

NO. 63.—FOR READERS OF ALL AGES.—1^D.

*Week ending
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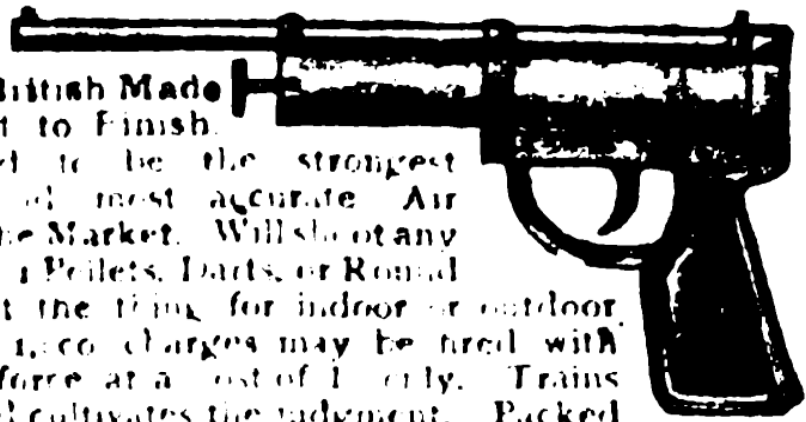
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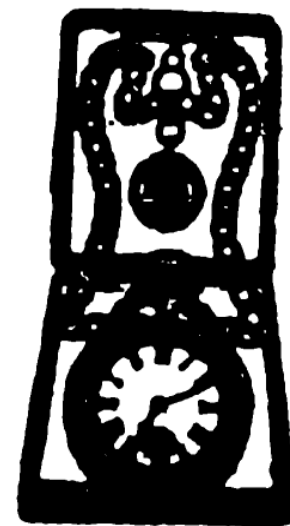
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THE PROLOGUE.

A Dream or Reality?—The Spectre—Grim Evidence!

SCARCROFT HALL was situated rather curiously. It stood upon the summit of a mount, well back from the road. A rather dreary drive led up from the lodge gates in an absolutely straight line to the front of the house. Round about the building itself there were few trees, but right round the foot of the mount, in a complete circle, a thick belt of ancient trees completely enclosed the house from outside view.

The belt of woodland was by no means perfectly circular, and it was certainly not even. In places the trees were no deeper than twenty yards, but in others they formed a tangled plantation. Once through them, however, the old country mansion lay in view—low, straggling, and decidedly disreputable. It was not out of repair, but its great age lent it a dismally forbidding appearance which left a somewhat grim impression upon one's mind.

The Hall was old—so old that nobody knew exactly how far it dated back. In the early part of the seventeenth century, when it had been at the height of its glory, there had been many additions and improvements. But a disastrous fire in the year 1785 had destroyed the entire northern wing, which had been the largest portion of the building. This had not been replaced, and the ruins adjoined the house and were ivy-clad and picturesque.

Nevertheless, Scarcroft Hall minus the northern wing was still extensive, but of late years it had been neglected sadly. For over a century past it had been the residence of the Marcourts. But the Marcourt family had always been impecunious, and the Hall with its extensive grounds had been something of a drag. The last of the family—Sir Cyril Marcourt, Bart.—had inherited practically nothing, and the old mansion, in consequence, had been allowed to get even more neglected. And now Sir Cyril was dead, and there were no more of his line. A distant relative inherited the property, and, being an elderly man with a home of his own, he had no desire to live in the Hall.

So Scarcroft was let on lease, and the tenant was now a Mrs. Godfrey Verney. Her husband had got the place cheaply; but even then the rent

was very considerable. The bulk of the grounds had been leased separately to an adjoining landowner, and Scarcroft Hall now had little more than fifty acres attached to it. This comprised the mount within the circle of trees, and one or two paddocks. Mr. Godfrey Verney had been dead just over four months. He had been an important City business man, and had taken rather a pride in his historical mansion. Now Mrs. Verney lived at the Hall alone with her daughter, Violet—the latter a quiet, attractive girl of nearly twenty-one.

Servants were few at the Hall, merely four women indoors and a chauffeur and the gardener. And Mrs. Verney, being a confirmed invalid, never entertained. Violet was not one of the ultra-fashionable girls; she was quite content to remain at home and to look after her invalid mother.

The poor lady, to tell the truth, was bedridden with paralysis. She had not left her room for over two years, and it was an acknowledged fact that she would never do so until the eve of the final ceremony. But there was no prospect of Mrs. Verney dying just yet, for, although paralytic, she was nevertheless healthy in body. Her daughter cared for her nobly, and denied herself countless pleasures for her mother's sake.

The Verneys were well-to-do, for Violet's father had left quite a respectable fortune. Scarcroft Hall, in spite of its forbidding outer aspect, was a beautiful place within and there was every comfort.

The old place was situated little over four miles from Windsor, so when Violet wanted to do some shopping it was quite a trivial journey in the big landaulette to London. The girl had many relatives whom she could visit, but it was very rare when she stayed away from the Hall for more than one day. Her mother's condition would not allow her much time for visiting except during the morning or afternoon.

One particular night Violet sat talking with her mother in the latter's bedroom. This was a noble apartment, spacious, lofty, and exquisitely furnished. Large French windows opened out upon a wide balcony, where sweet-scented creepers clung round the uprights which supported the broad railing.

It was August, and there still remained a faint glow of the setting sun in the cloudless sky. The day had been swelteringly hot, and it was a sweet relief to sit just against the French windows, breathing in the cool night air.

Violet was attired all in white, and a high standard lamp, delicately shaded, cast its subdued rays upon the girl as she sat in a wicker chair before the window. She had only returned a half an hour before from a tennis-party, and it was peaceful to sit here in the quietness of the falling light.

"You know, my dear, you are not looking quite so well this evening," remarked Mrs. Verney, who was sitting up in bed with cushions propped all around her. "Is there something the matter, Violet? I noticed this morning that you were quite pale."

Violet turned her head and smiled.

"It is nothing, mother," she said lightly. "Fancy you noticing things so easily! Oh, it's so ridiculous that I simply can't tell you anything about it!"

"My dear Violet, I haven't known you like this before," said the mother, with a touch of anxiety in her voice. "And, now I come to think of it, Marie was looking scared to-day. Has something happened that I know nothing of, Violet?"

The girl turned her chair round so that she could face her mother.

"I think I had better tell you," she said quietly. "It was Marie being frightened this morning which caused me to think seriously. Something did happen last night; but as I lay in bed this morning I thought it was a

dream. I was quite sure it was a dream, a nightmare, until I spoke with Marie. And then I found that she had had an experience exactly the same. Is it possible, mother, for two people to dream about the same thing?"

"Well, I suppose it is," smiled Mrs. Verney. "But what was this wonderful dream, my dear?"

"Well, it was about the old Scarcroft legend——"

"Oh, now I understand," interjected the invalid. "My darling—my darling, just fancy you getting those ideas into your head! The legend of Scarcroft is hundreds of years old, and quite out of date."

"Last night was the first night of the new moon, mother."

"And yesterday, I suppose, you and the parlourmaid were talking of the legend?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Verney smiled.

"Then, of course, you both dreamed of the subject," she said laughingly. "It was only natural, wasn't it? Oh, you two silly girls!"

Violet looked very thoughtful. She was, as a matter of fact, again thinking of the old legend—as she had done many times during the day. Nearly all old historical mansions have some sort of legendary story connected with them, and Scarcroft Hall was no exception.

The legend went that in some remote year of the Middle Ages an execution had taken place at the Hall. One of the Marcourt ancestors had been beheaded for treason, and the modern Marcourts, in consequence, had been rather proud of the distinction. To have had one of one's ancestors executed is not looked upon as a dishonour.

And, according to the old story, the execution had taken place in the month of August, on the first night of the new moon. The actual date had long since been lost sight of. And, according to the legend, on that particular night the executioner was supposed to walk abroad with a massive axe. The spectre was a grim enough fellow; but he had always been regarded somewhat affectionately by the Marcourt family. In one old historical volume it was laid down that on three occasions, at least, the spectral executioner had materialised to such good purpose that he had beheaded several innocent victims in their beds. There may have been a slight amount of truth in this portion of the legend, but nobody believed that the spectre had been responsible. Many grim happenings occurred in past centuries, and it was probably a mere touch of romance to set it down that the Scarcroft executioner was responsible for the mysterious murders.

The late Sir Cyril Marcourt had fully believed that the spectre actually appeared on the first night of the new moon. He had even been known to go so far as to declare that he had more than once seen the black-clothed gentleman. But, Sir Cyril having been a fanciful man by nature, his statements were rather discredited. And the spectre, it was said, sometimes appeared on the two succeeding nights after the new moon. One visit a year was not sufficient to content him.

"I am not so sure that Marie and I were silly, mother," exclaimed Violet, very thoughtfully. "Yesterday she reminded me of the old ghost story, and we had quite a good laugh about it; but during the night something dreadful happened. Oh, it must have been a dream, but it seemed so awfully real. I have been trying to convince myself all day that I was not really awake."

"Tell me about it, dear."

"It won't take me long to do that," Violet went on. "When I went to bed last night I dropped off straight to sleep. I don't know what the hour was, but everything was dreadfully still and quiet when I awoke suddenly—at least, I believe I awoke. And there, standing close beside the bed,

between the bed and the window, I saw the spectral executioner! I always sleep with my blind up, as you know, mother, and the figure was clearly outlined against the starlit sky. Oh, I could see his head with the tight-fitting cap over it, and he seemed to wear a mask, and in his hands he carried a dreadful axe."

"Upon my soul!" exclaimed Mrs. Verney.

"I screamed, and yet hardly a sound seemed to come from my throat! I was choked with fright," said Violet intently. "I know I made some kind of noise, and almost at once the spectre glided away into the darkness just beyond the window. I did not hear a sound, and I was so frozen with horror that I believe I must have remained half-sitting up in bed for fully five minutes."

"But, my dear, you are speaking as though it actually happened."

Violet shivered slightly.

"It could not have happened, of course," was her reply; "but when I woke up in full daylight it seemed horribly real to me. Yet by the time I had dressed I laughed at myself and tried to remember what I had had for supper last night to give me such a nightmare. Then, in the hall, I met the parlourmaid. Marie was looking pale and strangely frightened."

"It is certainly very curious," remarked the invalid lady.

"I questioned Marie at once, and I soon learned from her that she had had an experience almost exactly the same as my own. She declared that she had seen the spectre, and would not for a moment acknowledge that she had merely been dreaming. She says that the ghost came right through her doorway, and then went out again. She had been awakened by a sudden noise—at least, so she thought—and as soon as the spectre had vanished she swooned right off."

"But, Violet, we have always looked upon the old legend as idle talk," protested the mother. "Why, even the Marcourts themselves openly ridiculed the story of the spectre; only old Sir Cyril believed in it. Moreover, you and I should be immune, should we not? We are quite new-comers to the Hall."

Violet smiled.

"That makes no difference," she replied. "Old family ghosts are not particular as to whom they scare. But I have always laughed at ghosts, mother—I have always thought it a silly thing to believe in such nonsense. And, besides, what does the old legend say? That the spectral executioner does not appear every year, but only after a death has occurred in the family. And father, you know, died this year."

"You simply must not get such absurd notions into your head, my darling. The explanation is quite simple. You and Marie were talking on the subject yesterday, and the truth is you both frightened yourselves. And it is not surprising that you both had dreams of a similar nature. As for the ghost really appearing, I simply can't believe it. But if you are nervous to-night, Violet, I should advise you to have Marie in your bedroom with you."

The girl rose from her chair and walked out on to the balcony. When she faced her mother again there was a smile on her pretty face.

"I am not going to admit that I am frightened," she said decidedly. "No, mother, I shall sleep alone, as usual. After all, there is nothing to be upset about, is there?"

Violet laughed the matter off, and before long mother and daughter were discussing other affairs. They remained talking for nearly another hour, and then Violet left her mother and went downstairs. The girl was feeling quite cheerful now, and had mentally decided that although she would not have Marie as a sleeping companion she would not, at least, be alone.

For she had thought of another individual who would share the night with her. The one to be so honoured was Jackie, Violet's little toy terrier. He was an insignificant little chap, but when he liked he had a shrill bark, and could make quite a deal of noise. Moreover, he was very attached to his mistress, and he disliked strangers exceedingly. On more than one occasion he had flown at tradespeople, and had once grabbed hold of the baker's clothing. He was too small, however, to do any real damage, and his warlike efforts generally caused keen amusement.

When Violet went to bed she brought Jackie's sleeping quarters up with her. This was merely a small basket, which usually reposed in Violet's needlework-room. Jackie was quite content with the change. For some time he frisked about joyously, and then, making himself tired, he hopped into his basket, curled up, and went off to sleep.

When Violet was in bed herself, and the lamp had been turned out, she snuggled down into the bedclothes with a quiet feeling of confidence.

It was quite remarkable what a change the little terrier's presence made. The girl did not seem so absolutely alone, and one or two gentle snoring grunts from Jackie were quite comforting.

Violet dropped off to sleep very soon, and nothing disturbed her until far into the night. But quite suddenly she awoke with a start, and was wide awake in a moment. The blind, which was up, was making a slight noise occasionally as the wind caught it. A fairly stiff breeze had sprung up, and it was whistling a little round the gable just outside the bedroom window.

The girl half-raised herself in bed, and looked round with fast-beating heart. She believed that the moving blind had awakened her, but it seemed to Violet as though she were not alone in the room. In some strange, unaccountable fashion, she almost knew that there was another human presence in the apartment—not a spectral presence, but a human!

She knew well enough that she was not dreaming now. She was very wide awake, and she told herself that she had been awake on the previous night. Her womanly intuition told her that all was not right, that something out of the ordinary was about to occur.

And then, with startling abruptness, the Spectre of Scarcroft appeared!

Violet caught her breath in with a little frightened gasp, and she felt her muscles set absolutely rigid. For the life of her she could not move an inch, and the cry of horror which arose in her throat choked back before she could utter a sound. It seemed as though she had become paralysed in every limb and every nerve. She could only stare with fascinated terror.

And, in truth, there was every reason for Violet to be in a state of ungovernable horror. She was, after all, but a girl, and did not possess nerves of steel. The sight she saw was sufficiently appalling to cause absolute prostration.

Without any previous warning, without a sound, the ghastly spectre had appeared as though from nowhere. She had been gazing straight into the darkness of the room towards the fireplace. This was quite in an opposite direction to the doorway, and there was no means there by which any human presence could have entered. And yet, in one second, the spectral executioner stood there! He seemed to be outlined in bluey-white fire, and a smoky haze hovered round the thing. In that one second Violet told herself that her first impression had been wrong. This awful thing was nothing human—it was a spirit from another world.

With her staring eyes she could see the shape of the figure of the executioner. Downstairs in the library she had more than once glanced through an old volume which set out the legend as far as it was known, and in that volume there was a wood-cut of the spectre. And here, in every

detail, she saw the same figure. The huge axe was held in the ghastly thing's hands, and the axe itself emitted the same luminous haze. As Violet watched the spectre moved forward, and came towards the bed with a kind of gliding motion, the axe upraised ready for striking.

And then Violet found her voice. She seemed to know that her position was a terrible one. Death was very near to her at that moment, for the very attitude of her visitor made it apparent to the girl that the axe was intended for use, that it would descend upon her head and crush the life out of her.

A hoarse cry, sounding terribly unnatural, burst from her dry lips, and the power of movement returned to her. She flung herself back, and crouched against the head of the bed.

Violet was completely terrorised, and further movement was impossible; she had just been able to perform that one crouching spring backwards. If death was to come she was incapable of defending herself.

And then something else happened.

Subconsciously she became aware of a shuffle over in the corner, and the next second a perfect volley of furious barks, shrill and insistent, rang out through the room.

Jackie had been awakened by his mistress's cry, and he was making known his presence in no uncertain terms!

Apparently he had been asleep, but now there was no doubt about his wakefulness. And the little beggar was plucky—as plucky as any toy-terrier can be. In one series of bounds he dashed full at the spectre, and leapt up with a furious snarl, which under ordinary circumstances would have caused great amusement.

Jackie, at least, was not frightened. He danced about and kept up his shrill song without intermission, and his sharp little teeth snapped several times as he made dashes at the unwelcome visitor.

And the result was curious.

Violet, continuing to watch with dumb fascination, was startled to see the spectre disappear as abruptly as he had come. The figure seemed to bend down, and then in one second he was swallowed up in the darkness.

He had vanished as he stood there in the centre of the room!

But little Jackie kept up his furious song without pause. Apparently he could still see something with his sharp little eyes, and it seemed to Violet as though the little dog had made his way across the room to the door.

Then, with a final yelp, Jackie subsided and rushed across to his mistress. He was active enough, and with one bound he was upon the bed. Violet felt somewhat hysterical, and her mind was in utter chaos.

But there was one thing she saw, one definite thing which caused her to regain her self-possession to a certain degree.

In the darkness there remained a tiny point of greenish light, hazy and indistinct. It seemed to Violet as though it hovered about the bed, and she suddenly caught her breath in with a little panting gasp.

The truth had dawned upon her!

With the coming of daylight Violet's mind was fully made up, and at breakfast-time she gave orders for the landaulette to be got ready for an immediate journey to London.

END OF PROLOGUE.

CHAPTER I.

A Case for Eileen Dare—The Girl-Detective's Plans.

VIOLET VERNEY stepped out of the landaulette and turned to the chauffeur.

"Wait here, Hampson," she said shortly. "I don't know how long I shall be."

"Very good, miss," replied the man.

It was just before noon, and the August day was as sweltering as August days are proverbially supposed to be.

The blazing sun shone down pitilessly upon Gray's Inn Road, and people went about mopping their brows and inwardly praying for rain. And when it did rain they would probably pray for sunshine again.

Violet Verney stepped across the pavement and mounted the short steps of a certain house. She pulled the bell, and the door was presently answered by a good-natured lady in a large flowered overall.

"Is Mr. Nelson Lee at home?" inquired Violet, with a trace of anxiety.

"Yes, miss; I think so. If you'll step in an' wait I'll send your card up to him," was the good-natured lady's reply.

And Violet stepped in, and before long Mrs. Jones returned and asked the girl to follow her. She mounted the stairs and was ushered into the great detective's consulting-room.

Violet saw much in that one glance which she bestowed upon the apartment and its two occupants.

The consulting-room was large, airy, and delightfully untidy. Books lay about on the tables, and the mantelpiece was littered with pipes, ashtrays, and other articles which really had no right there.

Both the large windows were open to their widest extent, and sun-blinds outside lent the apartment an appearance of coolness—and they did, undoubtedly, prevent the room becoming unbearably hot.

Nelson Lee had risen to greet his visitor, and Violet found him to be exactly like the photographs of him she had sometimes seen in illustrated papers; only, in the flesh, the famous criminologist was obviously powerful, iron-willed, and exceedingly delightful in manner.

"I hope I have not disturbed you, Mr. Lee," said Violet, somewhat nervously, as she took his hand. "If you are too busy——"

"I am always busy, Miss Verney," smiled Nelson Lee. "Won't you sit down? But I am never too busy to give my undivided attention to a lady visitor. Please be quite at your ease, and make no attempt to hurry."

The girl sat down and looked round for a moment. She had already seen a clean-limbed young fellow over by one of the windows, and she surmised—rightly—that he was Nipper, the detective's well-known young assistant.

At the present moment Nipper was grinning to himself. The young rascal was amused at his master's easy manner. He had generally noticed that Nelson Lee was the very essence of politeness when a visitor happened to be an attractive young lady.

With regard to that, however, Lee treated every client with superb courtesy and consideration. Perhaps he was a trifle more considerate to young ladies, but that was only natural.

"I hardly expected to find you at home, Mr. Lee," said Violet, turning to the detective again.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I am not often disengaged at this hour of the day," Nelson Lee replied. "But I am lazy this morning, Miss Verney. For once Nipper and I are taking things easily. The weather really makes one feel disgusted with London. But you wished to consult me——"

"Yes, that is so," replied the girl quickly. "I have come to you, Mr. Lee, because it would have been ridiculous for me to approach the police. Yet I am positively certain that a terrible murder was attempted last night. But for a lucky chance I believe I should have fallen a victim——"

Nelson Lee lifted his hand.

"Perhaps it would be as well to acquaint me with your position, the situation of your home, and the exact nature of the peril which menaced you," he interrupted gently. "Tell your story in your own way, Miss Verney, but begin at the beginning."

"Very well," smiled Violet. "I live at Scarcroft Hall, near Windsor, with my mother, who is a confirmed invalid. Perhaps, before I go into the details of the attempted crime I had better tell you the old legend of Scarcroft."

"Is this legend in any way connected with the affair?"

"Oh, yes; closely connected."

"Then tell it me, by all means."

"Well, Scarcroft Hall is an awfully old place," went on the girl. "I don't exactly know how far it dates back—but for hundreds and hundreds of years. Oh, yes, Mr. Lee, smoke by all means; I do not object at all. The old story concerns an execution which took place at the Hall in the Middle Ages——"

And Violet, in clear sentences, related the legend of the Scarcroft executioner. Nelson Lee listened with keen interest, and Nipper left his seat by the window and squatted down close by his master. When it came to ghost stories, Nipper was all there—and a spectre which appeared only in August was something of a novelty.

Having told the ancient legend fully, Violet then came to the singular occurrence which had happened during the present week.

With scarcely an interruption from her two listeners, she went into the details of her "dream" of two nights ago, and she emphasised the curious coincidence of the parlourmaid, Marie, having a similar dream on the same night.

She then referred to her talk with her mother, and gave all details concerning their position, home and habits. And at last Violet came to the vital part of her story. She related how she had taken the toy-terrier, Jackie, to bed with her, and how she had suddenly awakened in the middle of the night.

"I think you will know what I mean, Mr. Lee," she continued intently. "As soon as ever I awoke I felt—absolutely felt—that somebody else was in the room with me. It is impossible for me to describe how and why I should have the conviction—but it was there. And I was, oh, so frightened!"

"I am not surprised at that, Miss Verney."

"Enough to make anybody frightened," commented Nipper. "Well, miss, did the giddy executioner appear? This is jolly interesting! Did the spectre show himself a second time?"

Nelson Lee frowned.

"You must not hurry Miss Verney, young 'un," he said severely. "If you interrupt again I shall pack you out of the room."

"I'll be as quiet as the Germans after they've suffered defeat, gov'nor!"

And Nipper subsided gracefully.

"As I was saying," proceeded the visitor, "I was certain that somebody was in the room with me. And then, before I could even have time to collect my wits, the spectre appeared. But this time, Mr. Lee, the thing was ever so much more ghastly. And it appeared in a flash, as though from nowhere."

"Was it near the doorway?"

"No, quite a long way away."

"Or near the fireplace, or window?"

"The figure stood in the very centre of the room."

"And it appeared suddenly, and without a sound and without warning?"

"Yes."

"What was it like?"

"It was just like a picture of the spectre in this book," replied Violet, opening her bag, and taking out a small, leather-bound volume. "There it is, Mr. Lee. But, although this woodcut is very similar in general outline to the thing I saw, I can really give you no true picture of the horrible thing. It was ghastly and supernatural, and hovered there quite a foot from the floor."

"Dear me! Were its feet not touching the floor?"

"No. They seemed to be fully a foot from the carpet," replied Violet.

Nelson Lee looked thoughtful.

"The legs, I gather, were short and somewhat stumpy?"

"Yes. I was just going to mention that. How did you know?"

"I deduced so much from what you have told me," replied Lee quietly.

"But please proceed, Miss Verney. I am already scenting a dastardly plot of some sort."

Violet nodded at once.

"Oh, I know something is wrong—something dreadful!" she exclaimed. "It was no ghost, after all! Oh, but I am getting along too fast. Well, I had half-raised myself in bed, and I was completely rigid with terror. I stared at the thing with fascinated horror. I am not ashamed to tell you this, Mr. Lee, for I believe any girl would have been similarly frightened."

"Many men would have swooned with sheer funk," said Nelson Lee grimly.

"I don't know what I should have done; but I am certain that I could not have stood the strain for long," went on the girl. "The spectre advanced towards the bed, and the axe which it held was upraised and ready to strike."

"Great Scott!" breathed Nipper. "You don't think——"

"I am certain—positive—that I was in terrible peril," said Violet, with firm conviction. "If a certain thing had not happened at that moment the axe would have descended upon me, and I should have been killed. To have defended myself would have been quite impossible. I was incapable of action."

"And what did actually happen?"

Miss Verney smiled.

"There is a touch of humour in the incident," she said. "A toy-terrier is not a very formidable animal, is it, Mr. Lee? And yet little Jackie certainly saved me from a horrible death. I suppose it was the suddenness of the affair which saved me."

"Jackie, I presume, awoke to the fact that something was amiss?"

"Yes. The little rascal is a surprisingly heavy sleeper," laughed Violet. "Dogs, as a rule, awake easily, but Jackie is ever such a lazy little beggar. I suppose I feed him too well."

"Very probably," said Nelson Lee gravely.

"Well, he certainly did not awake until I uttered a cry of sheer horror," went on the girl. "It was a strange cry, and it echoed curiously in my own ears. Quite suddenly Jackie made his presence apparent by jumping from his basket and barking with all his fury."

"Was he afraid of the supposed spectre?"

"Not in the least. On the contrary, he flew at it valiantly, and while I

watched, the thing vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. It simply disappeared where it stood."

"Did it seem to bend down, or reach in any direction?" asked Lee keenly.

"Yes, it bent down. But how can you guess these things?"

"It was natural that the spectre should do one or the other, wasn't it?" smiled the detective. "You do not follow? Well, I will make it clear very soon. But I am anxious to hear what followed."

"After the thing had disappeared, Jackie continued to bark for a few moments, and then he subsided," said Violet. "Somehow the dog seemed to put new life into me, and I lost my nervousness. It is curious how such an insignificant little animal can instil courage into one. He jumped upon the bed, and I was struck by a very extraordinary fact. Up till that moment I had had just a suspicion that the ghost had really been supernatural."

"But you found evidence to the contrary?"

"Yes—positive evidence," replied Violet, bending forward slightly. "The room, of course, was intensely dark, and I saw a dim spot of light upon the bed, moving about uncertainly and fantastically."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I think I can guess," he said slowly.

"Indeed? Oh, I thought I would surprise you!"

"Perhaps you will. What was the cause of the uncanny light?"

"I would prefer you to voice your surprise, Mr. Lee," said Violet quietly.

"Certainly. I assume that the light was caused by a small amount of some kind of luminous paint upon the little dog's muzzle," said Nelson Lee.

"But when you obtained a light you could detect no trace of the stuff."

Violet opened her grey eyes wide.

"That is exactly right," she replied. "And isn't it absolute proof that the horrid thing was human? It was a man, dressed up for the part!"

"Obviously."

"First of all I couldn't understand. I cuddled the terrier, but in a few minutes my wits returned sufficiently for me to realise that when he had flown at the spectre he had touched some portion of the hazily glowing clothing, and had transferred a little of the luminous stuff on to its own mouth. And, when I knew that it had all been real, I was not frightened, but angry and alarmed."

"You do not think it could have been a practical joke?"

"A joke? Oh, Mr. Lee, who would play such a terrible joke?" asked Violet. "Besides, there is not a soul who would dream of such a ghastly trick. And I know as well as I am sitting here that the disguised man intended killing me."

"You said nothing to your mother?"

"No, nothing. I found that Jackie's barking had not disturbed anybody, and I was afraid to leave the bedroom," said Violet. "So, after lighting the lamp, I partially dressed myself, and sat thinking and reading. I realised how foolish my story would seem if I related it to the servants; they would all say that I had been dreaming, or suffering from nervous imagination."

"When did you decide to consult me?"

"During the night, while I was waiting for daylight," was the answer. "I determined to say nothing at all, and to make an excuse to mother that I wanted to run to London in the car to do some shopping. I knew how impossible it was to approach the police; they, too, would have ridiculed my story."

"That is fairly certain."

"But I was just as sure that you would listen patiently, Mr. Lee, that you would understand, and would promise to help me," said the girl earnestly. "You do not believe I have been dreaming, do you?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"You have told me your story clearly and cleverly," he replied. "I am quite convinced, Miss Verney, that there is something very much the matter at Scarcroft Hall. Villainy of a particularly dastardly sort is being engineered. I will render you every assistance that lies in my power. But I have many questions to ask."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Lee," said Violet eagerly. "I will answer every question you choose to put."

The great detective stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"It is impossible, of course, for anything to be done up here," he said. "It is absolutely necessary for somebody to go down to Scarcroft and to investigate. But there are difficulties. We do not know who your enemy is, and it would be unwise to give him warning. If I were to go down he would instantly know you were on the alert. And he would probably cease his machinations altogether."

"But you could come as a visitor, under another name."

"Yes, but the result would be the same. Our unknown friend would suspect," replied Nelson Lee. "If there were men in your household it would be different. But you are practically alone, Miss Verney, and—By James, I have got it!"

"An idea, guv'nor!" ejaculated Nipper quickly. "Let Miss Ei——"

"Precisely!" Lee agreed smoothly. "We both thought of Miss Eileen Dare at the same moment, Nipper. This case is exactly one in which her singular ability will be given full scope. Ring her up at once, and ask her to come round."

And while Nipper was doing so, and while Eileen Dare was on her way, Nelson Lee told Violet the story of Eileen Dare—although the detective did not enter into exact details.

Eileen lived in a lovely flat, close to the river at Chelsea, with an old maiden aunt—practically her only relative. She was a girl of extraordinary charm and beauty, and was wonderfully athletic and vigorous.

But, in addition to these qualities, she had proved herself to be possessed of ability of quite another order. She had detective powers equal, in some respects, to Nelson Lee's own. Quick-witted, keen, resourceful and active, she was shaped superbly for detective work. Her powers of deduction were remarkable, and her instant appreciation of even the faintest clue even more so.

Nelson Lee admitted freely that Eileen Dare was the most wonderful girl he had ever met, and he admired her tremendously. He admired her for her cleverness and for her unequalled courage and resource.

Some months before her father had been driven to disgrace and death; he had died while awaiting execution as a traitor. Both Eileen and Nelson Lee knew that Mr. Dare had been innocent, and they had been unable to prove it.

Dare's enemies had been too clever, and they had succeeded in murdering their victim—for, morally, murder had been committed. And the scoundrels had deliberately stolen Mr. Dare's invention and had produced it as their own.

Eileen's father had been a clever engineer, and had fallen a victim to the scheming of his former employer and his business colleagues. The poor girl, on the eve of her father's death, had solemnly sworn to him that she would

exact vengeance. Her enemies were beyond reach of the law, but she alone would deal with them.

And her vow had not been idle. Already Eileen had accounted for one of the "combine"—as the highly-placed gang were termed. Only a few weeks before she had unmasked Sir Ambrose Shore, and he had only escaped a heavy term of penal servitude by succumbing to an attack of apoplexy.

There were many others—Eileen had barely started her campaign. Roger Haverfield, the chief plotter; Mr. Jonathan Bridger, a City business man; Mr. Martin Hallton, a scoundrelly stockbroker—and many others. Before Eileen was satisfied, they would all be disgraced and ruined. It was only justice that they should be made to pay the penalty for their crimes.

Nelson Lee did not tell Violet Verney everything; he simply outlined a few bare facts, and stated that Eileen was singularly clever and could be trusted implicitly. She was fully capable of dealing with this present case.

In less than twenty-five minutes there was a ring at the bell, and Nipper, projecting his head out of the window, announced with pleasure that Miss Eileen was waiting on the doorstep.

The girl-detective was brought up at once, and she looked delightfully fresh and pretty as she was introduced to Violet. The latter was a good-looking girl, but her charms were homely and limited.

Eileen, on the other hand, was undoubtedly one of the prettiest girls in the whole kingdom. She was small, dainty, and her figure was a delight in itself. At present she was dressed very sweetly in a light blue voile dress, which was cut so perfectly that her figure was shown to splendid advantage.

Her hair—deep, rich brown—was slightly curly and coiffured most becomingly. Her large eyes—deep brown, too—were just wells of purity and delightfulness. She seated herself, and listened interestedly as Nelson Lee fully outlined the object of Miss Verney's visit. Nipper, the young bouncer, paid far more attention to Eileen than he did to his master's story. Nipper admired the girl-detective greatly.

Lee was not long in telling everything, and then Eileen was as well-informed of the facts as the detective himself.

"I have asked you to come, Miss Eileen," said Nelson Lee, "because I believe there is a chance here for you to exercise your wonderful talents. I will tell you later exactly how you can set to work."

Eileen nodded her pretty head.

"I am anxious to help," she said quietly, and with a curiously grim note in her voice. "It is, as you say, just the type of affair which will suit me. But I am anxious to obtain more facts, Miss Verney."

Violet smiled.

"It is for Mr. Lee to question me," she replied simply.

"Upon the whole, I think I shall leave the case entirely in Miss Dare's hands," said Nelson Lee. "I am sure she is quite capable of dealing with it effectively and satisfactorily."

Eileen flushed with pleasure.

"Thank you, Mr. Lee," she said. "That is a very nice compliment. I shall certainly do my very best to get to the bottom of the mystery, and, as you have said, I think there is more scope for a girl in this affair than for a man."

"Have you formed any idea as to how the 'spectre' appeared and disappeared?"

"Why, of course, Mr. Lee," Eileen answered. "It is fairly obvious, is it not?"

"I am puzzled, at least," said Violet. "But then, of course, I am not so

clever as you; I am inexperienced in such intricacies as these. Compared with yourself, Miss Dare, I am afraid you will find me dull."

But Eileen shook her head.

"The manner in which you have acted already proves that you are very far from being dull," she replied, smiling. "But as to the ghost appearing so suddenly, I solve the puzzle this way. He entered the bedroom by the door, in the ordinary——"

"But I should have seen him at once!"

"Not if he were attired in a long black cloak," put in Eileen shrewdly. "He probably had the cloak all over him—right over his head. So, when he suddenly dropped the cloak to the floor, he revealed his luminous 'get-up,' and seemed to appear suddenly and from nowhere."

"That is my own idea," observed Lee, knocking the ash from his cigar.

"And the fact that the 'spectre's' feet did not seem to touch the ground merely shows that the scoundrel painted a pair of feet somewhere about the middle of his shins," went on Eileen. "He did that, of course, to add to the general ghostly effect. And when he disappeared so suddenly he merely threw the cloak over him and walked quickly to the door. The dog, as soon as the visitor had gone, naturally rushed on to the bed to his mistress."

Nelson Lee nodded approvingly.

"Your wits are as sharp as ever, Miss Eileen," he remarked. "May I ask how you intend to conduct this case? What will be your first move?"

Eileen was quick in replying.

"Since it is necessary for an investigation to be made on the spot, I must go down to Scarcroft Hall without delay," she said. "I shall not question you now, Miss Verney, but when I arrive at the Hall. You will have had more time by then in which to think everything out."

"But when will you come?" asked Violet.

"To-morrow, in the morning," was Eileen's crisp reply. "To avoid giving the enemy any warning I want you to pave the way for my arrival to-day. Please make it known to the servants that you have engaged a girl's companion, as your life is somewhat lonely. The companion—a Miss Ebbutt—will arrive to-morrow and must be met at the station. Will you do this?"

"Certainly," said Violet. "I think it is a splendid idea. Nobody will suspect the real truth—that you, the supposed companion, are down at the Hall for the purpose of guarding me and discovering the truth."

And the arrangements having been made, Violet Verney took her departure, feeling greatly relieved and just a little excited.

But after the girl had gone Eileen Dare looked very serious and thoughtful, and Nelson Lee knew at once that she had something of importance to say.

CHAPTER II.

A Possible Connection—No Clue—The Sudden Thunderstorm.

EILEEN was very pleased with the prospect, and she made no attempt to hide her satisfaction. But her manner was rather grave, and Nelson Lee was sure that she was thinking of something else.

She came across from the window, where she had been watching Violet's departure, and faced Nelson Lee.

"I believe I know something which is unknown to you, Mr. Lee," she said quietly. "And it was that knowledge which made me so anxious to go into this case. I am convinced that Miss Verney's affairs and my own are curiously connected."

The detective raised his eyebrows.

"I was certainly unaware of that," he replied. "I have seen no such connection as you state, Miss Eileen. Would you please make things clear to me?"

"As soon as you introduced Miss Verney to me, and told me that she was one of the Verneys of Scarcroft Hall, I was determined at once to enter into the case," said the girl detective. "My father once told me, Mr. Lee, that Mr. Godfrey Verney, who lived near Windsor, had been distantly connected in some way with Roger Haverfield and his associates. Even he did not know exactly how this Mr. Verney was concerned with the affairs of the 'combine,' but I deduced that Mr. Verney was one of Haverfield's victims—that he had fallen foul of the scoundrels I am fighting against. So, you see, I am naturally very interested."

"Of course, I understand that fully now," was Nelson Lee's reply. "I suppose you do not know in what way this Mr. Godfrey Verney was connected with Haverfield?"

"No, I have no idea. Perhaps this case will serve to enlighten me."

"Well, I have left it entirely in your hands," smiled Lee, "and it is for you to acquit yourself well. If, however, you find yourself in need of assistance you have only to wire me or telephone me and let me know. Either Nipper or myself will be with you as early as possible."

"We'll simply fly, miss," said Nipper eagerly.

Eileen Dare remained at Gray's Inn Road for some little time longer. Then she took her departure and returned to her own riverside flat. She had certain preparations to make, although these were not very extensive.

The following day Eileen stepped out of a train at Windsor Station just after twelve o'clock noon. She was quietly dressed, and carried a rather heavy hold-all; her hair was coiffured very differently from usual—much more plainly and primly. Moreover, she wore a pair of silver-rimmed spectacles, and her appearance was decidedly altered.

Nevertheless, this slight disguise could not hide Eileen's natural charms. She was still dainty and pretty, but without a close inspection it would have been difficult to recognise her as Eileen Dare.

At the present she was simply Miss Ebbutt, a paid companion, who had been engaged by Violet Verney. If, indeed, the unknown enemy took note of her arrival he would certainly not have his suspicions aroused. After what had happened on two nights it was only natural that Violet should be nervous, and it was still more natural that she should engage a companion, who would be by her side and keep her company.

Nelson Lee had seen at once that Eileen would have fuller scope than he or Nipper could have. The occupants of the Hall were both women—mother and daughter. Eileen would sleep with Violet, and so she would be constantly with the girl, and would guard her carefully. Moreover, there were many other advantages in Eileen taking the case in hand.

The girl found Violet's landaulette waiting outside the station, in charge of Hampson, the chauffeur. He, of course, believed that his passenger was Miss Ebbutt, the new companion. Eileen was soon out of Windsor, and on the quiet country road which led to the Hall.

Eileen was not particularly impressed by her first sight of Scarcroft. The landaulette passed in at the lodge gates, and hummed through a thick belt of trees. Then it suddenly came out upon the open drive, and the Hall lay in full view ahead.

The dull drabness of it all was relieved somewhat by the appearance of Violet, who stood upon the great doorstep smiling in welcome. She greeted Eileen cordially but somewhat distantly—as was befitting to a companion.

No mention was made of Eileen's real object until luncheon had been served and until the two girls had retired to Violet's bedroom. Then, with the door closed, Eileen smilingly faced her client.

"Everything has gone off splendidly," she said. "By nature, Miss Verney, I am very frank and open, and I believe in speaking frankly. I like you very much, and I think we shall become firm friends."

Violet was very pleased.

"Surely we are friends already?" she smiled. "And I am so anxious to see you get to work, Miss—Miss Ebbutt. I suppose I'd better get into the habit of calling you by that name?"

"It will certainly be the safer course."

They both sat down, and for a few minutes Eileen remained thoughtfully silent.

"Of course," she said at length, "the idea of the spectre was merely adopted because it provided a good opportunity to commit a dastardly crime without any possibility of the real murderer being suspected. The man can hardly have hoped that your death would be put down to supernatural causes. His idea was that investigation would be hampered, and detection for himself almost impossible."

"It is an absolute mystery to me who can have attempted to kill me," said Violet, in a puzzled voice. "And then, why did he appear before Marie, the maid? Surely he had no intention——"

"Oh, no. That is extremely unlikely. It is fairly obvious that he appeared before the maidservant so that when you were found mysteriously killed everybody would at once credit the legendary spectre with the crime. It may not have been successful, but it would, at least, have caused delay and confusion."

"I cannot understand why anybody should wish to kill me," said Violet, looking worried. "I don't think I have an enemy in the world. Certainly I know of nobody who owes me such a grudge as to want my death."

"Perhaps it is something far deeper than a mere personal grudge," said the girl detective. "Can you think of anybody who was a very bitter enemy of your father's? Do you know if your father——"

"My father had business enemies, I believe," said Violet thoughtfully. "But what has that to do with me?"

"One can never tell. I want you to think things over very carefully. When you saw the spectre did you notice any resemblance to anybody you had ever seen? There may be some slight clue in the matter of height, or facie——"

But the other girl shook her head.

"I saw no face," she returned.

"Not even a resemblance of a face?"

"Well, it was so hazy and indistinct that it looked like nothing human," Violet returned. "I saw no eyes or lips, or any distinctive feature. It was—well, just a horrible apparition."

Eileen nodded.

"I am afraid we must draw a blank there," she exclaimed. "And now, Miss Verney, I am going to ask you another question. It is obvious that the would-be murderer entered the Hall in some way or other. It is not possible, is it, that he was concealed within the building?"

"I don't think so. You mean concealed for a length of time?"

"Yes. Because if there is such a place where he could hide himself he may be there even at this minute," said Eileen. "You must understand that there is a great amount of risk in breaking into a house such as this and in wandering about the halls and passages at dead of night."

"We are very lonely here," said Violet. "You see we are a long way

from the road, and after nine o'clock never a soul comes near the place. In the middle of the night it would be quite possible for a dozen men to wander about the grounds, and nobody would be the wiser."

"But have you thought of any way in which your enemy could have entered?"

"Yes. I am almost sure that he got into the building by means of a cellar grating some little distance from the back-door," was Violet's reply. "It is a large grating, but can be easily lifted. It is only necessary to drop into the well of the grating, pass into the cellar itself, and then mount a few stone steps to a door."

"Which is unlocked?"

"Always."

"It is quite likely that you have hit upon the truth," said the girl detective. "Very shortly we will have a look at that grating, Miss Verney. But there is something else. This is a very old building—do you know if there are any secret passages or hidden tunnels?"

Violet laughed heartily.

"I used to think so when we first came here," she replied. "But this is not quite such an interesting house as all that. No, there are no secret passages of any description. An architect who stayed with us once examined the walls with an experienced eye, and declared that secret passages would be impossible."

"Well, since an architect was satisfied, I suppose I must be," smiled Eileen. "He, surely, knew what he was saying."

"Why, what made you think of such a thing?"

"Well, the bare possibility entered my head that the spectre might have entered your room—this room—by means of a secret panel. As you see, there is panelling all round, and I was at once struck by the fact. But we will dismiss the matter and go on to something else."

And Eileen rose and stated her intention of examining the cellar grating.

The two girls descended to the hall and made their way down the house to the rear. Acting upon Eileen's suggestion they did not deliberately approach the grating, but did so by a round about route. Eileen believed in taking every precaution.

"Here it is," said Violet. "I have had a look myself, but I can see nothing."

Eileen made no comment, but stood for a few moments looking at a large grating at her feet. It was about three feet square, and the iron bars were rusty and bent. It could be seen at once that the thing was not fastened in any way, and that a pull was sufficient to lift it.

The well of the grating was about four feet deep, and there was a lot of old collected rubbish at the bottom—scraps of paper, rotten leaves, and suchlike. The grating was situated right against the house wall, and there was not a single window within sight of it.

Looking down, Eileen could see that it was one of the easiest things in the world for a man to lift the grating, drop into the shallow well, and enter the cellar.

Probably, at one time, there had been a window in the cellar, or perhaps, bars, but now there was nothing but a blank opening.

"This is certainly a splendid entry for burglars," remarked Eileen.

"I suppose it is," was the other girl's reply. "But we've never thought of burglars in this quiet spot. Indeed, I had no idea the house could be so easily entered until I made a deliberate search."

Eileen was by no means surprised. She knew well enough that scores of quiet country mansions had cellar gratings very similar to this one, and that many of them were equally accessible.

"Is there any other place where a marauder might find entry?" she inquired.

Violet thought for a moment.

"Well, there's the dairy window and the pantry window," she replied. "But they are both small, and I don't think the man who played the spectre would have taken the time and trouble to squeeze himself through."

Eileen bent down closely, and her keen eyes at once detected positive signs that the grating had been lifted very recently. Moreover, the leaves and rubbish below were disturbed and scattered about.

Eileen also examined the two windows her companion had referred to, but she was soon satisfied that neither had been used. ●

Later on, she examined the cellar; and here, on the damp floor, she found obvious traces of footprints. And Eileen was assured that nobody in the household had descended to the cellar for weeks, for it was now disused.

The only conclusion to come to, therefore, was that the scoundrel had entered the Hall by means of the grating, and had left the same way. Eileen suggested that the gardener should be instructed to pile a large number of flower-pots over the grating, and thus effectively block it.

This suggestion was a wise one, for the unknown enemy, should he get to know of the change, would assume that the gardener had done it by chance. To have the grating fastened down by padlocks would be to make it known that precautions were being taken.

But the night passed quietly and uneventfully. Eileen had already had a chat with Mrs. Verney, and she found the invalid lady extremely cordial and likeable. Mrs. Verney knew nothing of the actual facts, and believed Eileen to be "Miss Ebbutt," a paid companion. It was not necessary to enlighten the old lady until the mystery was cleared up, and all danger past.

And the day following was as quiet as the first. The second night passed by without anything of a suspicious nature occurring. Eileen and Violet slept together, and they instituted a system of "watches." For four hours Violet would sleep while Eileen kept guard, and vice versa. And the two girls felt safe and comfortable. A surprise attack was impossible.

But it seemed that an attack of any sort was not contemplated. The mysterious enemy did not make any move. On the evening of the third day Eileen was becoming somewhat downcast; she had hoped that some sort of excitement would make itself apparent. But, on the contrary, everything was dreadfully dull.

She liked Violet very much, and the girls were fast friends. They were sitting in the conservatory in the cool of the evening, chatting and laughing, when Violet remarked that it would be her birthday on the following Saturday. On that day, she declared, she would be twenty-one; she would come of age.

"Oh, you did not tell me that before," said Eileen quickly.

"I really forgot it until this evening," Violet replied.

Eileen was silent for a few minutes. Truth to tell, she had scented a motive for the attempted crime. Violet would come of age on Saturday! Eileen determined to question her friend closely.

"Will you inherit any money—any fortune?" she asked keenly.

"Well, hardly a fortune," laughed Violet. "Merely a legacy of fifty pounds from an uncle of mine. Dad's affairs, you know, were settled long ago."

"And this fifty pounds is all you will get?"

"Yes, of course."

"If you were to die before your birthday," went on Eileen quietly.

“would that make any difference? Would any relative—anybody, remember—benefit by your sudden death?”

Violet was puzzled for a moment, and then she smiled.

“Oh, I see what you are getting at!” she said. “You think somebody might be trying to kill me for some money? Well, Eileen, there’s nobody—nobody on earth. And I’m only coming into fifty pounds, anyhow! That’s not enough——”

“Oh, no. I thought there might possibly be far greater issues involved.”

Eileen pressed her inquiries further, but without result. And presently, the evening being somewhat close—it had turned closer within the last half-hour—the two girls ventured out with the intention of taking a boat out on the lake.

It was only a small stretch of water, just at the foot of the mount, and hidden from the house by the belt of high trees. As Eileen and Violet walked down the path towards the trees the former glanced at the sky and shook her head.

“I’m afraid we’re not going to have many minutes on the water,” she observed. “I think we are in for a storm, Violet. The sky looks awfully threatening, and it is dreadfully close.”

Over towards the west, indeed, a mass of leaden, bluey-black clouds were slowly rolling towards the zenith. The sky itself was heavy, and not a breath of wind stirred. Almost as Eileen spoke a distant mutter of thunder became audible.

Unknown to both girls, the coming storm was to be the beginning of great events. From that very hour the happenings at Scarcroft Hall were destined to be exciting and perilous.

CHAPTER III.

Shelter—Eileen Suspects—Beneath the Tarpaulin—Nelson Lee Wanted.

“**R**UN for it!” panted Eileen. “Oh, what huge drops of rain!”
The girl-detective’s pretty face was aglow with health and amusement. She and Violet had just scrambled out of the light rowing-boat in which they had been skimming across the lake.

As Eileen had foretold, they had not had many minutes on the water. The storm had come up rapidly, and now threatened to break with full violence at any moment. A vivid flash of lightning, followed by a roll of thunder, had warned them that it would be wise to seek shelter.

And just as they stepped ashore rain commenced to fall in huge, splashing drops. The dark clouds now covered the sky, and these, aided by the dying day, caused darkness to fall prematurely.

The trees ahead were dim and indistinct, and it was difficult to see any distance. Strictly speaking, it had been unwise to venture on the lake, but the girls had thought that the storm would possibly blow over. As it had not blown over—well, no harm was done. At most, they would get a drenching.

“It will be dry under the trees,” said Violet, as she ran.

“Very likely, but we mustn’t go there,” was Eileen’s reply. “It’s very unwise to shelter beneath trees during a storm, Violet. See, there’s that half-finished haystack; that will provide splendid cover.”

Just ahead, as Eileen had indicated, a stack of hay was being built. It was to be a large one, and, so far, it was quite low. As is usual in such cases, the unfinished stack was protected from the weather by a heavy tarpaulin, slung across wooden supports. Therefore, in the space between the canvas and the hay there was quite a large haven of refuge.

The girls reached the stack, and with many laughs scrambled up and lay half buried in the sweet-smelling hay. The canvas above them was slatting violently in the heavy wind which had suddenly arisen.

"Only just in time," gasped Violet, as she straightened her skirts. "Oh, Eileen, weren't we foolish to come out when a storm was brewing? We might have to remain here for over an hour!"

Eileen laughed merrily.

"It's quite an adventure," she said. "Oh, what a noisy old thing!"

She looked up, her pretty brow contracted. The canvas was certainly noisy, for it was fairly slack, and the wind caused it to heave and shake forcibly. And then, even as Eileen looked upwards, something rather startling happened.

An extra-fierce gust of wind came, and a short wooden pole, carelessly fixed above, came whirling down. One end of it caught Eileen a nasty crack on the side of her head, and she fell into the hay without a sound. A flash of lightning followed, accompanied by heavy thunder.

"Eileen!" gasped Violet frantically. "What's the matter? Are you hurt?"

There was no answer from the fallen girl.

Beneath the tarpaulin it was not only gloomy, but absolutely dark. Violet could scarcely see her companion, but she knew well enough what had happened. And Eileen's stillness sent a chill into her friend's heart.

"Oh, what shall I do?" panted Violet, in great alarm.

She bent forward, endeavouring to see exactly what injury Eileen had sustained. But it was impossible for her eyes to penetrate the gloom. Her companion's ominous stillness and silence, however, was sufficient to set her heart beating wildly with dreadful fears.

Her first thought was to obtain help without delay. What did it matter about the rain? Besides, the first few preliminary drops were now over, and although a downpour was threatening at any moment, so far there had been no rain to speak of.

Violet came to a decision very quickly. She slid from the stack to the ground, and commenced running swiftly towards the belt of trees, through which she would have to pass in order to reach the Hall. The clouds were now so thick that everything was pitchy dark.

And, meanwhile, Eileen lay upon the hay motionless. Perhaps her friend had been rather too hurried in rushing off for help; but, in any case, her motive in so doing had been entirely one of concern.

If Violet had waited only a couple of minutes longer she would have found that it was quite unnecessary for her to hasten away for help, for Eileen Dare quite suddenly turned over in the hay and assumed a sitting position. She rubbed her head just above the left ear ruefully.

"Oh, what happened, Violet?" she asked, half turning. "Something caught me such a nasty crack on the head— Why, what— Where are you, Violet?"

As she was occupying a position in the centre of the stack, by looking at either end the exterior was naturally clearly outlined. But Violet was certainly not there.

The girl-detective at once guessed what had happened. She knew that she had been momentarily stunned, and was quite sure that Violet had rushed off to the house in order to obtain assistance.

But as assistance was not necessary, and as she could not allow Violet to bring help uselessly, Eileen decided then and there to follow straight to the house, careless of the rain, which had now commenced to descend in earnest.

It would not matter so much if she got drenched through, for she was

only wearing a light voile dress, and she could easily change her clothes once she got indoors. Moreover, the rain would probably do her head a lot of good.

For at present Eileen was suffering from a mild fit of giddiness. The blow she had received had not been much in itself, and her injury was nothing more serious than an ugly bump.

She slipped down to the ground and walked round the haystack to the edge. At the corner she stopped, trying to pierce the gloom before making a run for the trees. And at that very second a hissing flash of lightning scared down from the heavens, long and extraordinarily vivid. The rain was now pouring down in torrents, and for a second the whole drenching scene was visible to Eileen's eyes.

And as the thunder rolled out with appalling intensity she felt herself become rigid, and her muscles tightened. For during that brief second she had seen something which aroused every instinct within her.

Twenty yards away, and running towards the stack with faltering strides, were two men! Even in that brief moment Eileen could see that they were well dressed; but her quick eyes had noted something else. She fancied she recognised something familiar about the build of one of them.

As the thunder died away the rain simply fell in one blinding sheet and Eileen heard the men fairly close. One of them was gasping painfully, the other encouraging him with rough exclamations.

"Buck up, Hallton!" came the voice. "Confound this infernal storm! But there's shelter here—the very place! It'll be as dry as a bone beneath the canvas of that hayrick!"

Eileen caught her breath in sharply, and did not move an inch. She cared nothing for the rain which pelted upon her head and shoulders. As a matter of fact, the cool rain cleared her head wonderfully, and the only effects of the blow she now felt consisted of a dull, inward throb. Her brain was as clear as crystal.

And she was alert—perfectly alive to the situation. And, not only that, she was astonished to a degree of amazement. That voice was well known to her, and her lips were set very grimly.

"Roger Haverfield!" she told herself. "Roger Haverfield and Martin Hallton—two chief members of the 'combine!' What can they be doing here? At last something is happening!"

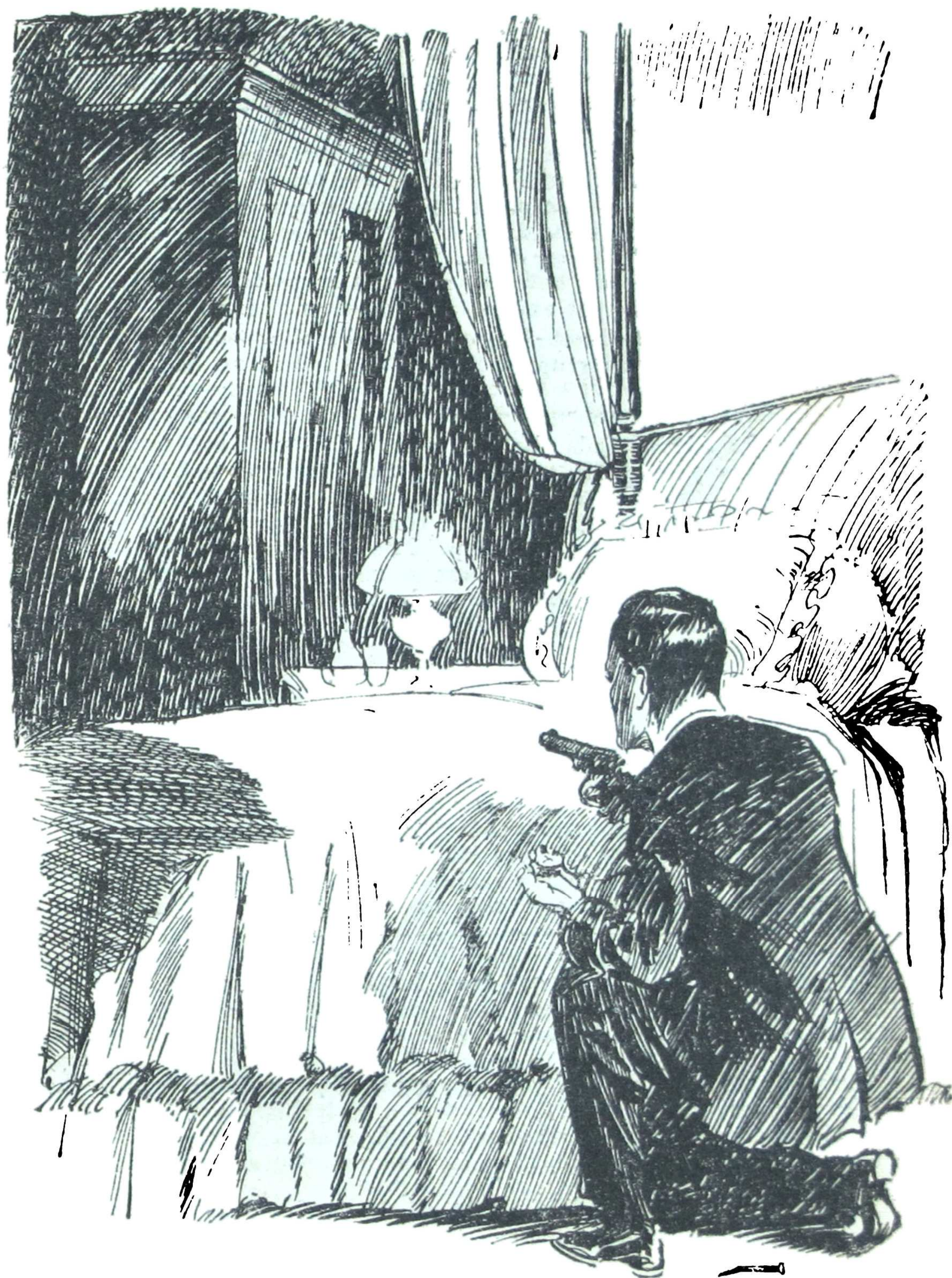
And, as Eileen had suspected all along, she was now positively certain that the attempts on Violet Verney's life were connected with her own enemies. What that connection was, and why the girl's death was desired, remained to be seen.

Her first thought was to hurry indoors as she had originally intended; but then Haverfield's words came to her. He and his companion were going to shelter beneath the canvas of the haystack.

She realised that here was a chance, possibly, of learning something. And Eileen had been inactive for so long that the prospect of a little adventure thrilled her. She made up her mind at once.

The storm was indeed terrible. Now that the rain had started in earnest, the wind had naturally gone down a lot, and the heavens were delivering their burden in swishing, hissing cataracts. Eileen did not remember having seen it rain so furiously before. Already she was soaked to the skin; every garment she wore was wringing wet. But she did not mind in the least; somehow she felt that she was to be amply rewarded for any little inconvenience.

From certain sounds she gathered that the two men were already beneath the cover, and she crept round the stack again until she came to one of the



Nelson Lee Keeps a Midnight Vigil.—(See page 25.)

open ends. The men had clambered up on the opposite side, and were probably nearer that opening than this.

The fact that Eileen was in a position of danger did not seem to strike her at all. She only thought of the possible end she might gain. It was risky, no doubt, to venture upon the stack which was already occupied by two dangerous men; but Eileen was no ordinary girl. She was well capable of taking care of herself, and believed, moreover, that there was no likelihood of her being detected.

With rare forethought she waited, crouching low, until the next flash of lightning had blazed out. It would never do for her to be caught climbing the stack by such a means. The presence of the two men had been revealed to her by the lightning, and she did not intend to betray her own nearness by rashly showing herself during one of the flashes.

It was only a little point, but one of great importance, and it proved Eileen's true detective instinct and natural sense of precaution.

Even as the thunder rolled out, long and reverberating, she took advantage of the uproar to climb swiftly up on to the stack. During that harsh series of claps she knew that any movement of hers would be unheard. And it was now so pitchy dark that there was no possibility of her being seen.

In less than twenty seconds she was upon the stack, half-buried in the hay. And, having gained this point of vantage, she was not content. She wormed her way forward through the hay, careless of pricks and scratches from the hard ends and occasional dried thistles.

And then she suddenly came to a stop. Looking cautiously up she found, rather to her consternation, that she was actually within a yard of a broad back! Had she proceeded much further, she would actually have blundered into one of the men. It was impossible for her to see this, but she could hear distinctly.

It was a curious situation.

Those two men had sought shelter, and had found it. And, unknown to both of them, their greatest enemy—the girl who had sworn to settle with them—lay within a yard, keenly on the alert, listening intently.

"Just our luck, Haverfield!" growled a rough voice. "Why in the name of fury couldn't this storm have blown over!"

"My dear Hallton, we have found shelter, so we mustn't grumble," came Haverfield's voice. "I suppose it would be rather unwise to light a cigar here, eh? This storm won't do any real harm—in fact, it will do good. Our friends will remain indoors, and our work, therefore, will be made the easier."

Eileen set her little pearly teeth grimly. As she had suspected, these men were not here by chance; they had been lurking within the Scarcroft Hall grounds for some sinister purpose. They had probably been lying low among the trees, and had been forced to evacuate their hiding-place because of the storm.

So, after all, the storm would probably prove to be a blessing in disguise.

Martin Hallton, Eileen well knew, was a rich London stockbroker—an influential man, and one who had great power. Yet he was one of the City's greatest scoundrels, and he had taken an active part in the foul plot against Lawrence Dare, Eileen's father.

"I don't like this infernal business at all, Haverfield," growled the stockbroker. "I shall be glad when we have finished with it. But to-day is Wednesday, and it is absolutely necessary that the girl should be dead before Saturday. If we fail to-night, something drastic will have to be done——"

"We shall not fail!" said the other curtly. "Why, man, haven't we

come here ourselves so as to make absolutely sure? This thing couldn't be trusted to anybody but ourselves—and we sha'n't make any blunders."

"Three o'clock's the time, isn't it?"

"Yes; at three o'clock the girl will die," replied Haverfield. "It sounds pretty horrible, I know, but there's no sense in being squeamish over an affair of this sort. If this girl lives after Saturday—well, you know yourself, Hallton, what the result will be."

"Yes; it's got to be done!" muttered Hallton. "But there's another girl, isn't there?"

"I believe so, but that's none of our business. If she chooses to sleep with Violet Verney, she must take the consequences. To warn her of danger would be to warn the Verney girl—and we mustn't risk anything like that. You failed yourself, Hallton, and to-night the thing has got to be done properly."

"Well, that spectre business was absurd, anyhow," said the other. "The girl won't be anticipating anything from the direction of the bedroom window, especially at three o'clock in the morning. And even if she is awake, she'll be unable to avert the——"

A sudden gust of wind caused the canvas to bellow noisily, and the rest of the sentence was drowned.

Eileen had heard quite sufficient to assure her that dastardly and diabolical work was contemplated. And, taking advantage of that prolonged gust of wind, she wormed backwards until, at last, she dropped lightly to the ground.

Her dress was torn and ruffled, and she presented a very forlorn appearance. But what she had learned had been well worth double the risk. Without delaying a moment she set off across the open space to the trees.

The storm had passed by now, and the rain had settled down to a steady downpour, which, judging by the appearance of the sky on the horizon, would soon cease altogether. Eileen hastened up the path to the trees, and soon came within sight of the Hall, with its four or five brightly glowing windows. And, as she had more than half expected, she suddenly came face to face with Violet, who was accompanied by the groom and the gardener.

"Hallo, what's wrong?" asked Eileen calmly. "Were you coming to rescue me?"

"Oh, Miss Ebbutt, I thought you were injured!" exclaimed Violet with relief.

But Eileen soon satisfied her friend that her injury had been merely superficial. The groom and the gardener were dismissed, and they all entered the house—the girls by the front entrance.

Eileen led the way straight to the bedroom, and while she and Violet were changing completely into dry clothing, she rapidly explained what had occurred at the haystack. Violet was amazed and startled, but Eileen told her not to worry.

Nothing, she declared, could be better. The scoundrelly enemy would be frustrated in his plans, and caught redhanded. In all probability the pair of them would be unmasked.

The whole case had undergone a change. The motive still remained a mystery, but there was now no doubt regarding the identity of the plotters. Violet could scarcely believe her companion's story, for she knew both Haverfield and Hallton well; and although she disliked both, she could scarcely bring herself to believe that they were such murderous scoundrels.

"Say nothing," advised Eileen. "Don't breathe a word of this to your mother, Violet; and, more important still, don't breathe a word to any of the servants. I am going out now, but I shall be back in less than an hour. I want to ride to Windsor on horseback—"

"Whatever for?" asked Violet, wide-eyed.

"To ring up Mr. Nelson Lee," was the girl-detective's quiet reply. "To request Mr. Lee to hasten down here with all speed. There is going to be grim work to-night, and we must be absolutely prepared!"

CHAPTER IV.

At Three O'clock—The Unseen Peril!—A Fiendish Contrivance.

NELSON LEE nodded grimly, and was silent for a few moments. Then, after pacing the room, he came to a halt before Eileen Dare and smiled.

"You have done splendidly, Miss Eileen," he exclaimed. "By all appearances, we shall be able to trap the scoundrels redhanded. You acted very wisely in ringing me up without delay."

The hour was just after eleven, and Nelson Lee and Nipper had been at Scarcroft Hall for twenty minutes.

Eileen had journeyed to Windsor according to her plan, and had got through on the 'phone to the great detective's number. At the moment Lee had been out, but Nipper had eagerly taken Eileen's message, and had promised to give it to his master the very instant he came in.

As it happened, Nelson Lee had returned only a few minutes after Nipper had hung up the receiver, and he and the detective at once journeyed to Windsor in the latter's powerful motor-car. In Windsor they garaged the automobile, and walked the distance from there to Scarcroft Hall.

Following Eileen's instructions, they had entered the Hall grounds by a private way, and had reached the house unseen, not a soul knowing of their arrival. The night was now clear and fine, and delightfully fresh after the storm.

Nelson Lee had been sure that Eileen would not call him down from London unless she had a very good reason. And, as he soon learned, her reason was very good indeed. He had listened to the story of the haystack incident with keen interest, nodding grimly once or twice.

He turned to Violet Verney, and saw that the girl was somewhat pale but quite composed.

"I have already decided upon a course of action, Miss Verney," exclaimed the detective quietly. "But can you satisfy me upon one point? You are acquainted, I believe, with both Roger Haverfield and Martin Hallton. Is there any reason, within your knowledge, why they should plot to kill you?"

"I know of no reason whatever, Mr. Lee," replied Violet earnestly. "Oh, it is terrible! That those two men should descend to such base villainy!"

Nelson Lee smiled very grimly.

"I assure you their baseness is nothing new to either Miss Eileen or myself," he replied smoothly, neatly tapping the ash from his cigar. "In fact, the two gentlemen have more crimes to their credit than I know of. One thing is certain, however; they will find they have blundered very badly to-night!"

"What's the plan, guv'nor?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"Well, young 'un, so far as we know no action is to take place until three o'clock in the morning," was Lee's reply. "And then, whatever takes place will occur in the young ladies' bedroom. Accordingly, you and I Nipper, will occupy that bedroom, and give our friends a warm reception."

"Oh, but——" began Violet.

"Let me hasten to add that you, my dear young ladies, must, of course,

sleep in another room," went on Nelson Lee, with a smile. "I place Miss Verney in your charge, Miss Eileen, and——"

"Oh, but is there nothing I can do?" asked Eileen quickly.

"Nothing beyond what I have said. It is necessary that Miss Verney should be closely guarded, and I do not think she could have a better guardian than you. Nipper and I will attend to the visitors."

The plan, accordingly, was carried out exactly as Lee had outlined—except for one slight alteration. Nelson Lee himself waited within the bedroom, and Nipper took up a position outside beneath a clump of bushes. In this way the bedroom was guarded from within and from without.

Lee had thought of obtaining police assistance; but, upon due consideration, he had decided that there was really no necessity for such a course. It was highly improbable that both Hallton and Haverfield would take part in the attack, and Nelson Lee and Nipper were quite capable of dealing with either one of the gentlemen.

By midnight everything was prepared. Eileen and Violet were safe in a bedroom some little distance from their original apartment. Neither thought of sleeping, and neither undressed. There was no telling what emergency might arise, and it was far better to be well prepared. Very naturally, they were allowed no light—for a light in that window would have told that a change had taken place.

Nelson Lee was sitting in the original bedroom, keenly on the alert—waiting. A shaded lamp near the bedside cast a subdued glow over the room. And Lee himself sat fairly close to the window, but to the left-hand side of it, in deep shadow. He would be able to see anyone who appeared at the window, but would remain unseen himself.

Mrs. Verney was in ignorance of the whole plan. Before Nelson Lee and Nipper had arrived Violet had bade her mother good-night, and the invalid lady went peacefully to sleep unconscious of the perils around her.

Nipper was the worst off of all. But he didn't care a rap about personal discomfort so long as there was to be excitement at the end of it. And, upon the whole, he was not so very uncomfortable after all. It was fairly dry beneath the bushes, and the night was quite mild.

From where he crouched he could see the dimly lighted bedroom window plainly. It was, of course, upon the first floor, but very thick ivy grew profusely upon the wall, and it would be perfectly easy for any man of ordinary agility to clamber up.

The one drawback was that nobody knew exactly what the coming danger consisted of. And, although the hour of three had been mentioned, Nelson Lee was very wise in preparing everything well beforehand.

The vigil was somewhat nerve-trying. There is nothing quite so "jumpy" as waiting for an event which is unknown, and which might possibly come from an unexpected quarter.

Lee held his revolver in readiness. He suspected that Hallton would enter the bedroom by means of the window, and would then betray the method which he intended employing for causing his victim's death.

The detective did not think it probable that Roger Haverfield himself would take an active hand in the game. It was more in keeping with Haverfield's character to escape the actual crime. He had a very wholesome respect for his own skin.

The time passed draggingly.

It seemed that hours had passed before one o'clock struck on the little marble clock which reposed on the mantelpiece. And the next hour was even more wearisome. But Nelson Lee was well accustomed to night vigils, and there was no prospect of his dozing or slackening of his vigilance.

The night was singularly still. This, in a way, seemed against the projected crime, but Lee was sure that the enemy would act. There was no reason why they should not. They had no suspicion that their plans had become known.

The bedroom light was nothing new. Recently Eileen and Violet had made a habit of burning the shaded lamp throughout the night.

At half-past two Nelson Lee began to get somewhat restless. He wanted something to happen badly. It would be a rich fiasco if he and Nipper had been waiting all this time for nothing.

Besides, Lee was anxious to capture one or the other of the scoundrels—with luck, the two—and to get to the bottom of the mystery. Why was this attempt being made on Violet Verney's life? What could be the reason for the activity of Eileen's old enemies?

When the clock showed that the time was just ten minutes to three, Nelson Lee bent forward slightly, and kept his eye fixed upon the window. He hardly knew what to expect; but he was sure, at least, that the "spectre" dodge would not be attempted again.

And the famous detective was certainly in no measure prepared for the startling event which did happen.

It was so utterly unexpected—so amazingly abrupt.

Three o'clock softly chimed, and every moment Lee expected to see a figure appear against the window. Or, failing that, he was instantly ready for action should Nipper suddenly call for assistance.

But neither happened.

Five minutes passed—five long, tense minutes.

Then, quite suddenly, and almost without Lee being aware of it, a slight hissing sound made itself apparent. He started, looked round sharply, and stared hard at the window.

There was nothing to be seen.

And the hissing became louder and more insistent. Lee half-started to his feet; he believed he could see a dim cloud of vapour—at least, so it seemed—entering the bedroom.

Then, like red-hot fire, something entered his throat. He staggered, fell back a pace, and uttered a gasping, agonised cry.

At the same second the hiss grew loud and angry, and the vapour he had seen enveloped him in a grey-yellow cloud. But the detective, with tightly-closed eyes and mouth, staggered backwards blindly, and tore open the door.

He passed through into the passage, slammed the door, and took in a hard, gasping breath. It seemed to tear his very throat to shreds, and the pain was terrible.

But Nelson Lee realised the horrible truth.

The bedroom was being filled with deadly poison-gas!

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CHAPTER V.

Nelson Lee is Puzzled—The Decoy Letter—In the Enemies' Hands.

NIPPER, outside, beneath the window, suddenly started to his feet. He had been lying down upon a comfortable rug. And now, his senses all alert, he parted the bushes, and stood out in the open.

"That was the gov'nor," he muttered anxiously. "By gum, what's happened?"

Only a second before Nipper had heard the agonised cry which had been forced from Nelson Lee's throat. The bedroom window was apparently open, and in the stillness of the night the sound had easily reached Nipper's ears.

What was the matter?

Nipper had been keenly on the alert for the last twenty minutes. But not a sign of an intruder had he seen. Everything had been still and quiet. He had watched the window constantly; and, even as he heard Lee's cry, his gaze had been fixed upon the ivy-covered wall.

Nipper had a feeling that something was wrong.

He stood there, in the open now, careless of what might happen. That cry had told him that his master was in peril. What the peril could be was at present a mystery. And then he heard the bedroom door slam violently.

"The gov'nor's cleared out!" muttered the lad. "By glory, there's something happening up there, and, what's more, I'm going to have a look."

Without further hesitation he crossed to the foot of the wall, grasped the ivy, and quickly and nimbly climbed up the strong roots to the window-ledge. Grasping this, he pulled himself up, and inserted his head within the room.

One glance told him that the apartment was empty.

But, even as he became aware of that fact, something else made itself apparent! He experienced the same sensation as Nelson Lee. And he saw, dimly, that the room was filled with yellow vapour.

Moreover, the vapour was pouring through the window, fully into Nipper's face.

He stood five seconds of it before he realised the truth.

And then it was too late. The agony in his throat was terrible, and he mechanically closed his nose and nostrils. His head swam, and the grip relaxed from his fingers. Like a stone Nipper dropped to the ground, and lay perfectly still.

He was gassed.

The poor lad had received a bigger dose than Nelson Lee, and he was consequently quite unconscious. The fall had not hurt him much, for the distance was not great, and the grass beneath the window had been rendered soft and spongy by the recent downpour.

Within the house, Eileen Dare had heard the slamming of the door. Nelson Lee's cry had not reached her; but she instantly surmised that the hour of action had arrived as she heard that slam.

"Oh, something is happening!" she exclaimed tensely.

Violet, who was dozing in a chair, started up in the darkness. Then the two girls, Eileen leading the way, left the room and quietly ran along the passage. They had decided, long before, to get in "at the death."

The passage was illuminated by a tiny lamp which stood upon a ledge. And, after the darkness of the bedroom, this light seemed quite bright. At all events, Eileen at once saw Nelson Lee leaning dazed against the wall.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Lee," said the girl quickly. "Why, what——"

"Don't open that door!" gasped Lee thickly. "For Heaven's sake go, Miss Eileen! The air—the air is poisoned! The hounds have used poison-gas!"

"Oh, oh!" panted Eileen.

Violet said nothing, for she was too overcome with terror. Poison-gas! And it had been originally intended for her! She pictured to herself what would have happened if Eileen had not detected the plot in time.

She and her girl-protector would have fallen victims to the ghastly, unseen death before they could escape. And Nelson Lee, himself, it seemed, had breathed a certain amount of the horrible gas.

Eileen quickly obtained water, and a long drink soon made a difference

in Lee's condition. As a matter of fact, he had not breathed any of the fatal gas, but had just taken a tiny diluted dose. He knew very well that if he had not closed his mouth in time he would, by now, have been utterly incapable of movement. He would, indeed, have been so badly gassed that weeks of illness would have followed.

As it was, however, he recovered practically at once.

"The devils!" he exclaimed huskily. "Thank you, Miss Eileen. I am much better now, and I am anxious for Nipper's safety."

"Oh, yes. What of Nipper?"

"I do not know. He was on guard outside, but he gave me no warning," Lee replied. "I fear something bad has happened. Somebody caused the poisonous vapour to pour into the bedroom, and by this time he has certainly escaped. But Nipper gave no sign. The lad must have been attacked without my being aware of the fact."

Without further delay, Nelson Lee and the two girls descended to the side door, and went round to the spot beneath the window. Violet, being somewhat nervous by nature, was perturbed and not a little frightened. But Eileen, on the other hand, was as cool as ice, and ready for anything.

She was first on the spot, and she fell on her knees beside Nipper's prostrate form. She saw, at once, that he was unconscious.

"He is alive!" she said quickly. "Oh, the demons! Poor boy—he is in a bad way, I fear. Shall we take him indoors, Mr. Lee?"

"Yes; at once."

Lee spoke briskly, but he was simply boiling with inward rage. If the hounds had really harmed Nipper— But the detective did not allow his thoughts to run wild. The best thing was to see exactly what ailed the lad.

Nipper was quickly carried indoors and laid upon a large sofa in one of the reception rooms. As soon as Violet had lit a lamp Nelson Lee examined his young assistant, and dosed him with cold water and brandy.

It was ten minutes before Nipper opened his eyes.

He had only taken one breath of the poison-gas—and then it had been diluted with air. It was grim proof of the deadly vapour's power. Both Nipper and Nelson Lee had had a taste of the gas, but no more. Nipper perhaps fared a little worse than his master.

But, under the care of Eileen, he very soon recovered. She had feared, at first, that he was in for a long illness; but the lad was as sturdy as a horse, and one breath of the poisonous gas was not going to lay him up.

After half-an-hour Nipper declared he was quite fit. This was, perhaps, not strictly true, but Nipper always made light of personal injuries. His throat seemed to be raw, and his head was swimming dizzily. But, on the whole, he was ready for action.

Nelson Lee at once commenced questioning the lad.

And Nipper related what had occurred. He had very little to tell. He had heard his master's cry, but had seen nothing of any living soul. Fearing that something was wrong he had climbed up the ivy to the bedroom, and one glance had told him that the apartment was empty. There was certainly nobody outside the window at the moment of Nelson Lee's cry.

"The thing is extremely puzzling," exclaimed Lee, with a frown. "In face of your story, Nipper, I really cannot see how the gas was poured into the room. You say you were watching the whole time, and that no living person appeared?"

"Not a soul, sir," said Nipper huskily. "And I know there was nobody in the room after you cleared out. That rotten gas caught me properly,

but I only took one gulp, thank goodness! Then I fell to the ground like a sack of flour, and it's lucky for me I fell on a soft spot!"

Nelson Lee was not only puzzled, but worried. Things had gone wrong seriously. He had been certain of trapping at least one of the two scoundrels who had plotted against Violet Verney's life. And yet neither Haverfield nor Hallton had shown a sign of themselves.

Shortly afterwards the great detective and Nipper entered the bedroom with water-soaked cloths tightly bound over their mouths and nostrils. And, after a very short examination, they found a small nozzle projecting into the room just above the window-ledge at the right-hand corner, and completely concealed by the curtain. The nozzle was of brass and quite small. The discovery of this little article at once led to a further discovery and a solution to the puzzle.

It was clear to Nelson Lee that the plotters had set to work with extraordinary care and precaution. Completely concealed in the ivy to the right of the window, a long tube was discovered. This evidently had contained a compressed supply of the death-dealing gas. Fixed to the nozzle end of it was a curious watch-like contrivance with the dial set at three o'clock.

"Dear me! Very simple after all," remarked Nelson Lee, evenly, after he and Nipper had pulled the thing down and had removed their improvised respirators. "You see, this apparatus was placed in position probably before we arrived, and it was set to release its poisonous contents at three o'clock. The idea of this gas-cylinder, with the flexible tube and nozzle, is remarkably ingenious."

"It's a fair knock-out, guv'nor," was Nipper's comment.

Eileen was very disappointed.

"What a pity I didn't learn more of the plan," she exclaimed regretfully. "Of course, Mr. Lee, you and Nipper kept watch for no purpose. I expect that horrible thing was fixed in position before you came. It was for the purpose of fixing it that Hallton and Haverfield were here. By this time I expect they are in London again."

Nelson Lee nodded grimly.

"And the worst of it is, we have no proof against them," he observed. "Really, they have proved themselves to be decidedly cute over this business. Supposing their plan had succeeded? It would have been quite impossible to have brought the crime home to the perpetrators. Even as it is, and knowing all we do, we are incapable of action."

"At present!" added Nipper somewhat fiercely.

"Exactly," agreed Nelson Lee. "Later on I do not think we shall be incapable of action. Moreover, a careful examination by daylight may reveal something of which we are at present in ignorance. It is more than probable that the scoundrels have left some sort of clue. And one direct clue may possibly be sufficient to trap them."

It was not yet daylight, and before long they all retired for a few hours. They had had no sleep so far, and it was morally certain there would be no further danger that night. Accordingly, Nelson Lee and Nipper went to a room which had been allotted to them, and Eileen and Violet returned to their own apartments.

It was fairly late before they arose. Lee and Nipper were both feeling the effects of the doses of poison they had received. Nipper was, perhaps, a trifle worse than his master. But he made out he was as fit as a fiddle.

As soon as breakfast was over Nelson Lee commenced operations by carefully examining the gas apparatus. After this he went over every inch of ground beneath the bedroom window. But his efforts were completely

fruitless; not a clue could be found. He knew who the culprits were but could not bring the crime home to them.

And he was puzzled and worried. What could be the motive? Eileen herself felt, somehow, that Hallton was the chief plotter, and she was firmly determined to unmask him.

But the whole devilish business seemed so utterly pointless. There was no question of money, and revenge as a motive Lee dismissed instantly. Neither Violet nor her father had ever done anything to warrant such diabolical measures being taken for the sake of vengeance. Besides, neither Hallton nor Haverfield would go to such risks without exceptionally strong reasons.

It was a puzzle, and no mistake.

Nelson Lee determined to remain at Scarcroft Hall until the following day—until Saturday had passed. From what Eileen had overheard, it seemed that Violet Verney must be killed before Saturday. It was reasonable to suppose, therefore, that her life would be in danger until then.

Her enemies would surely know that their vile schemes had failed, if only by the fact that there had been no commotion or excitement at the Hall. If their scheme had succeeded the whole of the district, Windsor included, would have been aghast at the tragedy. The fact that everything was as usual would tell Haverfield that the victim had escaped.

It was during the evening that events took a dramatic turn. Nipper was boating on the lake, and Nelson Lee and Eileen Dare had sallied out to make a second inspection of the hayrick and its surroundings. Even a well-defined footprint might prove to be the undoing of Violet's would-be murderers.

Violet herself remained indoors, with her invalid mother. She was explaining the presence of Nelson Lee and Nipper at the Hall; although she said nothing of their real object. Her mother was in no fit condition to stand a shock, and, for the time being, Violet had no wish to cause her mother unnecessary anxiety.

Eileen and Lee had promised to return in about an hour's time, and until then Violet intended remaining with Mrs. Verney.

But, while mother and daughter were talking, Marie, the maidservant appeared with a note. It had been brought, she declared by the gardener, and it was, apparently, urgent. Violet opened it quickly, and then uttered a short exclamation.

"Oh, I must go, mother," she exclaimed, and added a few words of excuse. She went straight to her own room, attired herself in a light woollen sport's coat and a neat little hat.

While she was doing so she laid the opened note upon the dressing-table and glanced at it once or twice. Then she hurried down, fetched out her bicycle, and immediately rode away.

The dusk was falling now, but there was still plenty of light for cycling. Violet was soon at the end of the drive, and then she set out in the direction of Windsor. The road was only a local one, and was singularly quiet and deserted. The distance was four miles to Windsor, but two of these was absolutely bare, with scarcely a house or a cottage. The hedges of the lane were high and thick.

Violet met nobody during her ride, and at the loneliest part of the two mile stretch, just as she was pedalling stiffly up a short rise, two men abruptly appeared from the hedges bordering the lane.

The girl was considerably startled and frightened when she saw, with a shock, that both men wore heavy slouch hats and that their features were completely disguised by black beards and moustaches, which were

obviously false. Nevertheless they effectively concealed the real identity of the men.

For one little instant Violet had an absurd thought that the pair looked exactly like a couple of moving picture desperadoes. And, indeed, they certainly seemed too unreal and preposterous to be dangerous.

But the two men roughly strode into the middle of the road and pulled Violet from her machine. Then, swiftly and decisively they pulled a heavy cloth over her face and carried her forcibly down a short, grass-covered lane. Violet was too frightened to offer much resistance.

She was carried into a low, tumbled-down cottage which lay completely concealed in the trees bordering the road. Once within the cottage she was bound and gagged, and left lying on the hard stone floor. The poor girl scarcely knew what was happening, but she had a dreadful intuition that awful danger was near.

The two men hurriedly left the cottage and fetched in Violet's bicycle. Nobody had witnessed the dramatic incident, and it had taken place in a very short space of time. As the disguised men re-entered the cottage they were having a low-voiced argument.

"At once, you fool," growled one curtly. "What's the sense of delaying? The motor-car is handy, and we must consider our own safety."

"But——"

"Oh, don't raise any 'buts'! There'll be no danger if we do the thing properly. It's got to appear an accident, and then nothing can be proved."

"Oh, I'll leave it to you——"

The cottage door closed, and all was silent.

CHAPTER VI.

Missing—A Terrible Discovery—Eileen's Determination.

"VIOLET!"

Eileen Dare called the name cheerfully as she entered the Hall. She and Nelson Lee had just returned, and the detective was on the terrace finishing his cigar, and talking to Nipper.

"Violet!" called Eileen again. "Oh, Marie, where is Miss Violet?"

The parlourmaid had appeared from the rear hall.

"Miss Violet went out," returned the girl. "Byles, the gardener, brought a note, and Miss Violet went away on her bicycle. It was nearly an hour ago, miss."

Eileen was surprised.

"Do you know whom the note was from?" she inquired.

"No, miss."

The girl detective thought for a moment, and then went upstairs. Never for an instant did she suspect that anything was seriously wrong. The thought that crossed her mind, in fact, was that Violet had been called to a neighbouring house.

She went to the bedroom which she and Violet shared, intending to tidy her hair, and change into an evening frock. But, before she had been in the apartment a minute she saw a piece of notepaper on the dressing-table. Twenty seconds later Eileen was hurrying downstairs as fast as her young legs would carry her.

She found Nelson Lee and Nipper on the terrace, and she came up breathlessly.

"Something has happened, Mr. Lee," she exclaimed tensely. "Violet is

not here—she went out on her bicycle nearly an hour ago. And I found this note on the bedroom dressing-table. Violet must have left it there.”

Lee took the note quickly.

“Good heavens!” he rapped out, as he read. “This—this is a decoy! Miss Verney has been tricked away by one of the simplest devices possible!”

The note, in fact, as Nipper saw when he read it, purported to come from Nelson Lee himself. It was short and curt, and said that certain facts had been discovered which made it necessary for Violet to go to Windsor at once. She was to say nothing, and she was to go on her bicycle. Lee would be outside Windsor post-office, and would there explain.

“The handwriting is disguised,” said Eileen rapidly. “It looks a little like your own, Mr. Lee, but Violet would not know. I doubt if she has ever seen your handwriting—and, in any case, she would not be sharp enough to see through the decoy. Oh, what has happened? How could we know this would—”

“I am to blame!” interjected Lee angrily. “I was a fool to leave Miss Verney unguarded in the house. But I never dreamed that anything would happen in the quiet of the evening. It only proves that this case is even deeper than we imagined. Nipper!”

“Guv’nor?” said Nipper promptly.

“Rush round to the stables and get the motor-car out,” rapped Lee crisply. “There’s not a single second to lose. By James, too much time has been lost already. Nearly an hour ago! Miss Verney has been—”

The detective broke off sharply, and, disregarding his order to Nipper, hurried round to the stable himself—Nipper by his side. The lad had been over to Windsor during the afternoon, and had brought the car along. The automobile would certainly come in handy now.

In less than five minutes the car was off. Eileen insisted upon going, and Nipper occupied the back seat. Nelson Lee sat at the wheel, frowning blackly, and chewing a half-smoked cigar. The detective was in a sorely troubled state of mind. He had an inward feeling that the very worst had happened.

It was dark now, and the car’s lamp were dim and inadequate. This, of course, was not the fault of the lamps, for they were huge, powerful things. But brilliant lights were against the regulations, and the lamps were masked.

Nevertheless, Lee drove quickly, and the distance was soon covered. After about two miles and a half the car descended a steep incline. At the bottom there was a sharp corner, and as Nelson Lee was applying the brakes in order to negotiate it, a lumbering figure appeared, waving his arms wildly.

The detective stopped, and he and the others saw that the figure was that of a young countryman, roughly attired, and with a face the colour of putty. He seemed incapable of speech for the moment.

“What is it?” asked Nelson Lee sharply.

“There’s—there’s bin a ’orrible haccident, sir!” gasped the youth. “Oh, my sakes, I—I ain’t never bin so frightened— Go you an’ look, master!”

With one accord Nelson Lee, Nipper, and Eileen jumped from the car and hurried forward. It seemed as though the spirit of tragedy was in the air, and the dreadful discovery which followed was more than half expected.

There, upon the road, lay Violet Verney’s poor mutilated body, lifeless and still. Her woollen sports coat was torn and dusty, and there was blood— Her bicycle lay close by, smashed to scrap-iron.

Nelson Lee was only a moment in making certain.

“No, no, Miss Eileen!” he exclaimed hoarsely. “You must not look—it is too dreadful. Nipper, keep back! By Heaven, as I am a living man the

scoundrels who committed this most foul murder shall pay for their ghastly crime!"

"Is—is Miss Verney dead, gov'nor?" breathed Nipper.

"She was killed instantly," was Lee's sad reply. "That is the only consolation we have, young 'un. She died quickly and painlessly. She was run down by a heavy motor-car—that is clear—and I am certain that it was no accident!"

Eileen seemed dazed for a moment. Then she proved her true feminine instinct; she commenced to sob quietly, and turned away to hide her trembling lips and wet cheeks. She had grown to like Violet, and now—— Oh, it was too horrible!

Nipper, too, felt a lump in his throat which absolutely refused to be swallowed. And the lad suddenly choked back a gulp, and clung to his master.

"We'll make them pay, sir!" he said thickly. "Oh, we'll make them pay!"

It was a shocking blow for them all. And Eileen soon recovered, and her pretty face was fixed and resolved. She lost none of her beauty, but there was a light of deadly, settled purpose in her dark brown eyes.

Nelson Lee was icy cold with fury and deep sorrow. Nipper had never seen his master so moved, and the lad himself was almost incapable of speech or action. The terrible tragedy was so unexpected, so completely overwhelming.

It was certain, of course, that Violet had been deliberately run down and killed; the decoy letter had been merely a trick to get her upon the lonely road.

Neither Nelson Lee nor Eileen knew what had actually happened. If they had known that Violet had been taken to the cottage they would certainly have investigated; but they knew nothing of that incident.

Had they been aware of it, they would have realised that nothing had been left to chance. Violet had probably been deliberately placed upon the road, and the motor-car had then—— But it was a ghastly subject. The scoundrels who had perpetrated the murder were little short of demons.

The poor, mutilated body was taken away, and the news spread rapidly—as such news will. The plot had succeeded, but there was a reckoning to come.

The following day an inquest was held, and the jury brought in a verdict of manslaughter against some persons unknown. Nelson Lee had purposely withheld his grave suspicions, and there was no reason to doubt that the girl's death had been accidental. Indeed, even if Lee had spoken, the police would still have believed that an accident had occurred.

Everything pointed to it. A large motor-car had run Violet down, and the driver, frightened by the accident, had driven straight on. The police were searching diligently for a strange motor-car; but Nelson Lee feared that they would not trace it.

Eileen herself broke the sad news to Mrs. Verney. The poor lady, crippled though she was, bore the shock bravely, and her doctor declared that she would suffer no ill effects. It was a terrible blow, but Mrs. Verney was strong-willed and courageous. Two nurses were sent to Scarcroft Hall to care for her until new arrangements could be made.

And, meanwhile, Nelson Lee and Nipper returned to London. Eileen followed on the Saturday afternoon—the day which would have been

Violet's twenty-first birthday. The girl detective, knowing that the crime had been committed by the "combine" she herself was pitted against, made a mental vow to get at the truth, and to unmask Martin Hallton; who was certainly the prime mover in the murder.

The foul plot had been successful, after all. The poor girl had been killed before her birthday. But why? What was the motive? It still remained as much of a mystery as ever.

It was on the Monday morning that Eileen came round to Gray's Inn Road. She found Nelson Lee in a black mood. The famous criminologist had told Nipper positively that he would start on no other case until the mystery of Violet Verney's death was cleared up.

Eileen Dare was as dainty and pretty as ever. Her visit was very welcome, and Lee greeted her cordially. And there was a light in her eyes and colour in her cheeks which promised well.

"Have you discovered anything, miss?" asked Nipper eagerly.

The girl shook her head.

"Nothing connected with the crime," she replied, turning to Lee. "But I believe I have thought of a scheme which will be successful, Mr. Lee," she added. "We know that Martin Hallton was very closely concerned in the murder, and if we can wring a confession from him we shall get at the truth."

Nelson Lee looked dubious.

"But I am afraid——"

"Please listen to my suggestion, Mr. Lee," went on Eileen quietly. "When I have finished, I think you will admit that the plan is well worth trying. It is a chance—a definite chance—and there is a strong probability that it will strike home."

CHAPTER VII.

Preparations—The Seance—A Confession—and the Truth.

TEN minutes later Nelson Lee's eyes were gleaming. He faced Eileen Dare squarely, and took her little hand.

"The plan is splendid," he said quietly. "There is more than a mere possibility that it will succeed. I am hopeful, indeed, of a complete triumph. But you are quite sure of your facts, Miss Eileen?"

"Oh, yes, I am positive," was the girl's reply. "After all, it was common knowledge. Martin Hallton believes in spiritualism, and attends seances quite regularly. And to-night he will be at a seance at Madame Ralston's in St. John's Wood Road. Madame Ralston, as you probably know, is well-known as a 'medium.'"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"It is quite a paying game, I believe," he said grimly. "There are quite a large number of society people who spend great sums on these charlatans. And Madame Ralston earns—or, at least receives—a queenly income. But I think she is one of those 'mediums' who really believes in herself and her work. There may be something in it all—I cannot say—but I do not tolerate spiritualism myself. Remarkable things certainly happen in this world, and it is not wise to speak too assuredly."

"Will you help me in my plan?" asked Eileen anxiously.

"Most certainly. I will visit Madame Ralston at once," was Lee's brisk

reply. "Perhaps you will come with me, Miss Eileen? It would be better. Nipper can go on one, two errands which will be necessary."

Very soon the detective and his lady assistant were in a taxi, bound for St. John's Wood Road. Here they interviewed a portly lady, who listened to their proposals gravely and with a certain amount of doubt.

Madame Ralston professed to be a genuine medium, but, in all probability, she was more or less a fraud. That, however, was nothing to the point. Martin Hallton was to attend a seance in her house that evening—and that was all that mattered.

After a considerable amount of trouble, and after certain financial matters had been gone into, Madame Ralston agreed to Nelson Lee's suggestion. It was quite against her principle, she declared, but this was an exceptional case. If a murderer was to be exposed, she would only be too glad to assist—for a consideration.

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The scene was a strange one.

A number of well-dressed ladies and gentlemen were seated round a curious table, and the light which filtered into the large room was mysterious and dim. It was reflected light, and of a rosy tint, and nobody knew exactly where it came from.

As a matter of fact, the seance at Madame Ralston's was in progress, and had been in progress for upwards of half an hour. At the present moment madame was causing certain spirits to rap upon the table.

Undoubtedly the raps were audible, and there was nothing visible to show how they were caused. But it is doubtful if spirits were contributing to the entertainment. But that, of course, was Madame Ralston's business. These people came here to hear and see spirits—and so they had to be satisfied.

Only the centre of the room seemed to be illuminated—and then only dimly. The walls and corners of the apartment were shrouded in black gloom.

The seance proceeded, and madame was evidently in good form to-night. At all events, she presently produced some spirits which startled every occupant of the room. The medium herself lay back in her chair with closed eyes, and with a peaceful expression upon her comfortable features.

"I seem to see strange figures," she murmured dreamily. "Strange spirits appear before my vision. Ah, what is this? I appear to see an executioner—an executioner dressed as in the Middle Ages! And there is a girl; a slim, beautiful girl, and I know that her name is Violet. I do not understand why I knew her name, but I am certain. She is a recent spirit, for she has but lately passed into the visionary state— Ah, ah! They grow more distinct to me. Come, spirits, come!"

All this was uttered in a low, dreamy murmur, and the listeners bent forward with eager expectancy. One gentleman, indeed, seemed strangely perturbed. He was trembling visibly with excitement, and a hoarse exclamation, low and tense, had left his dry lips.

"They are coming!" went on Madame Ralston, in a louder voice. "Ah, they are coming quite close. See! The spirits will appear before us all!"

Even as she spoke a ghostly kind of blue-white light appeared at the far end of the room. Here there was a wide arched recess, usually covered with heavy curtains. The latter were now drawn back, and everything behind was inky dark except for the uncertain spot of curious light in the centre.

Gradually, but perceptibly, the light grew larger and somewhat brighter. And then it was seen that the light resolved itself into two separate portions. These, in turn, took shape, indistinctly at first, but hazily defined within a few moments.

And there, seemingly floating in the air itself, were two spirits. One was that of an executioner with a huge axe—the legendary Spectre of Scarcroft! His eyes were pale in colour, and they seemed baleful and murderous. And, in some strange way, he resembled one of the men who formed part of the audience!

The other was the spirit of a young girl; pretty, but inexpressibly sad. She seemed to be pleading, and her expression was pitiful. And there were several low murmurs from the sitters in the room. The spirit was that of the murdered girl, Violet Verney.

Abruptly, startlingly, a strange thing occurred.

One man staggered to his feet, moved forward a pace, and held his hands before him as though to shield himself. The others kept their seats, transfixed by the tenseness of the situation.

The ghostly executioner lifted his arm deliberately and slowly, and his finger pointed at the staring man.

“Martin Hallton,” came a low, hollow-sounding voice, “what do you see before you? I am Master Jabez Donald, executioner to His Majesty King Richard the First, who lived on this earth in the year eleven hundred and fifty——”

A strangled cry came from Martin Hallton's dry throat.

“By Heaven!” he choked. “Go back—go back!”

“You dared to wear clothing in order to brutally murder this innocent girl, Mistress Violet Verney,” went on the spirit relentlessly. “Failing in that dastardly attempt, you plotted to kill her——”

With a low cry Hallton fell to his knees, for they simply refused to bear his weight. The man was completely terrorized. He fully believed this thing to be the spirit of the Scarcroft executioner, and his nerve gave way. Being a man who believed in spiritualism he instantly fell a victim to the trick which had been played.

“She is alive,” he croaked hoarsely. “Violet Verney is alive! I meant to kill her at first, but I failed. And—and then—— She is alive—she is alive!” he repeated frantically. “I will tell you where she is!”

And then bright lights appeared in the room, and all was confusion. The “spirit” stepped out, and clapped a strong hand upon Martin Hallton's shoulder. He started up, his eyes goggling, and his teeth chattering.

And his fear changed to fury and amazement. For he saw, in a moment, that the figure was that of a real man—and, further, that he was none other than Nelson Lee himself!

“Am—am I dreaming” gasped Hallton faintly.

“No, you are not dreaming,” said Lee. “You have been forced into a confession, Hallton, and I should advise you to make an absolutely clean breast of everything. You have irretrievably compromised yourself, in any case.”

Hallton seemed dazed, and then uttered a curious, half-insane laugh. He was looking at the second “spirit.” The girl was Eileen Dare, carefully made up, and wearing curious apparel.

The other occupants of the room were collected in a crowd round Madame Ralston, who was hurriedly explaining what had actually occurred. Many of the people turned now, and gazed at the wretched Hallton.

Eileen was quivering with excitement and eagerness.

"Was that true, Hallton" she asked quickly. "You said that Violet Verney is alive? Speak, man! You have nothing to gain, now, by remaining silent."

Hallton snarled furiously.

"Hang you," he grated; "suppose I refuse to say a word——"

"Then it will be worse for you," cut in Nelson Lee curtly. "At present there is a warrant out for the arrest of Miss Verney's murderer. You have no escape, you cur. You will be well-advised to tell the whole truth."

"Miss Verney is alive!" muttered Hallton, completely broken. "Yes, I'll tell the truth—it's the only way now. Miss Verney is down in a little cottage, close to Windsor. It was another girl who was found!"

Eileen stared open-eyed at Nelson Lee.

"Violet is alive!" she panted. "Oh, what can it all mean?"

The explanation, however, was quite plain and simple. Hallton spoke freely and told everything. He was, in fact, unnerved, and cared little what he said. But it was all taken down, and he signed the confession after a short argument.

Some startling facts were revealed.

It had been Hallton who had entered the Hall in the guise of the executioner, and he had failed. Then he had attempted to kill Violet by means of the poison-gas, and had again failed. The wretched man made no mention of Roger Haverfield; he had sense enough to limit the confession to himself.

Knowing that something drastic had to be done, he had been journeying down from London in order to settle the thing once and for all. And on a lonely stretch of road a huge racing-car had thundered past him at about fifty miles an hour—some joy-rider blinding about with murderous speed.

Then Hallton had seen a girl knocked down by the racing-car—knocked down and instantly killed. The car had roared on without stopping. Nelson Lee guessed that Haverfield had been present in the car, but there was nothing to prove it. Hallton declared that he had stopped, had taken the dead, unknown girl on his car, and had intended taking her into Windsor.

But then he had been struck by an amazing idea—a ghastly idea—but one which would obviate the necessity to kill Violet Verney. He would make it appear that Violet had been killed! Accordingly, he had taken the body to a little cottage, where an old hag of a woman, half-insane, was living, and who was in Hallton's pay. He had placed her there for a purpose connected with Violet, in case she was wanted.

Violet had been lured away from the Hall by a decoy-note, and had been taken to the cottage. Here the old hag had removed her clothing, and had dressed the dead body in Violet's attire. It had been a terrible task, but the old woman had done it with seeming ease.

The supposed body of Violet had been placed on the road, together with the wrecked bicycle. Owing to the dreadful nature of the accident, the unknown girl's features were quite unrecognisable, and there would never be any doubt as to the identity of the body.

And, as Hallton had hoped, the trick had succeeded. There had been an inquest, and no question of identity had arisen. The disappearance of the other girl, as was reported in the papers, was in no way connected with the Verney affair.

But here, at this point, Nelson Lee wanted to know the meaning of it all. If Hallton desired Violet Verney's death, what was the good of the expedient—for Violet was still alive. But Hallton declared that it would be

sufficient for his purpose if it was presumed that Violet was dead. The girl was to have been released two days later.

The motive was then explained.

Violet's father, Mr. Godfrey Verney, had mentioned in his will that a sealed packet was to be given to Violet on her twenty-first birthday. The package was in the hands of a firm of solicitors, whose name was not given, and who had received secret instructions.

But the packet, as Hallton well knew, contained certain damning facts against him; facts concerning a certain matter which he could not divulge. If that package had been opened Hallton and many other men would have been placed in a position of grave peril. It was impossible to steal it, for it was not known who had charge of it.

In Verney's will, however, he had stated that if Violet died before her twenty-first birthday the package was to be burnt unopened. So the only means of avoiding a certain disaster was to either kill the girl, or to make it appear that she had been killed—anything, in fact, to cause the packet to be destroyed.

Hallton concluded by triumphantly declaring that, by this time, the packet was burnt to cinders, together with its fatal contents. If he himself had fallen, the others were perfectly safe. His confession only affected himself, and he is true to his companions.

Later on, after Hallton had been taken away, Nelson Lee and Eileen had a short private talk. They could easily read between the lines, and much was clear to them.

It was obvious, of course, that Godfrey Verney had been associated with the precious "combine" which Eileen was fighting. He had, apparently, entirely disagreed with their scoundrelly practices, but to unmask them would be to implicate himself.

So, when dying, Verney had set all the facts down in writing, and had left it for his daughter to read upon coming of age. The "combine" evidently knew that the package contained evidence which would ruin them all, and they had, accordingly, decided to avert the disaster at any cost.

Probably Roger Haverfield or Jonathan Bridger had conceived the plan of killing Violet, but Martin Hallton had been entrusted with the task. As he failed, Haverfield himself had taken a hand in the game.

When further information was forthcoming, Nelson Lee learned that Godfrey Verney had, indeed, left his daughter a great sum of money. But it was not known until her coming-of-age; even the girl had been unaware of the coming fortune.

And Lee did not think it probable that Verney had set down the facts for his daughter to hand on to the police. She would fear to do that, knowing that her dead father's name would be blackened. But Verney had written everything down in order to warn his daughter of the true nature of the men about her.

Finding that she had come into money, the "combine" would probably try to defraud her, and Violet had therefore been prepared. The information was for her own private use—not for the police. Her father had acted in order to safeguard Violet; he did not wish his former friends to be exposed.

Verney had been true to his associates, but he did not trust them—that was what it amounted to. And they, knowing, in some way, the nature of the package, realised that safety only lie in preventing it ever being read.

It was more than probable that Verney had disagreed with the "com-

bine " regarding the fate of Eileen's father, Lawrence Dare. He had refused to take any part in the crime, and had threatened to expose them all.

Violet was little the worse for her adventure. She was found by Nipper and Detective-inspector Fuller, who went down to Windsor by car while Nelson Lee was taking Martin Hallton's confession.

The old hag was arrested, but she was ultimately sent to an insane asylum. Violet returned to her mother, who was overjoyed to see her. It was, indeed, a glad home-coming.

But there was one other little affair which Nelson Lee cleared up. He set himself a certain task—deliberately and carefully. He tracked down the inhuman scoundrel who had knocked down the poor girl who had been substituted for Violet.

The girl was a working-class girl, and, as it happened, she had neither father nor mother. Her life had been miserable, and the motorist suggested that she had thrown herself before his car.

But the man—a rash young fool of a fellow—received a stiff term of imprisonment for his dastardly conduct in driving away after the accident.

Martin Hallton himself was tried at the Old Bailey for premeditated attempted murder and for base conspiracy. He was sentenced to seven years' penal servitude.

Thus another member of the "combine" had been dealt with. Eileen Dare was keeping her word to her father. One by one she was dealing with the men who had sent Lawrence Dare to his death. One by one they would all suffer.

THE END,

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The island reached, the party begin to explore, and meet with a half-starved man named MIGUEL, whom they befriend. That same night, however, Alec sees the stranger prowling about the camp, evidently bent on some evil errand, and follows him to a distant camp, where he evidently has made an appointment, for there are others present to meet him. Unfortunately, Alec is discovered, and shots are fired at him. He escapes, but discovers that he is lost! A search party, headed by DR. CAMPBELL finds him, and he tells his story. On the return journey the doctor falls and injures his ankle. He is laid up for some days, and meanwhile Alec and Clive spend a few hours in a boat fishing. They find their bait continually being carried off by some creature which they determine to capture. Suddenly there comes a jerk, and the line runs out at terrific speed. (Now read on.)

The Subterranean Lake.

THEN there was a pause, and the line ran loose and got coiled and tangled about the drum and its frame.

Alec stepped forward to try to free it. Before he could do anything there came another pull which tightened up the tangle into a dense mass.

"The—the line's jammed!" breathed Alec, in worried tones. "What's to be done now?"

Tom Read had given them much excellent advice and various warnings, but he had not provided for this. Alec looked vainly at his chum for an idea.

Clive had none to offer, and, in fact, matters were quickly settled for them without their aid.

Something had to go—to give, as it were. And in this case it was the boat which gave. That is to say, it yielded to the strain, and began to move through the water.

First it went with a series of jerks, which threw the young fellows—they

had both risen up, intending to get into the bow—off their feet, sending them sprawling on the flooring boards.

Then, as the boat began to move faster, the jerks became gradually less and less, till presently the craft was steady enough for them to get up.

The boat was rushing through the water at a tremendous rate, throwing the spray from her bluff bows in fine fashion. Ahead, there was a great



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swirl in the water and innumerable eddies. These marked, of course, the track of the creature which had seized their bait, and, being unable to get free from it, was now racing through the water somewhere underneath the surface and dragging the boat behind it.

But what the creature was they had no more idea than before, for nothing of it could be seen.

Away they travelled along the winding creek, which ran inland an unknown distance. All that was certain was that it was gradually narrowing, but at the same time the rocky banks became higher.

At every turn of this waterway the cliffs rose on each side, shutting them in, as it were, more and more, until they lost all sight of the open water behind them, and seemed to be surrounded by high precipices.

It was now they realised that this inlet was, as has been mentioned, a sort of gorge, which evidently wound its way towards the very heart of the mountain. It showed no sign of ending, as the two wondering explorers had been hoping, in a cul-de-sac, where their formidable "steed," which was towing them along, might, by good luck, run itself aground in some sandy or muddy strand.

For still, the farther they went, the higher and more precipitous became the cliffs on either side which shut them in, the smaller the view of the sky overhead, and the darker and more gloomy the outlook below.

Moreover, the incoming tide was with them, and was running up the gorge at a great rate, which, of itself, made it pretty obvious that they could not be coming near the end of it at present.

This view of their position forced itself into their minds after a while and awoke them to the necessity for action.

So far they had done nothing, attempted nothing. They had been almost afraid to move. The boat swayed and swung about so, it seemed as though a very little weight thrown on one side might cause her to capsize. And the hissing of the spray and the queer echoes that came back to them on all sides from the rocks rendered conversation difficult.

And still, though they watched the swirl ahead with a sort of spell-bound fascination, there was no sign of their grim "steed"—nothing that they could fire at with any hope of hitting the thing.

Alec was the first to wake up from the deadly stupor which seemed to have seized upon them.

"Can't we—er—cut the wire, or something?" he said—or, rather, called out. "We've got an axe, you know. Don't you think that's the best thing to do?"

Clive decidedly agreed that it would be the best thing to do. But could they do it?

It meant, of course, letting their "grand capture" go, after all the trouble they had taken about it. The doctor would doubtless be disappointed, and perhaps might blame them or laugh at them. But what could they do? As matters were, they were in very evident danger of their lives. At any moment the creature might turn, or swerve, or double in such a way as to upset the boat or swing it against the rocks at the sides.

Then their doom would be sealed, for they would have no chance even to swim ashore.

But ere they could take any definite action matters were settled for them for the time being, and that in a most startling and alarming manner.

(Continued overleaf.)

The boat swung round a sharper bend than any they had yet passed, and there they saw, looming up in front of them, what looked like an impassable barrier of sheer rock. But a second glance showed them the wide, yawning, black mouth of an underground river.

And before almost they realised it, they had plunged into the inky darkness of this tunnel, and were being carried still onwards upon its gurgling waters.

It was a terrible time which followed, in the awful depths of that black river rushing along through its rocky tunnel.

Never in their whole lives, as they afterwards agreed, had they undergone a more terrifying experience. For long after, even amongst their numerous subsequent adventures, it stood out as one that had tried their nerve and courage more than any other.

To realise it properly, one has to remember the helplessness of their position. They could see absolutely nothing, and, therefore, dared not move. They could only hold on and wait for—they knew not what.

All the time there were jars and jerks and swerves on the part of the boat, which rendered it necessary to hold on tightly for dear life. They could not tell but what at any moment one of these jars might mean the crashing and smashing of the craft upon some rock in the midst of the stream or against the wall or rock on either side.

The gurgling and sucking sounds made by the wavelets against these sides, odd, unaccountable noises which seemed to come from somewhere ahead; strange phosphorescent lights which suddenly appeared and disappeared here and there, some rising up out of the water alongside as if about to attack them—these were some of the happenings which kept them all the time straining both ears and eyes.

And two or three times occurred even more alarming happenings. The boat ran against, or on to, something a little below the surface, over which it had to scrape its way, so to speak, as best it could.

Here the boat was lifted bodily partly out of the water, as the bow first rose and then dipped again with a plunge, so that it seemed a miracle that it was not capsized.

And what was worst of all was that they could feel that what they were passing over was not a hard substance, such as rock or a sandy shallow, but something soft and slimy. It was, in fact, as Alec afterwards described it, as if they had passed over some great creature with a slimy, rather soft, scaly back, lying a little below the surface—a creature which, had it not been asleep or too sluggish to move quickly enough, could easily, by a slight twist of its body, have heaved the boat into the air and overturned it.

However, wonderful as it seemed to the two, looking back afterwards, they escaped all these and other perils, and presently hope began to stir once more in their breasts; for they actually saw a glimmer of light ahead of them.

At first they were afraid that this might prove to be only some fresh phosphorescent phenomenon, but gradually, as they continued their wild career, they could see that they were nearing the end of the fearsome tunnel.

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