alert. She had sneaked outside the sitting-room door, probably, and had overheard the plan to place the child in the turret.

It was even possible that she had an arrangement with her confederates outside, and had at once informed them of the sudden change. And the original plan had been strictly adhered to in order to bluff the detective. While he and Nipper had been capturing the two strangers, a third had entered the turret and had effected the abduction.

There was something daring in the plot, and Lee half admired it. He reasoned that the scoundrels had known that there were no police present, and that even if they were captured, the female confederate would release them. Well, she had released them. The handcuffs had been of regulation pattern, and could have been easily removed with the aid of a key.

But, from the very fact that the fresh scheme had been successful, it was evident that the gang were a pretty clever lot. It was something of a miracle, even now, how they had managed to reach the turret roof.

The only thing was to learn the method which had been employed.

Nelson Lee quickly hauled himself through the open framework out on

to the roof. Nipper followed, and then Eileen, below, calmly asked for a "hand up."

"But my dear young lady!" protested Lee. "This roof is no place——"

"Oh, I sha'n't topple off!" smiled Eileen prettily.

Both Nelson Lee and Nipper assisted the girl, and in a moment she was standing beside them on the leads. The first flush of dawn was showing in the clear sky of the east, and before long it would be quite light. Everything was still, and the air was beautiful up at that height.

Nelson Lee, however, was not thinking of the purity of the air. He knew that it was useless rushing off on an aimless pursuit, for he had not the slightest clue as to which direction the kidnappers had taken.

It would be better to solve the present problem. He and Nipper leaned over the parapet on all four sides, one after the other. Three sides were sheer to the ground, without enough hold for a monkey. The walls were perfectly flat, without crevices, and devoid of window-ledges and other projections likely to assist an ascent. But it was clear, at a glance, that it was a waste of time to consider such an impossibility.

The fourth side was not sheer to the ground. Looking down, Lee gazed upon the roof of the low schoolroom. But the impracticability of an ascent was as apparent here as on the other walls.

"Rummy, isn't it, gov'nor?" observed Nipper, in a puzzled voice.

"It is almost uncanny, my lad. These four walls are absolutely unscalable, and a ladder is out of the question. Only a fire-escape could reach to this roof. I confess that I am completely mystified."

And then Eileen spoke. She had kept to the centre of the roof all this time, close by the flagstaff.

"What do you make of this, Mr. Lee?" she asked quietly.

There was something in her tone which caused Lee and Nipper to turn to her quickly. She was provided with an electric torch, and she was directing the brilliant beam full upon the weather-stained flagpole.

At the point thus illuminated the detective at once saw that the wood was chafed somewhat, as though by constant rubbing. The marks were quite near the roof, and consequently almost at the bottom of the pole.

Eileen altered the direction of her light, and played it upon the leads just below. There, quite plainly, were a number of fine wood-crums.

"By James!" muttered Nelson Lee tensely.

"There has been a rope round this pole," Eileen remarked. "And the fact that these wood-crums are present is clear evidence that the rope chafed the pole quite recently—during the night, in fact."

"You're right, miss! You've hit it sure enough!" ejaculated Nipper.

Lee, with his own electric torch, had left the pole, and was making a round of the parapet. And at one point he paused, and remained still. His companions went across, and needed no telling what the detective had discovered.

The stonework was smooth and green with age. But just here, for a space of three inches, a white mark showed, and when Lee touched it, a fine powder was left on his fingers.

"This is where the rope chafed the stonework," said Lee quietly. "Of course, the method of ascent and descent is clear enough now——. But wait. Is it clear? There was no rope tied to the flagpole when I took a look at the roof previous to the abduction."

"Are you sure, gov'nor?" asked Nipper.

"I am positive. I saw the pole clearly, and I should certainly have seen the rope if it had been then secured. Now, we have a fresh problem. How in the name of commonsense was the rope fixed?"

"Oh, dear! And I thought we had learned the secret," said Eileen,

with a pout of disappointment. "It seems that we are as puzzled as ever. Nobody on earth could have coiled a rope over the pole from the ground."

Lee shook his head.

"And even so, is it possible for a man to descend a rope—sheer, don't forget—with a fairly heavy child in his arms? But I am forgetting. He probably lowered the child first."

"But the rope—how was it fixed?" murmured Eileen intently.

Nipper had been very thoughtful, and was gazing out straight ahead. The early light was stronger now, and the trees and surrounding country were quite visible. And suddenly Nipper uttered a loud yell.

"Look at that!" he roared excitedly.

"My dear Nipper, what on earth——"

"I'll bet a quid that's the way the trick was done!" exclaimed Nipper. "Don't you see, gov'nor, don't you see, miss? That telegraph post! It's got iron steps all the way up, and it's absolutely in a line with the flagpole and the chafed parapet. One of those blighters climbed to the top of that post and slung the rope across—lassoed, sort of thing."

"Oh, it could not be done," exclaimed Eileen.

"I am not so sure—I believe it could," was Lee's comment. "In fact, I am inclined to think that Nipper's suggestion is very near the mark. The telegraph post is fairly close, and the summit of it is on a lower level than this tower. Nevertheless, it would be quite a simple task for an experienced man to sling a double line over this pole here. He then made the rope fast to the telegraph post and swung himself across. Having got back in safety, with the child on his back, he merely untied the rope, and it naturally became free."

The trio were silent for a few moments. The suggestion was a startling one enough—but possible. Indeed, under the circumstances it seemed as though no other explanation would be forthcoming. The telegraph pole was comparatively close to the tower—for the latter, it must be remembered, was at the extremity of the building, and bordering the road. The drive led round in a semi-circle to the gates from the front door.

And, as Nipper pointed out, the post was in a direct line with the flagstaff and the chafed stonework.

Without delay, Nelson Lee and his companions descended into the turret room—Eileen going first. It was a curious position for such a dainty girl to be in, this early dawn search for a clue. But Eileen was quite different to other girls; it seemed natural that she should be there.

She insisted upon accompanying Lee and Nipper outside, and in a very short time the three were at the foot of the telegraph post. Here, at once, were positive signs of recent tramping. The explanation of the mystery was laid bare. The circumstances must have been as Lee had outlined. The man—presumably small, active and wiry—had climbed the pole by means of the iron steps, and had, from the top, slung a thin, strong rope over the flagpole on the turret. The line, when drawn taut, could not have been horizontal, but the journey across was possible of accomplishment. The fellow must have secured the child to his back on the return journey.

"To have accomplished such a performance a clever acrobat was necessary," said Nelson Lee grimly. "No ordinary man could have done it. That, in a way, narrows down the inquiry slightly. We have got to look for an expert acrobat—a singular gymnast. But we have no inkling as to the direction the scoundrel and his confederates took, and so we are at a decided disadvantage."

Without delay, however, Nelson Lee and Nipper set off at a brisk walk for Leatherhead. Here they got out their car, and set off on a tour of

the district. They scoured every road, and made dozens of inquiries. But their efforts were fruitless, they were not rewarded by a single clue. On this occasion the kidnappers had been entirely successful and had got completely away.

At about breakfast-time the pair found themselves near the Turret House School again, and as they drove up, through the trees, they observed a large motor-car standing on the drive. Lee at once recognised it as Sir Ambrose Shore's, and he came to a quick decision.

"I don't think it would be wise for us to show ourselves, Nipper," murmured Lee. "I don't want Sir Ambrose to know that we have been engaged upon the case. Neither Miss Ridsdale or Eileen will mention our part in the night's work, I am sure."

"But those two blighters who were imprisoned——"

"They know us, yes. But they have not been able to report to Sir Ambrose yet," said Lee. "For as long as possible I want the baronet to remain in ignorance of our activity."

So Nelson Lee opened the throttle and sped right past. Then he made straight for London.

Meanwhile, Sir Ambrose Shore was talking with Miss Ridsdale and Eileen. He had never met the girl in the old days—the days of the Haverfield affair at Birmingham—and so did not know who she really was.

He acted his part superbly—but he was acting. Eileen's quick eyes detected that immediately. He had been brought down by a telegram from Miss Ridsdale, and affected to be terribly upset and furious at the disclosure of the facts.

But there was only one point of his conversation which interested Eileen Dare. And that, in itself, did not seem of much importance. He merely mentioned that during the evening he intended starting for his Yorkshire residence, and that any communications were to be sent to him there.

But there was an expression in Eileen's eyes—a look of keen determination and fixity of purpose—which told that she had come to a decision.

CHAPTER VIII.

Eileen's Plan—The Truth—The Disgrace of Sir Ambrose—Conclusion.

"**P**ERHAPS you will think I am impulsive and impatient, Mr. Lee, but I am determined. The only way now is to act drastically and promptly."

It was Eileen Dare who spoke; her voice was very calm, but it had a ring of deadly earnestness about it. Nelson Lee carefully knocked the ash from his cigar and slowly nodded.

"After all, this is your case, Miss Eileen," he replied gravely. "I know that you are quite capable of dealing with it effectively. But I urge you to do nothing rash; I do not like to think of you running into needless danger."

The girl laughed quietly.

"Oh, I sha'n't do that," she answered. "After all, what danger is there? I know that Sir Ambrose is leaving for Yorkshire this evening, and as soon as I heard that I came to a decision. Late to-night I shall disguise myself—oh, I can do that all right—and enter his library. If possible, I want to get hold of Sir Ambrose's private diary. He may have taken it with him, but it is just as likely that he has not. In any case it is a chance."

"A rather slim chance, I'm afraid. Personally, I do not think there is much prospect of the diary being there. But if you do lay hold of it I believe you will be rewarded. There is bound to be a clue of some sort hidden between its covers."

"Besides, there are other reasons," went on Eileen. "Even if I do not find the diary I may possibly come across something else which will be a clue—anything which will serve as an end to expose Sir Ambrose's villainy."

Eileen was very determined. She had plenty of pluck, and was as daring as Nelson Lee himself. Truth to tell, the idea rather appealed to her, and she was pleased with the prospect.

It was now fairly late in the afternoon, and Lee and Eileen were sitting in the former's consulting-room at Gray's Inn Road. The police, of course, had got busy almost immediately after Lee had left the Turret House. But so far they had been unsuccessful in their search.

A certain mysterious motor-car had been traced to a certain point, but word had come over the 'phone from Inspector Fuller, a short time ago, that it had been quite lost sight of.

Sir Ambrose had offered a large reward for the child's recovery. But this, Lee was convinced, was merely a matter of elementary bluff. It did not deceive the famous detective for an instant.

The affair, which had seemed likely to be a complete success, had taken an unpleasant turn. Lee had hoped to prevent the abduction, and to capture the scoundrels who were paid to do the work. But, owing to entirely unforeseen circumstances, there had been a grave hitch.

And it was in order to remedy this state of affairs that Eileen had determined upon her present course.

She was cheerful enough, and optimistic. Somehow, she had an idea that her mission would be successful. It gave her intense joy to think of Sir Ambrose Shore being humiliated into the dust. There was nothing vindictive in the girl's nature—who was one of the sunniest, sweet-tempered girls in existence—but she knew that Sir Ambrose, and men like him, were responsible for the disgrace and death of her dear father.

It was only right—it was only justice—that they should suffer according to their deserts. The law could not touch them; but Eileen was working outside the law. She would expose them, one by one, and reveal them to the world at their true worth.

At twenty minutes to twelve that night a well-set-up youth walked briskly along a quiet avenue in the St. John's Wood district. He was rather small, and was smartly dressed. A soft felt hat adorned his head, and his features were sunburnt and well-formed.

If this youth had come face to face with Nelson Lee it would have been several minutes before the detective recognised in him no less a person than Miss Eileen Dare. Any other man would not have detected the girl's identity at all.

Eileen looked the part to the life. And she not only looked it, but she acted to perfection. She had always had a natural talent for make-up and acting. At Birmingham she had often enough taken part in amateur theatricals, both dramatic and operatic. And she had always been one of the stars of the amateur "crowd."

She had many ideas of her own, too, regarding make-up. One or two of these she had laughingly mentioned to Nelson Lee. But the detective had been not only astonished, but greatly pleased; for the girl's ideas were sound and solid.

She had told her aunt that she was venturing on an expedition that night, but that she would return safely. Before long Eileen's aunt would discover that this was but the first of many exciting expeditions.

The girl set about her task in a business-like manner. She arrived outside the large residence occupied by Sir Ambrose Shore, and walked straight past without a pause, and without a glance in its direction. Earlier, when on a tour of inspection, she had seen that a small mews led round to the rear of the garden. She turned into this little passage-way, and was sure that her action had been unobserved.

The mews was quite deserted, and presently Eileen paused beneath a fairly high wall. That wall would have puzzled many agile men. But, with a light spring, the girl grasped the top and drew herself up with perfect ease. She was slight, and her muscles were as tough as whipcord—the result of continuous athletic and outdoor exercise. There was not a girl in the whole of England in a finer physical condition than Eileen.

She dropped lightly into the garden, and made her way quietly through some bushes until she stood upon the edge of a perfectly kept lawn. The night was very black, for clouds obscured the stars, and there was a feeling of rain in the air.

And she paused abruptly, rather astonished.

She had come here under the firm impression that the house was deserted—for she knew that when Sir Ambrose left for the country he took his servants with him. And yet, clearly and distinctly, the French windows of Sir Ambrose's study were outlined in clear light.

The night was mild—almost hot. And in consequence the French windows were open. She could see that thick muslin curtains covered them, and from where she was standing she could not see into the room.

Curious to know what could be the meaning of the light, she softly crossed the lawn and approached the window. As she drew near she distinctly heard voices raised in anger, and recognised one of them as belonging to the baronet.

“So he did not go to Yorkshire, after all!” Eileen murmured. “Oh, what a nuisance! This will mean another delay!”

A more honourable girl than Eileen did not exist, and, under ordinary circumstances, she would never have dreamed of listening to a conversation not intended for her ears. But this was different—she was out to learn the truth of the Turret House kidnapping affair. And the slightest possibility of success made her make up her mind instantly. This was not eavesdropping at all.

With great caution she crept quite close, and from the cover of a bush she was able to see into the room through the muslin curtains, and could hear every word that was being spoken. This was an unexpected surprise, but Eileen had grasped the situation on the instant.

“No, Bridger. You won't get a penny!” Sir Ambrose was saying hotly. “What do you take me for? Do you suppose I am going to be blackmailed by a hound like you?”

There was a furious exclamation from Sir Ambrose's companion.

“You can call it blackmail if you like—I suppose it is blackmail!” he exclaimed harshly. “But you wouldn't like the truth to be published, would you? I don't know much about this kidnapping business, but I'll bet a sovereign you wouldn't like the affair to be closely inquired into.”

“You are at liberty to do what you please,” mocked Sir Ambrose.

Eileen quivered as she listened. What she had already heard confirmed her suspicions, and she felt that much was to be revealed to her now.

"Perhaps you'd like me to send a report to the papers, telling them who the child really is?" said Bridger, with a grim look. "It would look nice, wouldn't it—eh? You are engaged to be married to the daughter of an earl, and you're supposed to be a bachelor. What would the earl say if he found that you had placed your own child at a private school under a false name and had then plotted for his abduction?"

"Look here, Bridger, I've had about enough of this——"

"Well, you're going to have some more!" snarled the other. "I know your game, you cur! The story's not much in itself, but it's sufficiently disgraceful to be suppressed. That boy, Jack Hillford, is your own son—as I have good reason to know, seeing that I brought him from Jamaica not long back."

"What's the idea of this, you fool? Don't I know it?"

"Perhaps you do; but I'm just reminding you," exclaimed Bridger fiercely. "I swear to you that if you don't part to the extent I have named, I'll publish the whole miserable story. I'll make it known far and wide that you went to Jamaica several years ago and married a girl of a humble family—British, right enough, and respectable people, too. I knew them well, for I've lived in Jamaica longer than you. You're a cur, Sir Ambrose Shore, that's what you are! Three months after marrying the girl you returned to England on a hollow pretext and never went near her again. You deserted her, basely and cruelly, leaving her without a penny, and without any address for her to write to. That would look nice in print, wouldn't it?"

"If you dare——"

"Oh, I'll dare a lot if necessary," went on Bridger, with a mocking laugh. "You see, I've got the story all pat—all ready to write out. A year after that you succeeded to the title, and you completely forgot your humble wife in Jamaica. You ignored her, and didn't care whether she lived or died—much less what happened to your child. For years I couldn't get out of Jamaica because I hadn't the money, but a couple of months ago I was sent here on business for my firm. And, as you have good reason to know, I brought the kid with me, and found that you had just become engaged to an earl's daughter! You'd become engaged when you didn't know whether your true wife was dead or not! What would the earl say to that?"

Sir Ambrose made no answer, but Eileen could see he was simply speechless with fury. This tale of the past was not palatable at all.

"Yes, I brought your child, and I brought news that your wife was dead. You bribed me to hush everything up—you invented a story that the kid was the son of a former valet. You did that well, I'll admit. But, Sir Ambrose Shore, that kid is actually the heir to your title and fortune. Do you think I can't see through your game? You're going to marry this big pot's daughter, and it's impossible for you to acknowledge your son. To do so would be the breaking off of your engagement and the wrecking of your social ideas. So you put the kid into a school and have now had him kidnapped—and mean to have him put away probably. Well, I don't see why I shouldn't make a bit out of it. I know all this, and I'm going to profit by it——"

Sir Ambrose could stand no more of it. In a flash he had turned and picked up the poker. The heavy weapon would have descended with deadly force but for an interruption which occurred. There was a sharp crack, a tingle of glass, and Sir Ambrose dropped the poker with a howl of agony. A deep scar showed on his forearm.

Eileen had fired her little revolver from outside!

With a roar of fury the baronet dashed to the window, and the next second the disguised girl was gripped fiercely and pulled into the room. It seemed as though matters were going very hard with her.

* * * * *

But rescue came from a surprising quarter.

The next minute Nelson Lee and Nipper dashed into the library. But how came it that they were there? As a matter of fact, Lee, knowing the risky nature of Eileen's plan, had decided to secrete himself in the baronet's garden beforehand. It was the detective's intention to watch Eileen come and to guard her. If anything untoward occurred, he and Nipper would be on the spot to assist her. At the sound of that revolver shot they dashed out of their concealment and were just in time to save the girl from a brutally murderous attack.

In two minutes Sir Ambrose was rendered helpless; and Bridger, seeing how things had gone, was only too willing to testify to the whole truth.

In spite of his pretended ignorance of the subject when talking to Sir Ambrose, Bridger knew quite a lot. The baronet's dupes were a troupe of circus performers, with whom he had become acquainted a short time before—three men and a woman. These people had agreed, for a large sum, to kidnap the child and take him with them to America—where they would very soon cause his death.

The exposure crumpled Sir Ambrose up completely; he was unable to deny a single impeachment. Straight away he was taken by Nelson Lee to the police-station, and in due course the newspapers were full of the great scandal.

Sir Ambrose Shore was socially and financially ruined; for his business associates would have nothing further to do with him, and his numerous creditors swamped everything up. His downfall was utter and complete.

He was not allowed to have the custody of his child—which was recovered from the circus troupe at Liverpool, just as they were going aboard a liner. The whole four were placed under arrest.

During Sir Ambrose's trial he succumbed to an attack of apoplexy. He died naturally, but solely owing to his own villainy.

Eileen Dare had dealt successfully, indeed, with the first of her father's enemies!

THE END.

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Whilst exploring the island, the party comes across a half-starved man, whose name, the stranger tells them, is

MIGUEL. He tells the comrades his story. Miguel has been left to die by a rascally "blackbirder" because he refused to take part in the pirate's "expeditions." That night Alec sees Miguel on the prowl, and determines to follow him. All goes well for a time; then Alec loses sight of his quarry.

(Continue this grand story from this point.)

SO far as tracking the night prowler was concerned, he had to confess he was utterly at fault.

Greatly vexed with himself for his failure, he decided that he would go back to the camp and wait and watch there, and so intercept the man on his return, and question him as to the cause of his absence.

But quickly he knew he could not do even that. When he tried to retrace his steps, he found that he was hopelessly at sea.

He had not the slightest idea which way he had come, or which direction to take to get back. The route had twisted and turned about, and when he tried to guide himself by the tops of the rocks, which he could dimly discern against the skyline, he found that they twisted about.

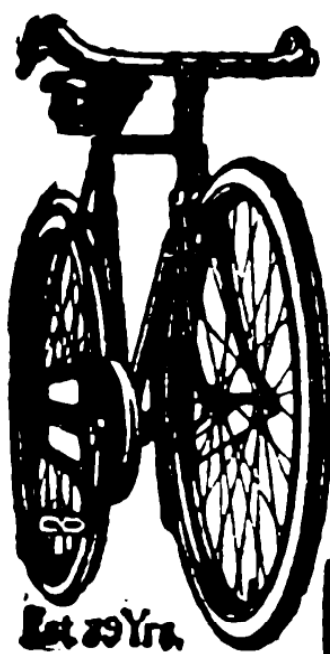
"It isn't one ravine here," he muttered to himself, "but several evidently, and they run into one another. I shall never find my way in the dark, and I shall only tumble into some horrible pool, and perhaps into the jaws of some lurking creature."

He could not repress a slight shudder at the thought, and he decided that it would be best to wait where he was till the dawn came.

Now, just as he had philosophically resigned himself to this, his wandering glance became attracted towards a distant spot, where he fancied he could see the suggestion of a light.

"Certainly," he thought to himself, "it seems as if there is a light

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of some sort over yonder! I'll make my way towards it, and find out whether it is fancy or——”

At that point, the thought came that it was probably only some phosphorescence from one or other of the swampy pools—some ignis fatuus which might lead him into fresh difficulties, and perhaps dangers.

Rather gingerly, therefore, he moved onwards in the direction of the supposed light, and was rather reassured as he found that it grew less faint as he advanced.

Not only less faint, but less pale and ghostly. Slowly, as he advanced, it took on a warmer tint until, after a while, it assumed a decidedly ruddy glow.

“Why, it's a fire—or the reflection of one—after all!” he said inwardly, with a slight laugh of satisfaction. “Nothing more weird or ghostly than an ordinary camp-fire, I fancy; and, if so, then I'm beginning to think I may be able to track Mr. Dago to his hiding-place after all.”

Cautiously, carefully, he approached the place where the light—or, rather, the glow—came from. The light itself he could not see; but the nearer he drew to it, the more plainly he could see that that glow came from a fire hidden away in some hollow, with trees and rocks around it. Upon these the gleams of firelight fell fitfully, now lighting them up almost clearly, now dying down nearly into darkness.

Alec set himself to work to get up to one side of the hollow amongst the tress and bushes in such a way as to be able to peep down at the fire without being seen or heard himself by those who might be near it.

To do this he had to climb up a rocky bank and worm his way through loose boulders and bushes. Rather an awkward business to manage in complete silence. And there was the risk of coming across snakes besides. But he did not hesitate, and a few minutes later he had gained the top of the bank, which he found to be fairly flat, grass covered, and wider than he had expected.

From it sprang numerous trees, and their trunks, and the deep shadows they threw, afforded useful cover for concealment.

At first he could see little; he could only hear voices. But, after wriggling about with great care and patience lest he should betray his presence by the snapping of some twig or the displacement of a loose stone, he managed to get into a better position.

And here a surprise awaited him. He found himself looking down into a crater-like hollow, with the pool, which seemed usual in this part of the island—only here the pool was small, and the rest of the bottom of the enclosure was rocky and dry.

It made, therefore, a very suitable place for a bivouac, being sheltered by the high sides and trees from both wind and sun, with a supply of water alongside. Here, at last, was the fire whose glare he had seen, and there were signs and smells indicating that cooking was, or had been, in progress.

And there sat the dago who called himself Miguel, and there, sitting round the fire, were half a dozen black men.

With these he was evidently on friendly, and even familiar terms, for he seemed to be conversing with them in their own language.

This latter fact was a great disappointment to the listener, who had taken so much trouble and expended so much patience in tracking him to the place. It was also rather surprising. There was very little doubt about it, however, for, though Alec was not near enough to hear all that was said, words came to his ears at times, not one of which could he understand.

Lying about were firearms, cutlasses, a spear or two, and even some bows and arrows. The first-named did not, however, appear to be very formidable

weapons—just old-fashioned muskets or shot-guns, such as native hunters usually managed to get hold of.

Just then there came the sound of a low whistle, uttered in a peculiar manner and evidently as a signal. Immediately there was a stir among the party below. Some—the dago amongst them—rose and went off—Alec could not see where to—and were absent for two or three minutes.

When they returned, they had with them another man, and Alec gasped with astonishment as he saw that this man was one of the sailors from the yacht.

He was known on board as Rupe Slaney, supposed to be English, and he was one of several Captain Barron had taken on board at Valparaiso in place of some men who had deserted when the yacht had touched there on her way out.

To Alec it began to look as though their stay on the island was not going to turn out the quiet visit of exploration they had anticipated. To begin with, the island was evidently not uninhabited. There were some natives, perhaps from some other islands, already there, if nothing more. Next, this dago, whom he and his friends had rescued, whom the doctor had treated with such kindness, had told them a pack of lies. He was ungrateful—that much was certain—and was most likely a traitor, plotting some mischief against the people who had saved his life.

Finally, there was this man Slaney, on intimate terms with the rascally dago and his native friends. So Slaney, then, must be a traitorous rascal, too! And some of the other new men whom the captain had taken on at Valparaiso might be in league with him!

This was a pretty bad outlook, and might mean serious danger to the exploring party if not dealt with at once. But, Alec felt, to enable the doctor and his chief officer to take it properly in hand, it was necessary to learn a little more.

So ran Alec's thoughts, and he at once determined to get near enough to hear more plainly what was said, since it was likely enough that most of the talk would now be in English.

If he could overhear the plans of these plotters, it might be of the greatest value.

Cautiously, therefore, he began to crawl and wriggle amongst the bushes and tree-trunks with the object of getting round to a ledge of rock he had noticed which was just above the place where the two white men were now sitting.

They had, in fact, seated themselves apart from the blacks, evidently so as to talk together, and were now on the farther side of them, so that Alec saw he would have even less chance of hearing than he had before unless he moved.

Little by little he crept forward, stopping every other moment or so to listen and make sure that none of the party had heard his movements. Naturally he feared most the quick ears of the natives, and their presence made him doubly careful.

Suddenly, as he was crawling along a strip of ground which sloped rather steeply, a piece of rock he put his hand on gave way and began to slide down the slope, starting others, with a loud clatter.

At once there was heard a hoarse challenge, followed by cries of rage from the men below. Then there was the sound of a shot, and a bullet came whizzing over Alec's head, missing him by no more than a few inches.

(Another thrilling instalment of this grand sea yarn next week.)

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