

NO. 65.—FOR READERS OF ALL AGES.—1^D.

Week ending
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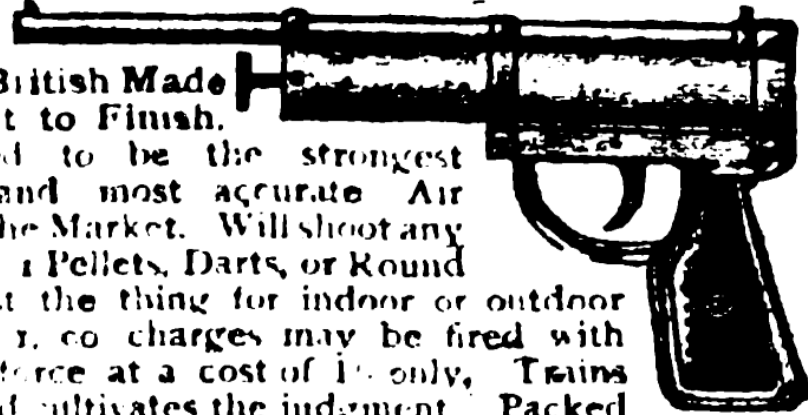
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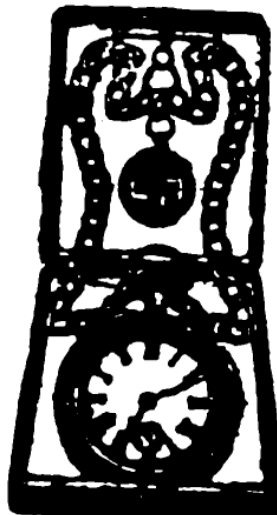
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A Sudden Quarrel—The Unseen Cleft—A Great Discovery.

MR. JULIUS QUINTON threw a cigarette-end away with an impatient gesture, and shook his head determinedly.

"No, Illingford, I won't agree," he said with decision. "You may as well abandon the whole thing now, and at once. I won't agree for a moment."

Basil Illingford frowned.

"But, my dear Quinton," he protested, "think carefully before——"

"I have thought carefully, and, to be perfectly frank, your proposal strikes me in a very unfavourable light," replied Mr. Quinton, whipping the head of a daisy off with his walking cane. "Without being absolutely dishonest, your suggestion is—well, crooked. That is plain speaking, Illingford!"

The other man flushed with ill-concealed temper.

"Yes, it is plain—infernally plain," he replied curtly. "But if you'll be sensible, Quinton, you'll see the whole thing in quite a different light. In business it is impossible to be absolutely straight. Now and again one is compelled to venture somewhat near the mark. Mind you, I am not saying that my proposition is dishonest—in fact, it is a pure business scheme—and if you show the amount of commonsense I credit you with, you'll drop that foolery about the thing being crooked, and listen to reason."

Julius Quinton smiled half-contemptuously, and did not reply for some moments.

The two men were walking through a wonderfully delightful glade, but neither had any thought for the beauty of the scene. The late August day was warm, and the weather was that of real summer. Overhead, through the trees, the afternoon sun shone down with considerable heat, and scarcely a cloud marred the azure blue of the heavens.

The glade was situated in the delightful old park which surrounded Quinton Manor. The house itself was some considerable distance away, quite hidden by the trees. The glade, moreover, was in a wide hollow, and here the two men were absolutely private and far from other eyes.

The two men were very unlike one another in personal appearance, and, from the trend of the conversation, it was fairly evident that they were widely different in their views and thoughts. Julius Quinton was somewhat

elderly, and his hair was more than tinged with grey. His figure was a little below the average, but well proportioned, and he was still muscular and active.

His companion, Basil Illingford, while, perhaps, possessing a more commanding appearance, nevertheless struck one as being a harsh man. His eyes, very different from those of Quinton's, were cold in appearance, and closely set. Illingford was tall—almost lanky—and loose-jointed. He wore a small dark moustache on his upper lip, and his age was somewhat difficult to determine. It was possible for him to be anything from thirty-six to well into the forties.

By profession Illingford was a mining engineer; a clever man, with an extensive business. He had offices in Victoria Street, London, and he added largely to his income by various business deals which, as Mr. Quinton had said, could scarcely be called strictly honest.

Quinton himself had made quite a considerable fortune—legitimately—as a wholesale City merchant. Several years ago he had retired, had purchased Quinton Manor and the surrounding estates, and had settled down.

Quinton Park itself was not very well kept, and it was mainly composed of woodland and grazing property. Breeding cattle had been Quinton's hobby, but recently, within the last year, misfortune had dogged him. Many seemingly safe speculations had gone the wrong way.

In consequence, Julius Quinton now found his position somewhat uncertain. He was not penniless, but he had certainly begun to think seriously of disposing of his estates and settling down in more modest quarters.

He was married, and his wife, too, had been urging him to act before matters came to a crisis. But there was no immediate hurry, and Quinton was a man who believed in making quite sure of himself before taking any definite step. He still had money, he was still able to keep up his home comfortably, but the prospect ahead was not promising. Unless the financial position improved very soon, Quinton Park would very shortly have to go.

The Quintons had no children, greatly to their disappointment, and their household, accordingly, was not very large. During a recent visit to London Mr. Quinton had become acquainted with Basil Illingford, and had at first rather liked him. For Illingford was engaging in manner, and a pleasant companion.

But very soon Quinton began to understand his new acquaintance's real character. And now, to-day, Illingford had come down to Derby, in which county Quinton Park was situated, in order to lay before its owner a certain proposition.

It concerned a certain deal in stocks and shares which would have been extremely profitable both to Quinton and to Illingford. But the scheme would have involved the ruin of at least six men, and Mr. Quinton had no wish to gain wealth by such means.

Undoubtedly, there was nothing actually unlawful in what Illingford proposed. It was, as he said, simply a matter of business. But it all depended upon the point of view which was taken. Some men would have jumped at the chance, caring nothing at all for the ruin which would involve innocent people. But Quinton was honourable, he was a straight man to his finger-tips, and he did not hesitate to tell Illingford exactly what he thought of him.

"My dear Illingford," he said quietly, "what you term foolery is, as a matter of fact, merely my sense of honour. We came on this little walk to discuss your business deal. Well, you will oblige me by referring to it no more. You are welcome here as my guest——"

"Nonsense!" ejaculated Illingford sharply. "Why, man, there are

thousands of pounds in the game! By profession I am a mining expert, but I have dabbled on the Stock Exchange for years past, and I know exactly what I am doing. Heavens, Quinton, you can't afford to be squeamish: some poor devil or other goes to the wall every day on 'Change—they expect to—it is all part of the game. And if you'll leave your affairs entirely in my hands I'll guarantee to bring off the coup exactly as I have already outlined."

Mr. Quinton carefully selected another cigarette from his case, and passed the latter to his companion.

"My views may strike you as being conservative and old-fashioned," he remarked, "but once I have made up my mind, Illingford, I don't usually alter it. To tell the honest truth, I regard your scheme as nothing less than a base and scoundrelly swindle. Good heavens! Do you think I could live comfortably, knowing that I had brutally sent to the dogs three or four poor fellows——"

Illingford lost his temper.

"It seems I have wasted my time in coming here," he snapped, with bitter anger. "I thought you were a sensible man, Quinton. I now learn that you are nothing more nor less than a squeamish funk! You don't possess the pluck of a rat——"

"Stop that!" Quinton exclaimed curtly. "Abuse won't alter my decision, Illingford. I think you had better leave this property before I lose my temper."

"Oh, so that's your attitude, is it?" snarled Illingford, losing complete control of himself and breathing hard. "You're a fool, Quinton—a short-sighted, little-minded——"

"My mind, at least, is capable of grasping the fact that you are a scoundrel and an unscrupulous trickster!" said Quinton slowly. "Your point of view, Illingford, is degraded and low. Your only thought is for your own personal gain—for you stand to rake in a considerable pile out of this deal. Well, I have told you my decision. I won't consent."

"Confound you——"

"Get off this property at once!" went on Quinton, coming to a standstill, and pointing a quivering finger. "Do you hear me? Go!"

Illingford stood with clenched fists and with his face flushed and distorted into a snarling grimace. By nature he had an almost uncontrollable temper, and now, at this pregnant moment, he found himself unable to govern his movements.

Quinton was angry, too, but his anger was born of indignation and contempt.

Illingford's, on the other hand, was the fury of a frustrated and outwitted man.

As Quinton had said, the mining engineer would have received a very respectable sum for his share in the deal. Illingford had been absolutely confident that the transaction would go through without a hitch. And now, to be frustrated, and to be, moreover, held up to contempt, was more than his temper could stand.

Without warning he sprang at Julius Quinton, throwing down his stick and snarling with the fury of a wild beast.

"By heavens! I'll make you withdraw those insulting words," he rasped hoarsely.

The elder man was taken by surprise. Never for a second had he imagined that Illingford would brutally attack him. His own cane was knocked out of his hand, and, before he could guard himself, Illingford's fist crashed

stunningly into his face. He staggered back with a cry of pain, and his attacker laughed with evil triumph.

"You scoundrel!" panted Quinton.

But he was quite game. He instinctively knew that Illingford intended following up his first attack by a second. And when the younger man did so, Quinton was better prepared. He seemed to realise that it would be a grim struggle—possibly a fight for life.

Illingford was in such a state of ungovernable fury that he was capable of almost any violence. Yet Quinton knew that the other man was fully responsible for what he was doing—fully aware of the dreadful nature of his assault. The attack was deliberate; and Illingford's intentions were obviously sinister.

Judged from a cool standpoint, there was really no cause for this murderous attack. But when Illingford was fully roused he became a veritable demon for the time being. And Julius Quinton's refusal, accompanied by his undisguised contempt, aroused everything that was bad in the other's nature.

He attacked again viciously, but Quinton was now well on his guard. The two closed in a fierce embrace, and struggled desperately.

"You mad fool, Illingford!" panted Quinton hoarsely. "Calm yourself, man! What good will this do? This wild brawling——"

"I'll make you realise I am not the man to be thwarted, you hound!" Illingford exclaimed savagely. "When I have knocked you down I'll go!"

But Quinton had no desire to be knocked down, and he resisted with all his strength. He was entirely on the defensive, for this mad fight was not of his making. He was extremely glad that there were no witnesses to view the disgraceful encounter.

The two men swayed and staggered. And the demon within Illingford gained the complete mastery over him. In order to avoid a terrible, driving blow, Quinton stumbled backwards. He plunged into a mass of low bushes, which grew closely together in a large, uneven clump. They were thorny, prickly, and of such a nature that they were generally avoided.

At this tense moment, however, Quinton had no choice. He backed into the bushes, and floundered helplessly. His assailant, with a low snarl of grim amusement, followed into the bushes and gripped Quinton's arm. The cruel notion had entered his head that he would hurl the other face downwards into the thorns.

But, with dramatic suddenness, an amazing thing occurred.

Julius Quinton uttered a gasping cry, and, before Illingford's eyes, disappeared from view! The whole thing happened in the space of three seconds.

It was an astounding incident. The bushes were no higher than three feet, and yet Quinton had vanished completely and utterly. Illingford was on the point of hurling himself forward, and there was no time for him to draw back. He attempted to do so, but failed.

He fell sprawling on exactly the same spot as Quinton had been before he disappeared. And then the mining engineer felt himself plunge through the prickly bushes, down, down!

His mind became chaos, and he had no true idea as to what had occurred to him. During a dozen tense seconds, which seemed like hours, he felt himself falling down a rocky slope, in utter darkness. It was so astounding that Illingford was incapable of thought. But, even as he was falling, he knew that it was not a sheer drop. He was, rather, slithering down a steep slope, the surface of which was smothered with rough boulders.

Then abruptly he came to a stop. Instinctively he knew that his posi-

tion was precarious, and that to shift would probably be fatal. So for a full three minutes he remained absolutely still, panting heavily, and vaguely trying to determine the extent of his injuries.

He was scratched about the hands, and his body was bruised and sore. But he was certain that no bones were broken, and that he was comparatively whole.

But where was he?

What had happened?

The whole thing was simply astoundingly singular. There, in that glade, both he and Quinton had plunged down into the seemingly solid earth!

Yet the explanation was really simple.

Illingford learned the truth as soon as he regained his full senses. It was impossible to see his hand before his face, for the blackness was like that of a pit. He remembered, however, that he carried a small electric torch within his inside coat pocket. Very cautiously he felt in the pocket and drew the torch out and pressed the switch.

As it happened, the battery was running out, and the light was consequently weak. But, down there, it was of sufficient strength to show him very clearly exactly where he was.

The very first thing he saw was a yawning chasm absolutely at his side; he was, in fact, almost overhanging the dreadful abyss.

He lurched backwards hastily, panting heavily with alarm and fear. And then, flashing the light around, he saw, at the rear, a long, sloping cleft leading steeply upwards. The cleft was no wider than five feet, and it seemed to be fairly even. And the rough surface of the slope instantly made it clear to him that it would be a comparatively easy matter for him to climb up to the exit above.

"By Jove! The very ground is cut in two from the surface downwards!" gasped Illingford huskily. "This cleft, of course, was unknown and unsuspected. The outlet at the top is concealed by the thorny bushes, and it is more than likely that nobody on earth knows of its existence. But Quinton—what of Quinton?"

For a moment Illingford's brain seemed to come to a standstill. The full realisation of what had occurred came to him with an appalling shock. The chasm at his feet! Julius Quinton had plunged down to—what?

It was horribly obvious. Quinton, sliding down the slope, had been caught upon the ledge. It was obvious, therefore, that he had plunged down to instant death below. How far below it was impossible to say, but that he was dead was certain.

"Great Heaven, I have killed him!" muttered Illingford, shivering with the ghastly realisation. "But nobody will ever know—nobody will ever guess!"

In a flash it occurred to the scoundrel that there was every possibility of his escaping scot-free. He had met Quinton on the long drive; nobody had witnessed the meeting, and they had at once walked off across the park. Consequently, if Quinton's body was discovered, it would be supposed that he had accidentally fallen into the cleft.

And Basil Illingford realised that the sooner he escaped the better it would be. With this intention he twisted round and cautiously raised himself so that he would be able to crawl up the slope. Already he had experienced one shock; now right on the top of it a further surprise awaited him. So far he had paid no attention to the seemingly rocky walls around him. But now, quite suddenly, his attention was arrested. He kept his light steadily fixed upon the opposite wall, and gazed at it with eyes which seemed to start from his head.

"Coal!" he panted, with growing excitement. "Coal!"

Illingford was by profession a mining engineer, and, to do him justice, he was an exceedingly clever and able man at his own business. And he knew that he had made no mistake.

With his excitement growing rapidly, he made an examination, almost forgetful now of the perilous nature of his position. And the result of his examination was startling. He saw that the property was extremely rich in the finest coal! And his experienced eye told him that it was no insignificant deposit; on the contrary, he was positively convinced that here, on the Quinton Park estate, was a startlingly valuable coalfield!

There was no telling how deep the seams ran, but Illingworth was sufficiently experienced to know that this unsuspected coalfield was worth a stupendous fortune.

And Julius Quinton had been pressed for money—pressed for money when his very house stood upon a fortune. The property belonged to the Quintons—they had bought the freehold of it, and it was theirs entirely.

Illingford forgot his desire to escape, he forgot the fact that he had killed Julius Quinton, and sat down to collect his wife. After all, there was nothing extraordinary in the discovery. Not ten miles away, he knew, a profitable coal mine was situated. And here, by a sheer chance, he had learnt the earth's secret.

For fully ten minutes Illingford sat perfectly still, thinking—pondering over the situation.

And when he, at last, commenced climbing upwards to freedom, and to the light of day, the germ of a cunning scheme had already taken root in his evil brain.

CHAPTER I.

Eileen's Morning Spin—The Stranger—Eileen's Resolve.

"O H, it's glorious!"

The words were gaily uttered by a girl, who sat in the driving-seat of a little motor-car; little, but powerful, and of a racing build, which gave it a wicked, saucy appearance. The car, in fact, could attain sixty-five miles an hour easily, and then have a certain amount of throttle to spare.

Its owner—the girl who was driving it—was now romping the car along at a comfortable twenty-five. As a general rule she disliked excessive speed, but was quite ready and capable enough to give the little racer its head when occasion demanded.

It was early morning, and the girl was just out for a spin before breakfast. The weather was glorious, and the whole countryside was bathed in clear, radiant sunshine. The first tinge of autumn was making itself apparent on the trees, and already a few brown leaves were falling.

August was nearly out, but the month might have been late June, to judge by the weather. The road along which the car was spinning was quiet and dusty, and fairly narrow. It was, in fact, a mere country lane, and one side was bordered by ripening crops, and the other by a great stretch of wooded parkland.

The latter was a portion of the Quinton Park estate, and the little lane was its southern boundary. And this morning was the day following the dramatic struggle which had taken place between Julius Quinton and Basil Illingford with such tragic results.

"Oh, how perfectly lovely!" exclaimed the girl in the car, breathing in

the pure air, and shaking her head so that her delightful dark brown hair was allowed to wave carelessly in the breeze.

She was undoubtedly a beautiful girl. Bare-headed, and dressed with exquisite neatness in a white drill skirt and a light-coloured, silky-looking sports coat, she was simply a young goddess of girlish freshness and health.

Her figure was as neat as any girl's in the land, her features were delicately moulded, and her eyes sparkled with sheer youthful gaiety and high spirits. It would have been difficult to find a more attractive picture.

Eileen Dare was a girl in a thousand, for in addition to being exquisitely pretty, she was talented to a remarkable degree. All the smaller accomplishments of life came to her naturally. She could ride, drive, swim, run like a deer, and her daring and keen sense of judgment were astonishing. She could play the piano, the violin, and she could sing and dance—and do all infinitely better than nine girls out of ten.

And her nature, while being sweetly feminine, was kindly and resolute. She possessed a strong will, and when she made up her mind to a thing it would take a deal more than persuasion to influence her.

Eileen was an orphan, and her story was somewhat sad.

Her father had been driven to utter disgrace and a miserable death through the machinations of a combine of rogues—well-known City men all, but scoundrels nevertheless. They had rid themselves of Mr. Lawrence Dare, in order to appropriate a wonderful engine he had invented.

Now the villainous combine was reaping the reward which was rightfully Eileen's, and would have been her father's, if he had been allowed to live. Nelson Lee, the celebrated detective, had personally investigated the case at the time, but he had been unable to avert the dreadful tragedy.

Nelson Lee, however, had been struck by the amazing detective ability which Eileen had displayed. In many respects the girl was as keen and as smart as Lee himself. Consequently, she had since worked with Lee on several occasions—and the great criminologist had excellent cause to highly value the girl's assistance.

Just before her father had died Eileen had sworn to him that she would make every man who had participated in his ruin suffer disgrace and degradation. Those men—who privately called themselves "the combine"—had murdered Mr. Dare, for in the eyes of Heaven it was nothing else but black murder.

And already Eileen had brought two of the select gang to book. Sir Ambrose Shore had died while awaiting his trial, and Martin Hallton had been sentenced to seven years' penal servitude.

There were others—many others—to be dealt with yet!

Roger Haverfield, the chief plotter; Jonathan Bridger, Ford Abbercorn, and several more well-known City men—all would have to suffer. Not until her vow had been accomplished would Eileen Dare be satisfied.

At present the girl detective was on a short holiday in the country. She had furnished a sweet little cottage, and lived the simple life there with her aunt—her only relative and companion.

By this time, of course, she had completely recovered from the great shock of her father's death. And, being sunny and joyous by nature, she was a picture of health and happiness. She was enjoying her holiday immensely.

The little racing car continued its way almost noiselessly, and Eileen reckoned that she would arrive home in nice time for breakfast. The early morning air had sharpened her appetite, and she told herself that she would create a record.

She had followed the main road for a certain distance, and had then

turned off into a side lane. She was now heading for home by a roundabout route.

As the car glided along Eileen suddenly sat quite upright, with her head in a listening attitude. Instinctively she closed the throttle somewhat, and the racer slowed down.

"I am sure I heard something!" Eileen told herself. "Oh, perhaps it was only a bird, or——"

Her thoughts broke off abruptly. For now, without any doubt, a cry for help reached her ears. It was the voice of a man, hoarse and faint, but carrying with it a note of appeal which instantly impressed itself upon Eileen's kindly nature.

"Help!" came the cry. "Oh, can you hear me? Help!"

Eileen Dare snapped the throttle lever over completely, slipping out the clutch, and pressed her dainty foot upon the brake. The little racing car stopped abruptly, and Eileen nimbly hopped into the road. She did not trouble about leaving the car in a formal manner; she simply lifted her active legs, and sprang lightly out into the road over the top of the closed door.

"Where are you?" she cried, looking round into the trees and hedges, but without result. "Call out again, please!"

There was a moment's pause, and then, quite clearly, the unseen man made his voice heard.

"I am here—among the trees! Thank Heaven, I have been heard at last!"

Eileen set her pretty lips firmly, and pushed her way through the gap in the hedge, and found herself among the trees of Quinton Park. At this spot they grew thickly against the roadside in a dense plantation. Eileen moved forward quickly until she had covered about a hundred yards.

And then, in a tiny clearing, she caught sight of the man who was appealing for assistance. He was laying full length in the tall grass and weeds, and his face was turned towards Eileen. She saw, with a quickening of her pulse, that the stranger's face was cruelly battered and scratched. With a little cry of pity, Eileen ran forward.

"Oh!" she exclaimed anxiously. "What has happened?"

"For Heaven's sake, give me water," croaked the prostrate man. "Oh, I am glad you have come——"

He broke off involuntarily, for his voice trailed away, and his features became convulsed with agony.

Eileen was very concerned. The stranger was, indeed, in a pitiful condition. He was an elderly man, and his greyish hair was ruffled and smothered with grime and particles of dead leaves and twigs. His face was almost unrecognisable, for it was blackened and smothered with blood from several ugly gashes. And the torn state of his clothing bore witness to the fact that his bodily injuries must be fairly serious.

Eileen bent over the prostrate man.

"Can you manage to get to your feet?" she asked gently. "I have a motor-car just handy, and I'll soon have you in a place of safety——"

"Let me have some water!" moaned the other.

Eileen looked round her quickly, and then remembered that, near the road, a tiny silvery brook rippled along its course. She sped lightly back, and soon returned with a large leaf-full of crystal water. The leaf could not contain much, but it was quite sufficient for the immediate need. The stranger gulped the water down, and then lay for a few seconds motionless. After a minute, however, he raised himself on his elbow, and, with Eileen's help, staggered to his feet.

Without the girl to assist him it would have been impossible for him to

rise, for he was weak with exhaustion and racked with pain. It was a slow business getting to the roadway, and could not have been accomplished at all if Eileen had not half carried the injured man. But she was as strong as many men—perhaps stronger—and the task was not difficult.

At last the stationary motor-car was reached, and the stranger was deposited in the vacant seat. Then, a little breathless from her exertions, Eileen drove off. Her companion lay back among the cushions, pale, breathing faintly, and a little delirious.

It was not far to the girl's cottage, and during the journey she did not pass a soul.

The cottage was small, but dainty, and creepers covered its walls, and hung down in festoons over the quaint rustic porch. A small but sweetly pretty garden surrounded the cottage, and at the rear was a tiny stable—now temporarily converted into a garage. There was no other dwelling-place within sight, and a more peaceful spot could scarcely be imagined.

Eileen ran swiftly up the short path, entered the cottage, and soon returned with Aunt Esther. The latter was a lady of comfortable proportion, and her age might have been about forty-five—but she certainly looked younger. Her features were kindly and good-natured, and her eyes were dark grey and full of gentleness and kindness. She loved Eileen dearly, and took the keenest pleasure in looking after her orphan and niece.

“What is it, Eileen dear?” she asked, as the girl bustled her out of the cottage.

“Come, auntie, quickly,” Eileen replied. “A poor gentleman has met with an accident, and I have brought him home. He was in a state of complete exhaustion, and I have no idea who he is. You don't mind him staying here until——”

“My darling!” protested Aunt Esther, as she passed into the road, “you did quite right. Oh, what a state the poor man is in!”

Between them they did not have much difficulty in getting the injured man into the cottage. And the next half-hour was busily occupied in attending to his injuries and making him comfortable.

After his head had been bandaged, and after he had drunk a glass of water, he became fully conscious of what was going on, and he smiled with gratitude and thankfulness. He did not know who these two good Samaritans were, but he resolved to thank them adequately later on.

Eileen and Aunt Esther found that the patient's injuries were not serious. His face and head were nastily cut, and there was an ugly bruise over his left ear. His hands were torn dreadfully, two finger-nails being almost ripped off. And his shoulders and both arms were simply blue-black from wrist to neck.

And these did not comprise all his injuries. His shins were hacked cruelly, and had bled considerably. Both knees were grazed and torn. Bodily he was unharmed. But the number of his gashes and bruises had weakened him to such an extent that it was a wonder he had been conscious.

Moreover, he had been without food or water since the previous day, and had been practically on the point of exhaustion. It was only his splendid health and iron will which had carried him through.

Eileen and her aunt held a short consultation, and they decided that a doctor was not necessary. The patient's injuries, though numerous and painful, were, after all, superficial. A week's absolute rest and careful attention would set him firmly on his legs again.

He was almost a comic sight when his benefactors had finished with him. His head was swathed in white cotton bandages, and his hands were almost covered with similar material. He lay back in a soft easy chair, with his

feet upon a velvet hassock. Both shins had been carefully bandaged, too, and the little cottage sitting-room smelt like a chemist's shop—for a good deal of soothing and healing ointment had been used.

Clean and tidy, the stranger presented a very different appearance. He was obviously a gentleman, and his voice was refined, in spite of its huskiness. As Eileen and her aunt sat down to breakfast, he looked on smilingly, and felt well enough to partake of food and coffee.

"I hardly know how to express my gratitude——" he began.

"Oh, please don't thank us for what we have done," said Eileen softly. "If you are not feeling strong enough to talk——"

"But I am as comfortable as possible," smiled the other. "You have made me wonderfully easy. And I have been collecting my thoughts this last ten minutes. I want to tell you exactly what occurred, and who I am. I daresay you are curious to know."

"Perhaps we are," said Aunt Esther gently. "You have had a terrible fall, I judge. Eileen and I believe that you tumbled over a cliff."

The stranger nodded slowly.

"Well, I had a dreadful fall, certainly," he admitted. "My name is Julius Quinton——"

"Oh!" said Eileen, looking up. "Are you the owner of Quinton Park?"

"Yes. And my injuries are not due to an accident, Miss Dare," replied Quinton. "To be blunt, I was deliberately hurled down a steep and rocky cleft; I was murderously attacked, and I am certain my assailant believes me dead!"

Both Eileen and the elder woman ceased eating, and their faces blanched.

"Oh, dear!" said Aunt Esther. "How dreadful!"

"But who attempted to kill you?" asked Eileen keenly.

"A scoundrel named Basil Illingford——"

"Oh!" cried Eileen abruptly.

Julius Quinton looked at the girl curiously.

"You know the man?" he asked.

"I do not know him personally," was Eileen's slow reply. "But I am aware that he is a base rogue, and I am not in the least surprised that he attempted to kill you. Mr. Quinton, Basil Illingford is a wicked man, and I believe him to be capable of almost any villainy."

The girl detective's words were quiet and grave. And she had excellent cause to speak with conviction, for she was aware of one certain fact—Basil Illingford was a member of the combine she was herself fighting! Illingford was one of the cruel scoundrels who had sent Eileen's father to death.

Quinton was somewhat surprised to learn that the girl knew Illingford's character so well, and he went on to describe the mining engineer's proposal, and the quarrel which had ensued upon the scheme being rejected.

The injured man told how Illingford had attacked him, and how he had struggled for life. There was no doubt, Quinton declared, that his companion had attempted to kill him. The ferocity of his attack had been sufficient evidence of that.

Quinton went on to say that both men had been surprised by the startling fall through the bushes. He himself scarcely recollected what had actually occurred; he simply remembered falling, striking against sundry hard projections, and then he had seemed to fall into space, and he had lost consciousness.

"I must have come to my senses last night, some time after dark," Julius Quinton went on, sipping his coffee. "It was several minutes—perhaps half an hour—before I realised my dreadful position. I was in total darkness, and

I could feel that I was suffering from numerous painful injuries. I managed to get to my feet, and felt that my prison was wide and roofless."

"But could you not see?" asked Eileen.

"After a while I remembered that I had a box of vestas," replied Quinton, "and I at once struck one of the matches. It seems that I was at the bottom of a kind of pit, and a yawning hole above, narrowing perceptibly, told me how I had entered.

"Well, I knew how serious my position was, but I thought it possible that Illingford might send rescuers down to me. After two hours had passed, however, I realised that the scoundrel had abandoned me, believing, probably, that I was dead. And so I set about the task of climbing out of the pit."

The rest of Quinton's story was straightforward, but harrowing. After several vain attempts, he had managed to climb the nearly perpendicular wall to a kind of ledge—where, unknown to him, Illingford had fallen. The distance had not been far, but the climb had torn Quinton's hands terribly, and he had nearly tumbled back at the last moment.

A projection, upon which he placed his feet, gave way as he was hauling himself on to the ledge. And only by a herculean effort had he managed to pull himself to safety. If he had, indeed, fallen back, it would have been utterly impossible to escape.

From the ledge it had been comparatively easy to mount to the surface, for the slope, though steep, was jagged and rocky. Once out in the open, under the stars, Quinton had intended walking to the Manor.

But the reaction of the terrible adventure had set in as soon as he saw the sky over his head. He collapsed, and lay in a state of semi-consciousness for hours. Fortunately, the night was dry, or he might have contracted pneumonia.

With the dawn he had attempted to rise to his feet, but had been physically incapable of doing so. He was parched, and every movement caused the most excruciating pains to shoot through him.

But, more dead than alive, he had crawled through the undergrowth aimlessly. He scarcely knew where he went, or why he continued his efforts; he seemed to be struggling along mechanically.

But he had been aware that he was growing weaker and weaker as the time sped by, and he had had a dim notion that he might be seen by a farm labourer. And then, just as he was on the point of a second collapse, he had heard Eileen's motor-car.

"You know the rest," concluded Quinton quietly. "And I am quite sure that if you had not rescued me, Miss Dare, I should have experienced a fatal breakdown. And there is Illingford—that villain shall pay dearly for his murderous attack!"

Eileen stirred her coffee thoughtfully.

"But will they not be anxious at the Manor?" she asked. "You can have Illingford arrested at any time; he thinks you are dead, and the delay will do no harm. It will prove, indeed, that he deliberately abandoned you in the cleft."

"What of your wife, Mr. Quinton?" inquired Aunt Esther. "Surely she will be anxious——"

"As it happens, my wife is staying in Brighton," the injured man interjected. "She, of course, knows nothing of the occurrence. Neither, as a matter of fact, does anybody else, with the exception of Illingford—and he will keep silent for his own safety. And my absence will cause no anxiety at the Manor."

"But you will be missed, surely?" asked Eileen curiously.

"No doubt. But I have a habit of making up my mind suddenly," smiled Mr. Quinton. "On several occasions I have travelled to London without telling any member of the household at the Manor. And it will be concluded by the servants that I have merely taken a trip. Nobody will dream of the actual truth."

Eileen's eyes looked keen and very acute.

"How long can you remain here without being missed?" she asked.

"A week at least," answered Quinton smilingly. "My absence will cause no alarm until my wife's return, at all events."

Eileen rested her elbow upon the table for a few moments. And when she looked at the patient again there was a light of determination in her dark eyes.

"Will you grant me a favour, Mr. Quinton?" she asked quietly.

"A dozen, if you wish!" said the other, without hesitation. "Considering my indebtedness to you, I should be an ingrate indeed if I refused a favour."

"Well, Mr. Quinton, I want you to remain here, in this cottage, for three or four days," said the girl. "I want you to 'lie low, and say nuffin', and leave things in my hands. You must not communicate with your wife, or your household at the Manor, or with the police."

"But, my dear young lady, what is your object?" asked the surprised Quinton.

"My object is to entrap Basil Illingford," replied the girl gravely. "He must not know that you are alive until I have dealt with him. By a strange chance, I have every reason to desire Illingford's downfall, and this affair will give me a strong hold over him. I can force him to do my bidding!"

It was rather an astonishing speech from such a pretty, dainty girl. And Julius Quinton was more than surprised. But there was something in Eileen Dare's tone which told him that she was grimly in earnest, and that she meant every word she uttered.

"I will do precisely as you request, Miss Dare," said Quinton readily.

"Thank you so much," was Eileen's quick answer. "Now, auntie, we must hurry."

"Hurry! My dear child, whatever for?" asked Aunt Esther mildly.

"I am going to London at once!" said the girl detective, rising to her feet. "An opportunity has occurred for me to expose Basil Illingford—and I should be foolish if I delayed action."

CHAPTER II.

Nelson Lee's Advice—Rogues in Council—Significant Words.

NELSON LEE neatly snipped the end off a cigar, and paced the consulting-room. The famous detective was looking very thoughtful, and when he had got the cigar well alight he came to a sudden halt.

"The circumstances are curious, Miss Eileen," he remarked slowly, "but, as you have said, the fact that Illingford thinks he murdered Mr. Quinton gives you a decided advantage over him. You may be able to put your knowledge to good account."

Eileen nodded.

"That is my intention, Mr. Lee," she replied. "But I thought it better to come to you, and acquaint you with the facts. I want your advice," she added, with a smile. "You will be able to tell me just what to do."

Nelson Lee was silent for a few moments.

He and Nipper, his young assistant, had just been listening to Eileen

Dare's strange story—the story of Julius Quinton's escape from the cleft. Eileen had arrived by express train from Derby—where she had left her little car.

She had told everything, and Lee was greatly impressed. He, too, knew full well that Basil Illingford was an associate of Roger Haverfield's, and, therefore, a member of the private combine.

This combine, it may be here stated, was no recognised concern—no public body. It was just a gathering of influential City business men, who combined their brains and capital to the general advantage of all. And all the transactions which were effected by the combine were shady and crooked. Ostensibly each man was highly respectable and honourable. But in secret they perpetrated the most villainous of swindles and frauds.

Both Nelson Lee and Nipper had been very glad to welcome Eileen Dare. Since the affair of Miss Violet Verney, at Scarcroft Hall, Eileen had not been much in London, and had consequently paid few calls at Gray's Inn Road.

And now, it seemed, she had hit the trail of another scoundrel. She was well on the way to getting equal with another of her enemies.

Her story was interesting, and Lee was greatly struck by the possibilities.

“So you have come to me for advice, Miss Eileen,” the detective observed pleasantly. “Well, I will certainly do my best. By all appearances, you hold friend Illingford within a cleft stick. He believes that he killed Julius Quinton, and there is no means of his finding out that Mr. Quinton is alive. Therefore, possessing such fatal knowledge, you will be able to dictate to him.”

“You've got him absolutely whacked, miss,” said Nipper with relish.

“If he finds out that Quinton is alive, half your power will have vanished,” went on Nelson Lee. “Accordingly, you must waste no time. You want my advice. Well, I advise you to go straight from here to Basil Illingford's office. Confront him, and frighten him into submission.”

“But that'll be dangerous for Miss Eileen, gov'nor!” protested Nipper, who admired the girl tremendously, and hated to think of her in danger.

Eileen smiled.

“I think I have proved that I am capable of taking care of myself, Nipper,” she said easily. “Besides, there is no need for me to fear Basil Illingford. He is a contemptible brute, and he will collapse when I quietly inform him that I can have him arrested for murder at any minute I choose.”

“That is my notion,” agreed Lee. “You can, by veiled suggestion, make him believe that you witnessed the struggle. Tell no falsehoods, of course, but give hints. Illingford will be sufficiently thunderstruck for your purpose.”

“What purpose do you mean?”

“I think your object in tackling your enemies, Miss Eileen, is to degrade them and make them pay up to the hilt for the wrong they did your poor father,” said Nelson Lee quietly. “Up to now you have dealt with two men, but there are many more who were equally as guilty. Basil Illingford is one of them. Well, if you can settle with him you will be satisfied?”

“Of course,” replied the girl. “This may sound dreadfully vindictive, Mr. Lee—at least, it would do so to a stranger. But we understand the precise position, don't we? This venomous combine is a peril to honest folk, and by smashing it up I am only working in the cause of right and justice. Besides, I keenly enjoy the work, and I know that I am doing good.”

"Precisely. But, as I said, what you desire is Illingford's——"

"Blood!" put in Nipper, promptly.

Eileen laughed.

"No, Nipper, I don't want his blood," she replied. "I merely wish to break his power—to sever him from the combine, and send him away in disgrace. That will be sufficient punishment."

Nelson Lee flicked the ash from his cigar.

"Very well, your task is simple, my dear young lady," he exclaimed. "Go straight to Illingford's office, and confront him—take him by surprise. You will, of course, go to work in your own way, and what I am suggesting is merely an outline. Make him realise that it is within your power to have him instantly arrested. Then, with that sword of Damocles hanging over his head, you will be able to dictate your orders."

"My hat!" commented Nipper eagerly. "That's a stunning wheeze, guv'nor!"

"My good Nipper, I did not ask you for these interjections," remarked Lee severely. "If you wish to commend the scheme, save your praise till afterwards. Well, Miss Eileen, there are many courses open to you, but I suggest this one. Give Illingford twelve hours in which to distribute his entire fortune among charities—for he is fairly wealthy—and to leave the country. Give him just twelve hours, and no more. Personally, I think the plan will work. Rather than stand his trial for murder Illingford will grasp at the straw.

Eileen's eyes sparkled.

"That is an excellent suggestion, Mr. Lee," she exclaimed. "For, not only shall I have the personal satisfaction of knowing that Illingford has paid the price, but good will be done with the man's ill-gotten money. And the country will be well rid of a rogue."

And the girl jumped to her feet and drew her gloves on.

"You're not going yet, miss, are you?" asked Nipper.

"Why should I delay?" was Eileen's reply. "I shall be quite interested in that interview, and am looking forward to it. And I fancy it will be entirely successful. Thank you ever so much, Mr. Lee, for telling me what to do."

Within five minutes Eileen had taken her departure. She walked the distance to Victoria Street, where Basil Illingford's offices were situated. It was a fairly long walk, but Eileen did not mind that. Her young legs were fresh and active, and she was one of the most athletic of girls.

Moreover, she wished to think the plan out in detail. Nelson Lee had merely given her a suggestion, and, as the detective had said, it was for her to fill in the gaps.

It was now afternoon, and the heat was rather oppressive. But Eileen was lightly attired, and the walk did not trouble her. By the time she was nearing Victoria Street she had her plan of action all cut and dried.

As it turned out, however, her careful thought was so much waste, for the scheme was destined to be abandoned. An incident occurred which rendered a visit to Illingford's office out of the question.

As Eileen was about to cross the road to the big block of buildings in which the office was situated, she suddenly noticed three men emerge from the wide doorway. At once the girl paused and examined the articles in a shop window.

For in a flash she had recognised the three men.

One was Basil Illingford himself, another was Roger Haverfield, and the third Rudolph Stebbing.

Haverfield she was personally acquainted with, and she knew that if

he spotted her he would be suspicious. The other two, she believed, did not know her to look at. Roger Haverfield was under middle age, and he owned a great steel manufacturing works in the Midland city of Birmingham. It was at these works that the invention of Eileen's father was being constructed—and the enormous profits were going into the pockets of the combine.

Rudolph Stebbing, the third man, was somewhat elderly, tall, but with bent shoulders. He wore a small beard, and powerful glasses, for his eyesight was weak. By profession he was a solicitor, with a select and exclusive practice. As a solicitor Mr. Stebbing was, perhaps, as honest as any other member of that profession; but he took an active part in many outside concerns which other members of the combine concocted, and his income was thereby considerably increased.

On the whole, Stebbing was as complete a rogue as the others.

The trio walked slowly away down Victoria Street, talking intently to one another. Apparently they were discussing something of more than usual importance. And Eileen Dare, on the other side of the road, did some very quick thinking.

On more than one occasion the girl had proved her smartness and ability for applying herself to new circumstances as soon as they arose. And she did not fail to exercise her natural shrewdness now.

Her original plan, she knew, was impossible. And it struck her that the men were strangely excited. An ordinary observer, perhaps, would have noticed nothing particularly strange in their appearance. But Eileen's wits were as keen as a razor blade, and she instinctively guessed that something unusual was under discussion.

"I know what I'll do!" she told herself quickly. "I can't carry out Mr. Lee's plan, so I'll try my hand at shadowing! Oh, this is getting exciting!"

She turned and walked quickly along the pavement until she drew almost opposite to Illingford and his companions. She hardly knew how she was going to act; and, as it chanced, she was not given much time for thought.

The men she was shadowing came to a halt soon after they had passed the Victoria Palace, and turned into a large restaurant just the other side of Victoria Station. It was a select establishment, and the ground floor was sparsely filled when Eileen entered.

She did so boldly, realising that she would stand less chance of being detected by so doing. And, at the first glance, she saw that the trio were seated half-way down the big apartment at one of the tables just on the other side of a wide marble pillar which supported the upper flooring.

To Eileen's satisfaction she saw that the table on this side of the pillar was empty. She walked to it quickly and quietly, and took her seat. She was really astonished at her own daring, for she stood quite a good chance of being observed. The marble pillar, certainly, was between her and Illingford and his companions. But the little party was within touching distance of her, and she knew that if she turned her face she would be seen and recognised.

And she hardly knew why she had acted in this way. Perhaps it was an inward intuition that she would gain possession of certain knowledge which could otherwise not be obtained.

She was not aware of it, but Haverfield, Illingford, and Stebbing were quite unconscious of her presence. This was probably due to the fact that she had walked up boldly, with no pretence of hiding her movements.

If she had attempted to gain the seat by stealth it is more than likely

that the trio would have become aware of her game. As it was they took advantage of the quietness to conclude the discussion which had been taking place during their walk.

And really there was no actual necessity for them to speak in whispers or to affect secrecy, for a few chance words overheard by a stranger would mean nothing. They were not burglars, plotting to crack a crib.

"It's a coal-mine, I tell you," Illingford was saying in low, but distinct tones. "I think you fellows know me well enough not to exaggerate. Besides, I am an expert in such matters. On that estate there's millions of tons of coal—that's the absolute truth. The place is worth a fabulous fortune!"

"But the park is mere woodland——"

"My dear Stebbing, that's nothing to the point," interjected Haverfield. "As Illingford advises us, our best move is to buy the property at once—the freehold belongs absolutely to Mrs. Q., and she'll sell outright without a murmur. Nobody knows of the tragedy yet—not even the woman—and to get the transaction completed at once will be the best course to pursue."

"Well," said Stebbing, "it will be a wonderful stroke of luck if we can—— Oh, bring us tea, miss. What do you fellows want?"

A waitress had appeared at the table, and their wants were being attended to. But Eileen Dare had heard nearly every word of the conversation which had ensued previously. It was short, and any ordinary listener would have taken no notice of it whatever. But to Eileen it had an extraordinary significance

CHAPTER III.

Followed—The Visit to the Cleft—Proof!—A Disaster.

EILEEN was capable of thinking quickly and clearly, and now she grasped the full meaning of the sentences she had overheard. The knowledge which was borne upon her mind was startling and amazing.

There could be no mistake.

The "park" which had been referred to was, of course, Quinton Park. And the woman spoken of as "Mrs. Q." was naturally Mrs. Quinton. But what of the rest of the conversation?

"Oh!" murmured Eileen Dare. "Now I understand—now I realise much!"

She was suspecting indeed that Illingford had deliberately attempted to murder Mr. Quinton for a definite object; but, as she continued to think, she realised that another explanation was more probable.

Illingford had flung his victim down the unsuspected cleft, and had been utterly startled at his own action. He had made his way downwards into the darkness, but had been unable to find Quinton's body. But he had instead discovered the presence of coal!

That was Eileen's reading of the affair.

It was remarkably near the truth. But a coal-mine! It was simply astounding, and Eileen found it difficult to settle herself to the fact. She remembered, however, that there were, indeed, some coalfields in that part of the country, and so for Quinton Park itself to be a coalfield was by no means an impossibility.

She deduced at once that, thinking that Quinton was dead, the scoundrels were contemplating a purchase of the estate from Mrs. Quinton. She, being unaware of the land's true value, would sell at a merely nominal sum. Thus.

quite legitimately and quite lawfully, the land-sharks would bring off their coup.

It was a cunning scheme, if Eileen's suspicions were correct, and the girl knew that this case was by no means finished. She had made a very important discovery; so important that she decided, then and there, to hurry to Nelson Lee and acquaint him with the facts.

She finished the cup of tea which she had ordered, rose quietly, and left the restaurant. Her back had been towards her enemies all the time, and she was quite satisfied that she had been unobserved.

But Eileen Dare was mistaken.

It was not her fault; it was not through any want of forethought and precaution. Up till the moment of her departure, as a matter of fact, the trio had no idea of her identity.

They had seen that a girl was sitting on the other side of the marble pillar, but naturally they had taken no particular notice of her.

But Roger Haverfield looked up as Eileen prepared to depart. She moved forward, and a slanting mirror hung upon one of the walls towards the front of the restaurant reflected her face and figure clearly.

Haverfield glanced at the reflection with mere idle curiosity. It was simply the interested look which a man always bestows upon a particularly pretty girl. He had seen, by her figure, that she was perfectly shaped, and, observing her reflection in the glass, he glanced at it in order to observe her face.

It was only possible to see the girl's features for a second, for she walked to the door quickly; but Roger Haverfield recognised her on the instant. In Birmingham, when Eileen's father had been in the employ of the Haverfield Steel Company, he had met her almost daily. And the recognition was something of a shock to him.

"By Jove, that's infernally queer!" he exclaimed tensely. "A girl just left this seat behind the pillar, and I know who she was."

"Hallo!" exclaimed Stebbing. "So you knew her—eh?"

"Knew her! She was Eileen Dare," snapped Haverfield sharply. "Dare! You understand? That girl is as clever as ten Scotland Yard detectives put together! What was she doing in this restaurant?"

Illingford swore furiously under his breath.

"What were we saying?" he asked. "By George, we were only just discussing that coal-mine business! She must have heard——"

"Follow her!" muttered Haverfield sharply. "You, Illingford—you've just got time if you go at once. We'll meet again at your office. Follow her and see where she goes. She's wearing a white skirt and a pale olive summer coat!"

"But, my dear man——"

"You fool! Don't waste time! Go at once!"

Illingford was struck by the urgency in Haverfield's tones—and he was struck, also, by the possibilities which impressed themselves upon his brain. If Eileen Dare had heard any of the conversation she would be able to understand what was in the wind, for it was too improbable to suppose that her presence in the restaurant had been a coincidence. And fifteen seconds wasted might mean absolute disaster to the scheme.

Without another word Illingford snatched his hat from the rack and quickly left the restaurant. Only a brief minute had elapsed since Eileen had left, and Illingford was just in time to see her enter a taxi-cab.

There are always plenty of taxis in the vicinity of Victoria Station, and Illingford at once beckoned to the cabby of one which was passing. He opened the door quickly and half stepped in.

"You see that cab in front—the dark-green one?" he asked rapidly.

"Yes sir!"

"Follow it!" said Illingford. "Keep him in sight, and stop when he stops."

"Good enough, gov'nor!"

The mining expert slammed the door, and the taxi lurched forward. Victoria Street was fairly clear of traffic, and the quarry was bowling along at a comfortable pace some distance ahead.

Illingford's cabby experienced no difficulty in carrying out his fare's instructions. The situation was somewhat tense. Illingford was elated at having picked up Eileen's trail so easily; but he was disturbed and uneasy. Why had the girl been present in the restaurant?

He had heard of Eileen Dare's shrewdness from Haverfield on previous occasions, and he knew that Martin Hallton's downfall had been due to the girl's activity. It struck him with force now that perhaps Eileen was favouring him with her attentions. But for the businesslike way in which she had tacked Hallton, he would have been contemptuous of her efforts.

But Hallton had gone under. And he himself, believing that he had killed Julius Quinton, was terribly perturbed. The discovery of the coal had, in a way, driven the uneasy thoughts from his mind; but now they returned tenfold, and he sat in the taxi fingering his heavy gold watch-chain and gazing restlessly ahead.

He was a murderer! And the terror of the hunted seemed to take him in its grip for a moment. But he shook himself impatiently, and cursed furiously under his breath. He was safe enough. Who could discover the truth?

But his uneasiness gave way to real alarm very soon, for Eileen's taxi turned into Gray's Inn Road and pulled up before Nelson Lee's door! Now, if not before, Illingford was convinced that something was terribly wrong. Eileen Dare had gone to Nelson Lee!

Illingford knew the famous detective's address, and he had made no mistake. Fear took possession of him, and he trembled as though with ague. He was under no false impression as to Nelson Lee's ability and shrewdness.

What did it all point to? Eileen Dare had been found leaving a restaurant which contained three members of the combine, and she had been sitting in a place, unsuspected, where she could have overheard the three men's conversation. That conversation meant nothing to a stranger; but it meant much to Eileen. And she had taxied straight from the restaurant to Nelson Lee's rooms! The train of incidents was uncomfortably significant.

And Illingford scarcely knew what to do. But after dismissing his taxi he hung about, and his cunning brain became active.

Meanwhile, Eileen had entered Nelson Lee's consulting-room, and found the detective busily engaged with Nipper in filing some important papers. Both looked up as the girl entered, and Nipper gave an involuntary exclamation of pleasure.

"My hat! You're back soon, miss!" he exclaimed.

"Something has happened which has entirely upset our original plan, Mr. Lee," said Eileen quickly.

And she took a seat and related exactly what had occurred. The detective listened without comment until Eileen had finished, and then he thoughtfully stroked his chin.

"Your information is indeed surprising," he remarked. "As you say, it is very evident that some plot is afoot. A coalfield—oh? Well, I

shouldn't be surprised in the least. Quinton Park is quite near the coal-country, and if coal actually exists there the property is worth a fabulous sum."

"And those rotters mean to buy it!" exclaimed Nipper indignantly. "They mean to diddle Mrs. Quinton out of the estate, and then——"

"There is no question of 'diddling,' Nipper," interjected Lee smoothly. "This is one of those affairs which is entirely within the law. Morally, however, the purchase would be nothing less than a base swindle—and we must stop it if we possibly can."

Eileen nodded her head quickly.

"It will be quite easy to stop it," she agreed. "I have only to inform Mr. Quinton of my discoveries and he will, of course, refuse to sell. But don't you think we had better make absolutely certain before going further?" added the girl shrewdly.

"You mean, of course, with regard to the coal?"

"Of course. There is time to-day for me to return to Quinton Park and descend that cleft," replied Eileen, with perfect calmness. "Oh, I'm not afraid of doing it, Mr. Lee."

"I quite believe you," was Lee's dry remark. "But, my dear Miss Eileen, I should not allow you to descend that dangerous cleft without assistance. The conversation you overheard was, unfortunately, not absolutely definite. Therefore, as you wisely remark, it will be as well to make quite certain before we show our hand. It would never do to tell Mr. Quinton that coal existed on his property, only to find that we had blundered. We must make quite sure."

Nipper stepped forward eagerly.

"I've got it, guv'nor!" he exclaimed. "Let me go down with Miss Eileen, and I'll see that she doesn't come to any harm!"

The detective smiled.

"Well, to tell the truth, young 'un, I was about to suggest something of the same sort myself," he observed. "After all, your task is quite simple, and if you take a stout rope with you, you will be safe enough. Just satisfy yourselves on that one all-important point, and then act accordingly. If coal does exist, inform Mr. Quinton. The knowledge will please him immeasurably, and do much to effect a speedy recovery. It will, moreover, upset the plans of our genial friends."

A train to Derby was soon looked up in the Bradshaw, and Eileen and Nipper had plenty of time to catch it. Nipper carried with him a small leather handbag containing a long line of stout rope and one or two other necessities.

Nipper was mightily pleased at being able to do something for Eileen, and he looked upon it as a high honour to be sent down with her to see that she came to no harm. The lad was hugely delighted at the prospect.

The journey down to Derby was uneventful. And, arriving there, Eileen obtained her little racing-car from the garage close by, and she and Nipper at once started off for Quinton Park.

It was evening now, and getting dusk. But the girl detective reckoned that they would arrive with plenty of daylight to spare for their operations. She had decided that it would be better to trespass; she would not obtain permission from anybody to make her investigations. It would be better to do the thing in private.

The evening was beautiful and cool, and both she and Nipper enjoyed the ride through the quiet country roads. Nipper was lost in admiration at the way the girl drove her car. He could drive splendidly himself; but he willingly admitted that Eileen could give him points.

The quiet lane bordering Quinton Park on the southern side was reached at last. Here a convenient gate was opened, and the car driven into a small meadow in order to conceal it from the road.

Leaving the racer, the pair set off through the trees towards the hollow in which the cleft was situated.

From Mr. Quinton's description of the morning, Eileen was fairly certain of her course, and she and Nipper had no difficulty in locating the hollow with the clump of thorny bushes in the centre.

It was a bit of a task getting through the bushes without receiving scratched hands. But Nipper gallantly went first, and cleared a way for his fair companion. At the very top the cleft was quite narrow, and by dropping into it Nipper landed on a flat piece of rocky earth four feet below. From here it was necessary to crouch down and wriggle through a narrow opening on to the steep slope which led right down into the bowels of the earth.

Much to Nipper's disgust, Eileen insisted upon going first. But there was really no danger at all. She was sure-footed, and provided with a powerful electric lamp. Nipper came behind with another lamp, and carrying the rope.

"That dress won't look up to much by the time we get out again, miss," grinned the lad. "It's white now, but if this is really a coal-shaft, I don't reckon it'll be white after a bit."

"Never mind, Nipper," said Eileen cheerfully. "After all, it's a washing skirt, and I've got plenty more. You must go carefully now—it's rather steep here."

Nipper grunted.

"Don't you worry about me," he replied. "I'm as safe as houses. Look here, miss; I wish you'd let me go first."

But Eileen continued her way downwards with a short, silvery laugh. And at last she and Nipper stood upon the ledge far below the surface—the ledge which ended the slope, and which bordered the almost perpendicular abyss.

At this point investigations were made, and it was soon obvious that they were on the right track. Coal undoubtedly existed, and in astonishing quantities. But Eileen meant to make perfectly sure before mounting to the surface again.

Accordingly the rope was made fast round a huge rock projection, and Eileen actively lowered herself to the pit below into which Mr. Quinton had fallen. The very instant she alighted Nipper came down like a monkey.

And here a still closer examination was made. The result was intensely satisfactory. It was perfectly obvious that the coal was of magnificent quality, and that the field extended for a great distance. In all probability there were seams far below the spot upon which Eileen and Nipper were standing.

"This means that Mr. Quinton is a very rich man," remarked Eileen, with great satisfaction. "I am so glad, Nipper; it will be a delightful surprise for him, especially as he hinted that he is pressed for money."

"I wonder why he didn't notice this himself when he was down here?"

"Well, he only had a few matches, and he was injured," Eileen replied.

"By the way, he might have caused a terrible explosion by striking a match, although I don't think there's any explosive gas here. But it was——"

She broke off abruptly, and looked upwards.

"Didn't you hear something, Nipper?" she asked, in a low voice.

"A piece of loose stone, perhaps, fell down the slope," suggested Nipper.

"I fancied I heard something move——"



Nelson Lee to the Rescue!—(See page 23.)

Then he, too, abruptly broke his speech off short. A very startling thing had occurred. As he and Eileen watched, the stout rope moved violently for a moment, and then came tumbling down into the pit-like cavity!

'They were imprisoned!

CHAPTER IV.

An Unpleasant Predicament—Rescued—A Terrible Shock.

BOTH Nipper and Eileen were too astonished for the moment to even move. The rope had fallen in such a mysterious manner that there seemed something uncanny about it. There had been just that one slight sound, and then nothing further. But the rope was on the rocky floor, at their feet!

"Who's up there?" roared Nipper furiously. "Oh, you scoundrelly rotter!"

No reply came, which was scarcely surprising. Yet it was certain that somebody had descended the slope and had cut the rope deliberately. The object of doing so was, of course, quite obvious.

Eileen Dare and Nipper were to be imprisoned. And the dastardly trick had succeeded. For it was now quite impossible to reach the surface again. There was nothing over which the rope could be slung, and it was of no use to the trapped pair.

"Look!" exclaimed Nipper huskily. "The rope's been cut as clean as a whistle, miss!"

Eileen needed no showing. She was already staring at the severed rope, and she was feeling very grim and worried. Somebody—she vaguely guessed who—had followed them, and had descended the cleft. Probably the dastardly deed had been done by Illingford himself; if so, he must have followed the girl and Nipper right from London.

The situation, in any case, was unpleasant and annoying. There was nothing particularly dangerous about it, for in due time Nelson Lee would undoubtedly come to the rescue. But it meant a great deal of delay.

"Oh, we were unwise, Nipper, to both descend," said Eileen gravely. "Either you or I ought to have remained on that ledge. But how ever were we to guess that somebody was after us?"

"We've been caught napping, miss, and no mistake!" was Nipper's rueful reply. "Oh, it's rotten! I feel so blessed silly, don't you? Fancy us falling into a trap like this so jolly easily? I call it disgusting!"

"Well, there's no good to be done by bewailing our fate," remarked Eileen, with delightful composure. "Cheer up, Nipper—we sha'n't come to any harm. And I think I know who did this."

"Who, miss?"

"Illingford himself. And I can understand the working of his evil brain," went on the girl detective, shrewdly. "Just reason it out, Nipper. Illingford thinks, of course, that Mr. Quinton is down here—dead. And he probably imagines that we were looking for the body."

"That's cheerful, anyhow!" remarked Nipper, gloomily.

"As Mr. Quinton is alive, it doesn't matter," went on Eileen, in a low voice. "Don't talk loudly, in case the rogue is up there, listening. If Illingford thinks that we came here to discover the body, he must be dreadfully alarmed. And he cut the rope so that we should be left to perish."

"My stars! Surely he wouldn't leave us to die?"

"Thinking that he has committed one murder, I don't think he would hesitate at another," said the girl quietly. "His own safety is at stake, remember. And Illingford is not a man to be troubled by scruples."

The exact truth, as a matter of fact, was different. It had certainly been Basil Illingford himself who had cut the rope. Scenting danger, he had watched Nelson Lee's rooms, had seen Nipper and Eileen depart, and had followed them. At Derby he had hired a bicycle, and had followed the car. Of course, he had not been able to keep the vehicle within sight. But it required little imagination for him to guess where it was bound for.

Illingford heard nothing of the conversation which took place between Eileen and Nipper. In some way the formation of the cliff thickened and blurred their voices so that the words were indistinguishable. If he had heard he would have been surprised to know that Quinton was still alive.

Illingford imagined quite the opposite. He knew, by the even blurr of the voices, that they were talking quite calmly. And he reasoned, cleverly enough, that the corpse had not been found—otherwise he would undoubtedly have heard decided exclamations of horror.

He surmised that Eileen and Nipper were merely standing on a ledge lower down, and that the pit descended to a vast depth. This supposition gave Illingford much relief, for he told himself that the body had not been discovered, and probably never would be. Never for an instant did he suspect that Quinton was very much alive, and comfortably installed in a cottage fairly close by.

The scoundrel, having cut the rope, mounted to the surface as quickly as possible. He gathered that rescue could not come for many hours at the earliest—and by that time much would have happened.

He returned to Derby, and at once despatched a long telegram. It was still fairly early in the evening, and darkness had only just fallen.

Meanwhile, his imprisoned victims vainly attempted to escape. They tried everything possible, but only failure rewarded them. Nipper was perfectly "fed up," as he confided to Eileen.

He regarded it as disgraceful that he should have allowed such a state of affairs to come about. He blamed himself entirely, and in doing so was hardly fair to himself.

Rescue came, as Eileen believed it would, when the hour was getting on towards midnight. She had promised to despatch a telegram to Nelson Lee as soon as she had ascertained the exact facts.

And the non-arrival of that telegram caused Lee to become anxious, and he grew really alarmed when darkness came and still he received no word.

Lee had travelled down to Derby by a late train, and arrived in a state of considerable perturbation. He lost no time in setting out for Quinton Park, and when he arrived he soon located the hollow.

The rest was merely a matter of time. The detective found the entrance, lowered himself into the cleft, and descended. He made a certain amount of noise in doing so, and he was relieved to hear Nipper's voice bawling out an inquiry as to who the dickens he happened to be.

Nelson Lee soon set the lad's mind at rest upon that point, and within a few minutes, by the aid of a fresh length of rope, Eileen and Nipper were standing beside the detective.

"Well, this is a nice state of affairs!" Lee remarked severely. "What would you have done if I hadn't come along? I am very pleased to see that nothing serious is amiss. I suppose it was merely an ordinary mishap?"

Eileen quickly explained what had actually occurred, and Nelson Lee was rather worried. He scarcely knew what to think.

"I don't think Illingford could have meant to kill you both," he exclaimed slowly. "Undoubtedly he followed you from my rooms, and, that being so, he knew quite well that I was aware of your project. As a consequence, he also knew that I should become anxious and would come in search."

"But what's the meaning of it, guv'nor?" asked Nipper.

"It looks suspiciously like a ruse merely for the purpose of causing delay," was Nelson Lee's answer. "You were trapped down here the best part of the evening, and it is now after midnight. Yes, I believe that the motive was to cause delay. But why? Why did Illingford want to hinder you?"

It was rather a difficult question, and neither Nipper nor Eileen attempted to answer it. They set out the task of mounting the cleft, and when they arrived at the summit Lee voiced his plan.

Both Nipper and Eileen were tired and weary, and nothing could be done, in any case, that night. So the little racing car was brought into requisition and Eileen was driven to her cottage. After that Lee and Nipper, still using the girl's car, motored to Derby and caught a night train back to London, leaving instructions with a garage owner to have the car sent to Eileen's cottage early in the morning.

The girl did not sleep well that night. Matters had been going somewhat awry, and she was by no means contented in mind. The incident of the cut rope worried her, for it certainly meant something. Eileen and Nipper had not been imprisoned for nothing. But of what use were the few hours delay which had been caused? Surely nothing could have been done in that short space of time?

Eileen was up early, in spite of the lateness of the hour when she had retired. But she was not up before Mr. Quinton, who she found out in the garden, hobbling about with the aid of two walking-sticks.

A great improvement was to be noticed this morning. The pallor had left his cheeks, and he greeted Eileen with a smile of welcome and a cheerful "Good-morning!"

His head and hands were, of course, heavily bandaged, and his injured shins gave him pain if he exerted himself too much. But the gentle attentions he had been receiving from Aunt Esther had worked wonders.

"I really could not resist the temptation to take a breath of fresh air, Miss Dare." He smiled. "I know you don't wish me to advertise myself, but at this early hour there is not a soul about, and, in any case, the garden is quite private."

"I have something to tell you, Mr. Quinton," said Eileen, helping him over to a little arbour and taking a seat beside him. "I have a great surprise for you—one which will cause you the greatest delight."

"Upon my soul! You make me curious!"

Eileen did not beat about the bush. She told Quinton that, far from being compelled to leave Quinton Manor, he was a tremendously rich man. When he heard of the coal discovery, Quinton became almost breathless with excitement and inward joy. For some time he could scarcely believe his good fortune, but at last Eileen convinced him.

"Coal in Quinton Park!" ejaculated the patient wonderingly. "Good gracious! I can scarcely believe my ears, Miss Dare; and, really, my indebtedness to you is increasing day by day!"

"I believe Basil Illingford has been planning to acquire the property," said Eileen. "I don't suppose he means to transact the business himself; he is too clever for that. And in all probability he is thinking of approaching Mrs. Quinton, for he believes that you are dead."

Mr. Quinton was restless and flushed with excitement.

"In any case, an intending purchaser would be compelled to approach my wife," he replied. "The entire estate, Miss Dare, belongs to my wife. I

made it over to her a year or two ago, and she owns the freehold of it. It is absolutely hers to do as she likes with."

Eileen's eyes became very grave.

"The property belongs to your wife?" she repeated, a vague fear taking possession of her. "You didn't tell me that before, Mr. Quinton. Have you no control over the estate whatever?"

"Well, from a legal point of view I have none," was the reply. "But, of course, the estate is just as much mine as it is my wife's. The transfer was only just a matter of form, for it pleased my wife to think that the property was hers. But surely that is of no importance? I hardly know what to think of your amazing revelation. That coal could possibly exist——"

And Mr. Quinton went off into a series of statements regarding the singular discovery of coal.

Eileen listened to him, but she did not heed. She was thinking deeply, and her keen, active brain was very far from being at rest.

Somehow—strangely, insistently—she felt a conviction within her that something terrible had happened. She did not know what; she could not guess what. But, in her heart, she was positive that all was not right.

And then, while Mr. Quinton was still talking, the low purr of a motor-car was heard, and the next moment it came to a stop, and the crunch of a footfall was heard. Eileen stepped quickly round to the front of the cottage and found herself confronted by a lanky youth in blue overalls.

"Brought the little runabout over from the garridge, miss!" he explained, with a broad grin. "My! She can do a bit o' speed on the quiet, miss! Oh, I was goin' to tell you——"

The youth in overalls hesitated.

"What were you going to tell me?" asked Eileen.

"Just as I was passing the station a lady, who come up from London by the early train, asked me if I'd take 'er to Quinton Manor," replied the mechanic. "It was Mrs. Quinton herself, miss, an' as she promised to give me five bob I thought you wouldn't mind."

"Not at all," said Eileen quickly. "You did no harm by obliging the lady."

After the overalled youth had gone—intending to trudge to the local station—Eileen told Mr. Quinton that his wife had returned to the Manor. He seemed a little surprised at the news.

"H'm! I wonder why Mary has come back so soon?" he mused. "I understood she was going to remain at Brighton until the end of the week. I hope she is not developing one of her old attacks of rheumatism."

Eileen made a quick resolve. Without waiting for breakfast she jumped into the car and at once drove away to the Manor. She had decided to see Mrs. Quinton without delay and to then bring her to her husband; for by this time perhaps she would be anxious at his prolonged absence.

The girl arrived without incident, and, leaving the car upon the broad drive, she mounted the steps and was soon admitted into the house. Mrs. Quinton came downstairs with an inquiring look upon her face. She was tall, elderly, and possessed of an imposing presence.

"Miss Dare?" she exclaimed questioningly, as she led the way into the drawing-room. "I don't think I have met you before——"

"I am a rather humble neighbour," explained Eileen. "My aunt and myself have a little country cottage close by. I have come to tell you that your husband is with us. He met with an accident that might have been serious, but is now safe and getting well speedily."

"An accident," repeated Mrs. Quinton, her face paling. "Oh, my child, what are you saying? Just as I had such splendid news for my husband, too. For Heaven's sake, tell me the absolute truth! If Julius is really injured——"

"I assure you that there is no need for you to worry," insisted Eileen firmly. "And, as it happens, he has good news for you, too. It is a surprise concerning this property——"

"Well, bless the man, how curious!" cried Mrs. Quinton. "My surprise concerns the estate! Perhaps Mr. Quinton has told you, my dear, that we were thinking of selling the property? Well, last night I completed a most profitable business transaction. I have sold the absolute freehold of Quinton Park, and have received actual cash. What do you think of that?"

Eileen clenched her little fists and smothered a gasp.

"You have sold the estate!" she cried. "Oh, you can't mean that, Mrs. Quinton? Oh, I was sure that something dreadful had happened! Tell me, please, who is the purchaser? Who has bought the property?"

"A rich City merchant," was the reply. "He was introduced to me by Mr. Rudolph Stebbing, the well-known solicitor. Mr. Ford Abbercorn is his name——"

"Good gracious!" panted Eileen, her eyes alight with anxiety. "Ford Abbercorn! He, too, is in this awful business; he is another of the scoundrelly circle!"

The words were murmured inwardly, and Eileen could scarcely contain her anxiety and chagrin. In a second she realised that her enemies had been too clever for her. Urged to make haste by Illingford, the sale had been pushed through without a second's delay. And the Quinton Park estates now belonged to Ford Abbercorn—one of the most villainous members of the combine—in their entirety!

"Is everything settled?" asked the girl huskily.

"Why, yes—everything! It was all done yesterday evening," replied Mrs. Quinton. "I signed the deeds and other documents, and received the whole great sum in cash. You don't know what a large figure I obtained."

"Please tell me. Oh, I am not curious," went on Eileen urgently; "but I must know, Mrs. Quinton—you must tell me! I will explain afterwards."

Mrs. Quinton was certainly very astonished.

"Well, if you must know, I suppose I had better tell you," she said smilingly. "I obtained the enormous figure of twenty thousand pounds for the entire freehold of the house and estates. What do you think of it? Isn't it simply splendid? Why, Julius will be overjoyed. We did not expect to get half so much!"

Eileen gripped her chair, and stared at her companion dully. £20,000! And Mrs. Quinton described it as an enormous figure! And the estates were worth hundreds of thousands—possibly millions!

The shock was terrible, but it would affect Mrs. Quinton the most when she knew. In all innocence, the good lady had renounced all right to the property which would have made her husband's fortune.

The combine had succeeded—Eileen's enemies had won!

CHAPTER V.

A Lawful Swindle—Eileen's Decision—She Acts.

BOTH Mr. and Mrs. Quinton were nearly prostrated by the shock when they realised how completely and how cleverly the trick had been worked. To know that the estate had been sold for a comparatively

small figure was a terrible blow. For what was £20,000 compared to the actual value of the property?

Eileen had refrained from telling Mrs. Quinton the truth until she had been taken to her husband, and then, after the first shock was over, Mrs. Quinton explained in a broken voice everything that had occurred.

In the early evening, while at Brighton, she had received an urgent telegram from Rudolph Stebbing, saying that he had a client who wished to purchase Quinton Park at once, and that he would offer a record price.

Naturally enough, Mrs. Quinton had at once come to London, and had arrived just before nine o'clock. In Stebbing's office she had been introduced to Mr. Ford Abbercorn, who declared that he was willing to complete the purchase immediately.

She had closed with the offer of £20,000 without a moment's hesitation, thinking that she was taking advantage of a particularly lucky chance. She had, in fact, jumped at the offer.

The poor lady was in no way to blame; she had no suspicion of the deep scheming around her. Both she and her husband had long since agreed to dispose of the property should a purchaser come along. But it is not always easy to sell an estate like Quinton Park.

Consequently, Mrs. Quinton had scarcely been able to believe her ears when a spot cash offer of twenty thousand pounds had been made to her. Without any hesitation whatever she signed all the necessary documents on the spot, and received payment in full—in Bank of England notes.

Everything, of course, was strictly legal and honest—judged from a legal standpoint. It would be utterly impossible to find a flaw anywhere; there had been no attempt at fraud, no suspicion of swindling. The banknotes were as genuine as any that had left the Bank of England, and all the documents which she had signed were strictly perfect, without a single catch or attempt at trickery.

But the whole of Quinton Park was now the absolute property of Ford Abbercorn. No matter what the Quintons discovered afterwards, a dozen legal actions would not have given them back their property. It was Abbercorn's now, to do precisely as he liked with. It was his completely, and he was on the side of the law.

Without the slightest doubt it was a scoundrelly swindle. But as a swindle it could not be exposed. There was nothing to prove that Ford Abbercorn knew of the presence of coal; he had merely bought the estate because he had decided to open up a country residence.

Eileen Dare herself was almost frantic when she thought of it all. She grimly realised that she and Nipper had been detained in the cleft. There had been no attempt at murder; they had merely been kept there so that the business could be transacted with Mrs. Quinton without the truth being made known to her before the papers were signed.

On the face of it everything was superbly in order and perfectly legal. There was no connection whatever between Ford Abbercorn and Basil Illingford; outwardly, indeed, they were comparatively strangers.

Yet, as Eileen well knew, the whole thing was planned—the whole thing was a clever scheme.

The combine had worked together neatly, and they had done everything with astonishing swiftness. But they had taken care to be on the right side of the law all the time.

That was the crying pity of it all!

The swindlers had the law on their side! And nothing could mend matters now.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Quinton were somewhat dazed by it all. It was as

though a vast fortune had come within their grasp, and had then hopped elusively away again. Mr. Quinton was charitable enough to console his wife, and to refrain from uttering a single word of reproach. After all, she had acted from all good motives. She was in no way to blame. She had been rather taken aback to see her husband's bandaged condition; but even the explanation of his fall into the cleft seemed insignificant compared with the new, appalling state of affairs.

It was, of course, still early in the morning, and Eileen lost no time in hurrying to London and visiting Nelson Lee. The famous detective listened with a grave, set face as Eileen told him, and when she had concluded he drove his fist forcibly into the palm of his left hand.

"What a situation!" he exclaimed bitterly. "Good heavens, I scarcely know what to say, Miss Eileen. But I realise that things are in a very bad way. Indeed, it is really impossible for us to do anything."

"Surely there is some way, Mr. Lee?" asked Eileen.

"What can we do? These men have kept under the wing of the law all the time," was Lee's answer. "There has been villainy, I know; but we can't prove it. We are aware of it ourselves—but we can't produce evidence to support our accusations. No, Miss Eileen, I'm afraid we are at a loose end."

Eileen pushed her hair back with a little impatient gesture.

"Oh, but surely we mustn't give up hope," she protested anxiously. "The situation with regard to Illingford, of course, remains the same. He is still unaware that Mr. Quinton is alive, and he must be made to pay the penalty. But we must do something, Mr. Lee—we must restore the estate to the Quintons!"

"Surely there is some way, guv'nor," put in Nipper tensely.

But the famous detective slowly shook his head.

"There is no way," he replied quietly. "The scoundrels have been too cute. The Quinton estate is now lawfully the property of Ford Abbercorn—and even Illingford's exposure for attempted murder would not help in any way. I'm very much afraid, Miss Eileen, that we are powerless."

The girl detective rose to her feet, and paced Lee's consulting-room for several minutes. It cut Nelson Lee to the quick to see her so perturbed and worried. She was attired now in a sweet voile dress, and she looked even prettier than ever, with a tiny frown puckering her forehead, and a suspicion of moisture in her glorious eyes.

"Oh, it's terrible!" she murmured, in a broken voice. "Mr. and Mrs. Quinton are really nothing to me, Mr. Lee; but they are good people, and they are victims of the same scoundrels who killed my father. Oh, the injustice of it! To think that they have only received twenty thousand pounds when the estate is worth a vast fortune! And it has been purchased by trickery——"

"Ah, there you make a mistake," interrupted Nelson Lee. "So far as I can see, the actual purchase itself was straightforward. There was not even a suspicion of trickery. As a matter of fact, Miss Eileen, nothing unlawful has occurred, and so we cannot take action. Mrs. Quinton was perfectly willing to sell, and she agreed to everything of her own free will. What can we do? She was not forced in any way—she was not even persuaded."

Lee paused, and faced Eileen squarely.

"But we know the inside facts," he went on. "We know that the whole affair is a trick of this scoundrelly combine. And the deeper we probe into it, the less chance we find of making the truth known."

"I don't know how it's going to be done, but I mean to right the wrong!"

said Eileen quietly, but with grim determination in her voice. "I swear that to you, Mr. Lee! I am going to foil my enemies!"

Lee looked up sharply.

"Why, what have you got in your mind?" he asked.

"There is the germ of an idea there, Mr. Lee; but I can't put it into words," replied the girl, with a smile. "But I mean to do something—and I mean to waste no time!"

Nelson Lee found it impossible to get any more out of the girl; but he was vaguely uneasy. He guessed that she was contemplating some desperate move, and he did not like the thought. These men whom Eileen was fighting were base rogues, and they would not hesitate at any villainy.

Eileen, however, became quite cheerful after she had been absent from Nelson Lee's room for half an hour. She went to her flat in Chelsea, and seemed the very reverse of gloomy.

To tell the truth, an idea had occurred to Eileen—an inspiration—and she was consequently highly elated. The scheme she had evolved was amazing in its audacity, startling in its daring.

But, as she reviewed her plan of action, she did not consider it either audacious or daring. She was simply going to right a grave wrong—and, whatever step she took to accomplish her object, surely she could not be blamed?

Presently she went out and taxied to the West End. Here she made some purchases, and ordered them to be sent home to her without delay. Her instructions were carried out, for she had not been in the flat more than ten minutes before a stout case was delivered, with no inkling of the rough woodwork to hint at its contents.

Eileen did not open it. On the contrary, she carefully removed the label, and pasted another one over the top of the used space. This label she had just typewritten, and it bore the words, "To be left at office until return of consignee. Mr. George Freeman, 8, New Court, Lincoln's Inn, E.C."

The case was then despatched by express carriers at once, and Eileen was assured that it would be delivered before evening.

"Oh, what a splendid idea!" she murmured gleefully. "I thought of it myself, and I hope I'm not conceited. I know that I shall be successful—I'm sure of it!"

The troubled look had died from her eyes, and was replaced by an expression of keen anticipation and inward excitement. The scheme she had formed in her active brain was one which seemed positive of success.

And, towards night, Eileen became even happier. The thought of her projected adventure filled her with high glee. She did not possess nerves, and was full of hope and confidence.

Her movements during the evening were somewhat curious, especially so as the night advanced. But she had already got her plan cut and dried, and knew exactly how she was going to set to work.

It was a desperate business—a deadly, dangerous game.

But it never seemed to strike Eileen in this light. She was simply going to undo the work of her enemies, and turn the tables on them. That was her object. And it was such an amazing scheme that it seemed likely to succeed.

Well after midnight—getting on towards one o'clock, in fact—a small, girlish figure, dressed entirely in black, walked quickly down a small passageway at the rear of New Court, Lincoln's Inn.

The passageway was in total darkness, for the light restrictions had affected this walk drastically. At ordinary times it was only illuminated

by two gas lamps. These were now both extinguished, and the passage was black and deserted.

The figure came to a halt, and looked quickly up and down the walk.

"Oh, it's perfectly easy!" murmured Eileen, her heart beating rapidly against her breast. "I'm rather glad the lighting regulations are strict—it is quite a boon to burglars!"

She laughed softly to herself, and gave a light leap upwards. Very nimbly she pulled herself to the top of the wall, and slipped over, her skirts causing her little inconvenience.

She now found herself in a small enclosed yard, with high walls on three sides, and a tall, old-fashioned building straight ahead. The whole of the ground floor, she knew well enough, were the offices of Mr. Rudolph Stebbing, solicitor.

Eileen had been certain of her facts, and she knew she was making no mistake. Stebbing's offices were always deserted at night-time. The floors above were also offices of a similar nature, and they, too, were only occupied by day.

The girl's present undertaking was a risky one. She was taking a rather desperate chance—and was enjoying it!

She had no fear of being disturbed, for the place was absolutely quiet and deserted. There were three windows facing her, and she knew exactly which one to make for. Eileen had not started out upon such an adventure as this without being well supplied with information. That information had been easy enough to obtain, and it was very useful now.

The middle window, she knew, was that of Stebbing's private office. The windows on either side were of no importance—one was that of an ante-room and the other the chief clerk's office.

Eileen found that the windows were fitted with modern catches, and that it was impossible to raise the sash without taking drastic measures. So, without hesitation, she produced an expensive glass cutter and removed a large portion of the glass. To do this noiselessly she employed a piece of stout calico smeared over with liquid glue. Sticking this upon the glass she tapped the latter gently, and it severed with only a slight snap.

Being stuck to the calico it did not fall, and she was able to lay it down noiselessly. Then, inserting her dainty hand through the hole, she pushed the patent catch back and quietly raised the sash.

The next minute she was within Mr. Rudolph Stebbing's private office, and had drawn the curtains closely over the windows. Not until then did she press the button of her electric torch.

The light slashed through the darkness, and she flashed it round her, and finally brought it to rest upon the large, modern safe which was set into the wall opposite the window. It was a big safe, burglar-proof and fire-proof. It was fitted with a combination lock and every thief-resisting device.

"You look a formidable customer," murmured Eileen complacently. "Many professional burglars would be rather dubious about getting the better of you. But I think I am capable of the task."

But how could it be possible? How could Eileen Dare hope to burgle that great safe?

She carried no tools, and she was unaware of the combination. Yet the girl-detective was convinced that she would achieve her object within half an hour. And her hope was by no means a vain one.

For Eileen had prepared everything with superb audacity. She had conceived the idea, and had made everything ready for her coup. Without efficient tools it would be an utter impossibility to open the safe door, and so Eileen had provided herself with efficient tools.

But where were they? She certainly did not carry them with her. And surely they could not be already on the premises?

For the present she wasted no time on the safe. She walked lightly to a small door which communicated with the chief clerk's office, adjoining. As Eileen had anticipated, the door was fitted with a strong Yale-type lock, and it was, of course, fixed upon this side of the door.

Accordingly, she had only to turn the knob and the door opened. This was very easy to understand. When the solicitor's office was closed up it was impossible for the head clerk to enter Mr. Stebbing's sanctum; but when the clerk was absent Stebbing could easily enter his employee's office.

It was for this reason that Eileen had broken into the private sanctum. If she had chosen the window leading into the office of Mr. George Freeman, the head clerk, she would have found it impossible to pass this communicating door.

But why did she wish to enter Freeman's office?

The truth was rather extraordinary. Eileen had adopted a daring plan—daring and audacious, but superbly simple. In order to force the safe it was necessary for her to have bulky and heavy apparatus.

To carry this apparatus with her was obviously impossible, and so she had actually sent her burglar's implements on in advance! They were there, in Freeman's office, waiting for her to use.

While in the West End she had purchased a complete oxy-acetylene apparatus, self-contained, and ready for instant use. This, packed in a strong case, she had sent by special carrier to New Court, Lincoln's Inn.

The cool cheek of the whole thing was worthy of Raffles himself. Eileen knew that the head clerk was away on a few days' holiday. Therefore, when the case was delivered, marked, "To be left in office until return of consignee," Eileen was confident that it would be placed in Freeman's room and left untouched.

The girl's shrewd judgment was correct. One glance was sufficient to show her the wooden case against the wall in one corner. Probably the arrival of the case had caused some comment; but it was no business of the staffs.

"Splendid!" she murmured gleefully. "Oh, I wonder what Mr. Lee would say if he could see me now?"

Probably Nelson Lee would be extremely angry with the girl for taking such risks. But Eileen was cool and in her element. She simply loved excitement, and the prospect of discovery in no way terrified her.

By a piece of utter, unadulterated cheek the girl was in Stebbing's office, with every facility for breaking open the great safe! In all probability the solicitor himself had seen the carefully packed case, and had, all unconsciously, had it placed exactly where Eileen had mentally decided it should be placed.

And now, without delay, the girl set to work methodically and carefully. She prised open the lid, and removed the expensive apparatus; then, returning to the safe, she commenced serious operations,

Being the daughter of an engineer, she knew many things which most girls are in ignorance of, and she was fully capable of using the oxy-acetylene contrivance. It was tricky work, and somewhat dangerous, but Eileen went about her task as though she had done this sort of thing all her life.

Very soon the terrible, powerful flame was issuing from the nozzle with a low roar. The oxy-acetylene flame is extraordinarily effective, and it will cut through the toughest steel as though the latter were tin.

Eileen persisted carefully with her task, and at last the safe was conquered. She melted a huge portion of the door clean away, and left the safe open and accessible. With the combination lock completely demolished, it was possible to open the heavy door. It swung back at length, and the safe's contents were open to Eileen.

She was excited now—excited with success and with the prospect of even greater success to come. She was confronted by many brass-handled drawers and a number of pigeon-holes.

Eileen began a systematic search of the drawers, and at the fifth attempt she gave a little cry of pure delight. And there was a note of triumph in that cry, too. From the fifth drawer she withdrew a little sheaf of folded, legal-looking papers.

By their marking outside she knew what they were, and a close examination in the light of the electric-torch, which was propped on the table, showed her that the papers were the deeds and documents which made Quinton Park the property of Mr. Ford Abercorn.

There was one document signed by Mrs. Quinton, and correctly witnessed by two of Mr. Stebbing's staff. This, with the other papers, formed the only proof that the transfer of the property had been effected.

And those all-important deeds were in Eileen Dare's hands!

She was a burglar; there was not the slightest doubt on that point. She had broken into a seemingly respectable lawyer's office, had broken open the safe, and had removed certain documents.

And she had done so with one object—one definite plan.

The documents which were now in her hands were legal, and they were irrefutable. Possessed of those Stebbing could prove that the Quinton Park estates were the sole and absolute property of Ford Abbercorn.

But without them Stebbing would be able to prove nothing. The estates would still remain the property of Mrs. Quinton; she would merely have to return the money she had received, and nothing could be done. A dozen law-suits might be brought against her, but they would fail. Eileen had engineered this affair solely of her own free will, and without the help of anybody. Eileen was responsible, and she was ready to accept full responsibility.

Breathing fast, and with a glad cry of relief and triumph, she laid the papers—every one of them—in the fire grate and set a match to them. And, feeling as though a great burden was being lifted from her shoulders, she stood and watched the all-important documents burn to ashes.

CHAPTER VI.

Paying the Price—Nelson Lee's Alarm—A Plan

THE last flicker died out from the burning paper, and nothing but black ashes remained. Eileen beat these to dust with the tongs, and then turned away with a little sigh of satisfaction. Her cheeks were somewhat flushed, and her eyes were alight with the excitement of her success.

Yes, she had certainly been successful!

The deeds were now non-existent, and Quinton Park still remained the property of the Quintons. It was a singular situation. The scoundrelly combine had bought the estate by swindling methods, although they had kept strictly on the right side of the law, and Eileen Dare had righted the wrong by performing a flagrantly unlawful act. Yet only justice had been done.

She turned from the fireplace, picked up the electric-torch, and went towards the safe again. Her one desire now was to get right away from Stebbing's office. She could not, of course, take the cumbersome oxy-acetylene apparatus with her, but she had no intention of leaving any clues.

There were several of the safe-drawers open, and she stepped over to the massive steel safe and stood against it.

And then, at that crucial moment, a stunning incident happened.

The door of Stebbing's office opened, and two men entered, one of them carrying a powerful bull's-eye lantern. Eileen turned sharply, and stood staring at the newcomers as though turned to stone. It was a tense moment.

"By gosh! It's a girl!" exclaimed a gruff voice in amazement.

The words broke the spell, and the other man stepped into the room, and in a moment the office was flooded with electric light. Eileen Dare stood, her heart beating very fast, her cheeks somewhat pale.

She saw now who the unexpected visitors were. One was Rudolph Stebbing himself, and the other a police-sergeant.

Stebbing was roughly attired, as though he had been suddenly alarmed, and he was simply shivering with fury and uneasiness. He recognised Eileen at once, for, although he had never met the girl, Haverfield had shown him her photograph and had described her minutely.

"Arrest that girl!" snarled the solicitor harshly, pointing a quivering finger in her direction.

"Hold on, sir," said the sergeant, who was filled with astonishment. "There seems to be something queer here, don't there? Mebbe, it's a joke of some kind. Young ladies don't usually——"

"A joke!" rapped out Stebbing. "Look at the safe, you fool! Look at all these things lying about! Does that look like a joke?"

The sergeant moved forward.

"I don't know your game, miss," he said gruffly, "but you'll have to come with me. And I warn you that anything you say now might be used as evidence against you. Not that it matters much, anyhow. It's a fair red-handed capture!"

The girl nodded.

"I suppose I'd better take your advice, and say as little as possible," she exclaimed, with forced calmness. "But will you tell me one thing? How did you know that I was in this office?"

Stebbing gave a triumphant laugh.

"My private house is fairly close by," he said grimly. "And, as a matter of precaution, I had an electric bell fitted in my bedroom which rings if the safe door is opened. So, you see, my dear Miss Dare, there was really very little chance of your escaping."

"It is a pity," said Eileen composedly. "But, after all, I mustn't expect too much. I don't think you will find any cash missing, Mr. Stebbing."

There seemed to be a note of mockery in the girl's voice, and the solicitor started and turned upon the sergeant.

"Don't go for a minute," he said. "And keep your eye on that girl; if you're not careful she'll slip out of here in a second. She might, indeed, be carrying a firearm. In spite of her looks she is a bad character!"

Eileen flushed somewhat at the insult; but, considering the position in which she had been found, she could not very well dispute the statement. The police-officer laid a brawny hand upon her slender arm, and she did not even wince. The sergeant was rather uncomfortable, as a matter of fact, for this girl seemed to him to be refined and ladylike. Yet facts were facts; she had been caught red-handed, and he had his duty to perform.

Stebbing was examining the safe. Truth to tell, the solicitor was almost stupefied by the whole incident. The safe was a complete ruin; it was beyond repair, and Stebbing had no idea how Eileen had attained her object.

A hurried examination of the drawers showed him that his cash was intact, and that two cases of jewellery had been left untouched. And then, in a flash, Stebbing guessed the truth. He had been too confused at first to realise what Eileen's visit meant; but then the thought of Illingford's plot crossed his mind, and he pulled the drawer out which had contained the vital deeds.

The drawer was empty!

Stebbing twirled round with livid fury.

"What have you done?" he screamed shrilly. "Where are the papers relating to the purchase of the Quinton Park estate? By Heaven, if you have interfered with them I will—"

Eileen made no reply, but her eyes mechanically turned towards the fireplace, and Stebbing ceased in the midst of his outburst. He saw the blackened paper ashes, and his teeth came together like the snap of a rat-trap.

"Take her away!" he snarled, almost incoherent with fury. "Take her to the police-station! She is charged with housebreaking and burglary, and I will personally lay the charge when she is brought before the magistrate!"

The latter part of Stebbing's sentence was almost too thick to be understood, for he was practically foaming at the mouth with fury. For the solicitor saw, in a moment, that the whole plot had fallen to the ground in shattered ruins. There was now nothing to prove that Quinton Park had changed hands. And, moreover, Mrs. Quinton was possessed of twenty thousand pounds—in cash! Stebbing had now no receipt for it, and it seemed as though the tables were turned indeed!

The sergeant escorted Eileen out of the building, and the walk to the police-station was devoid of interest. One or two late night-birds cast rather curious glances at the police-officer and his prisoner, but there was no excitement.

The police-station was only a short distance away, and Eileen was taken into the charge-room before the inspector, and formally charged with burglary. The girl herself was quite calm, but very pale and silent.

She had been successful in her enterprise, and was now ready to suffer the consequences. But she knew that those consequences would probably be deadly serious. She had been caught in the act, and, from a legal point of view, she had not justification. She had committed burglary in the most complete fashion, and she fully expected to be sent for trial.

But just as she was being taken to a cell she asked to be allowed to have a word with the inspector. The latter, who was greatly struck by the girl's ladylike manner, at once complied with her request.

"Well, what do you want?" he asked kindly.

"Will you allow me to use your telephone for two minutes?" asked Eileen. "Mr. Nelson Lee, the celebrated detective, is a friend of mine, and I believe he will help me if he learns of my position."

The inspector raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, so Mr. Lee's a friend of yours?" he repeated curiously. "Well, well! As it happens, I know Lee fairly well myself, and I'm beginning to think there's something behind this affair. Yes, miss, you may use the telephone."

The sergeant took Eileen to the telephone, and in a few minutes Nelson Lee himself was answering at the other end of the wire. It was nearly three o'clock in the morning, and the detective had been roused from his bed.

When he heard that Eileen was at the police-station, charged with burglary, he guessed instantly what the girl had been doing. And Lee was very grave.

"Don't despair, Miss Eileen," he said cheerfully. "I will come round at once and find out the actual facts for myself. I have no doubt that I shall be able to influence the police. I have a certain amount of power in that direction."

"Listen, Mr. Lee," said Eileen eagerly. "I will just tell you what I've done——"

"Tell me nothing," was Lee's crisp interjection. "Everything you say will be taken down, my dear young lady, and we don't want that. Be very cautious; say nothing that will blacken your own case. I will come round at once."

Eileen was taken to her cell. This, of course, was not a stone-walled apartment with a hard wooden bench as the only piece of furniture. On the contrary, Eileen was taken to a fairly comfortable room, with a carpet on the floor, and with a couple of easy-chairs and a good soft lounge.

Nelson Lee was as good as his word, and arrived in record time. He heard from the inspector what the charge was, and that the girl was now in custody. She would probably be brought before the magistrate and formally be charged with burglary in the morning, before noon.

Lee was not allowed to see Eileen, and so, having learned all there was to be learned, he left the police-station and made his way down to the Embankment. The detective was absolutely amazed at his girl-assistant's daring, and swore to himself that he would get her free by hook or by crook.

How he was going to do so he had no idea. But the thought of Eileen serving a term of imprisonment was horrible and repulsive. Yet, in strict accordance with the law, her action was deserving of punishment. She had committed burglary, and was entirely in the wrong.

Eileen had worked against the law—in defiance of the law!

"By James, what a situation!" muttered Lee, as he paced the Embankment and lit his fourth cigar. "It is certainly one of the most curious affairs that I have ever dealt with. This scoundrelly combine has kept within the law all the time, but Eileen has broken it. Yet only justice has been done, for I am convinced that Eileen has destroyed the documents relating to the sale of Quinton Park."

The detective knew well enough that it would be impossible to prove Eileen's innocence, for the simple reason that she was guilty. She had been caught red-handed. Something drastic would have to be done—something daring—or she would be committed for trial, and certainly sentenced to imprisonment. And that prospect was too appalling to contemplate.

And at last, when dawn was grey in the sky, Nelson Lee's eyes gleamed strangely and he turned his steps homewards. If Nipper had been present at that moment, if the lad had seen that sudden gleam, he would have known that his clever master had arrived at some definite decision. Nelson Lee, in fact, had formulated a scheme.

But would it be successful?

CHAPTER VII.

Before the Magistrate—Lee's Scheme—Illingford's Finish.

EILEEN DARE stood in the police-court at Bow Street. The time was eleven-thirty, and the police were now formally charging her with safe-breaking and attempted burglary.

The proceedings were only a matter of form. It was a foregone conclusion.

that she would be remanded after evidence of arrest had been given—for the police, naturally, were anxious to obtain further evidence.

The girl was wonderfully calm. It would be foolish to say that she was unaffected by the disaster which had overtaken her. She was, indeed, very pale, and she only held herself in control with an effort. But one thought always came to her aid—always braced her up and made her smile with inward courage.

She had done no wrong! Although she had broken the letter of the law, and although there was little prospect of deliverance, she had only worked in the cause of justice.

Mr. and Mrs. Quinton—as honest as the day, both of them—had been saved from the human sharks who had tried to ensnare them. Eileen had wrecked the plot, and she was calm and realised that whatever happened she had achieved a great victory.

She was really uninterested in the police-court proceedings. She knew positively that she would be remanded, and in all likelihood bail would be allowed. Nelson Lee would come to Eileen's rescue in that direction, and while she was at liberty they would, perhaps, be able to think of some scheme.

But Eileen did not deceive herself. She knew that she had broken the law, and the chances were that she would have to pay the penalty.

After evidence of arrest had been given, the girl saw that Rudolph Stebbing had entered the police-court. The solicitor was looking grim, but curiously subdued. There was no sign of the livid fury which had convulsed him the night before. He seemed changed, and almost nervous.

Stebbing commenced speaking, but his voice was low and Eileen could not catch the words at first.

"Please speak a little louder, Mr. Stebbing!" exclaimed the magistrate testily. "Did I understand you to say that you wish to abandon the charge against the prisoner?"

Eileen leaned forward involuntarily, and with fast-beating heart.

"That is what I said," exclaimed Stebbing bluntly. "I am anxious to completely abandon the charges against Miss Eileen Dare. There has been a grave mistake, and I have learned that the affair was really nothing but a foolish practical joke. I have no charge to bring against the girl."

There was a flutter in the court, and Eileen could scarcely believe her ears. She was, in fact, utterly amazed. What could be the meaning of it? Rudolph Stebbing had declared that he had nothing against her.

As though in a dream the girl listened to the voices. She heard that of the magistrate and that of Stebbing, but the words were blurred in her ears, and she could not distinguish the words.

Then, dazed, she was led away and told that she was at liberty. Since Stebbing refused to prosecute the police were powerless to continue the case. Eileen was placed in a taxi, and she mechanically directed the driver to take her to Gray's Inn Road.

She knew, by instinct, that Nelson Lee had been at work. What he had done, or how he had achieved his object, was a puzzle. But she was free! Just when she had resigned herself to the very worst she found that she was at liberty.

But Eileen did not have a suspicion of the actual truth!

And while she was being driven to Gray's Inn Road, Rudolph Stebbing was in another taxi on the way to his offices in New Court, Lincoln's Inn. Upon arrival he walked straight through the outer office where two or three clerks were at work.

Stebbing unlocked the door of his inner sanctum, which lay at the end of

a narrow passage, and was quite private. Much could happen in that apartment without those in the outer office knowing it. The chief clerk's office was adjoining, but Freeman was, at present, away.

Stebbing entered his office, and quickly closed the door behind him. If a stranger had been present then, he would have witnessed an extremely interesting little scene; he would have seen something of a very exciting nature.

Nipper, as cool as a cucumber, was squatting in a chair at his ease, and a revolver, fully cocked, lay in his lap. Facing him, bound to a chair and gagged, was Rudolph Stebbing himself. To tell the truth, there were two Rudolph Stebbings—the one in the chair and the one who had just entered.

The latter calmly removed his hat and assumed an upright position, for the solicitor stooped to a marked degree. At the same time the newcomer jerked off a wig and a pair of spectacles.

"Everything is all right, young 'un," he said calmly. "Things have gone splendidly at the police-court. What of our excellent friend here?"

"Oh, he's been as quiet as a lamb, gov'nor," said Nipper cheerfully. "This little persuader of mine made him realise that there wasn't any sense in kicking up a hubbub. And Miss Eileen, sir?"

"She is at liberty, Nipper."

"Good egg!" said the lad heartily.

Nelson Lee—for the second Rudolph Stebbing was, indeed, the famous detective—removed the remainder of his disguise and calmly lit a cigar. The solicitor, meanwhile, was nearly purple in the face with fury and helplessness.

Lee had acted drastically and with consummate daring. Under the circumstances, it was the only way. Stebbing himself would never have abandoned the charge, and so Nelson Lee had taken the law into his own hands.

He and Nipper had walked boldly into the solicitor's office, and Stebbing had been rendered helpless at the point of a revolver and bound to his chair. Then Lee had gone round to Bow Street and had effected Eileen's release.

Now, with no delay, the detective and his young assistant released Stebbing all but the gag and the cord round his ankles; then, softly and swiftly, Lee and Nipper left the private office and made their way out through a side door which led on to a small passageway. They had entered in the same way, and not a soul had seen them on either occasion. They had come and they had gone without the clerks in the other office having a suspicion of what was in the wind.

The scheme was really very clever. The clerks would be ready to swear on oath that it had been Rudolph Stebbing himself who had left the office and who had travelled to Bow Street. Stebbing would have no witness to support his story.

But in the wildness of his fury the solicitor did not think of that aspect. He tore the gag from his mouth, wrenched his ankles free, and rushed down the passage to the outer office. His employees thought that he had suddenly gone mad, and made him angrier than ever when they told him that nobody had passed through to the street. Like a maniac Stebbing rushed round to Bow Street Police Court, and feverishly demanded to know what had occurred. Almost incoherently he told his story, but the police officials would believe nothing of it. They thought that Stebbing was raving, and told him so.

Nelson Lee had been sure that this would be the case, for there was nothing to corroborate Stebbing's extraordinary statement. The result was

that the solicitor was forced to return, beaten, subdued, and nearly insane with impotence.

The great detective's daring scheme had succeeded. Eileen was free, and the charge of burglary, having been abandoned, could not be brought again.

It had been a game of chance, but Nelson Lee's master-stroke had been successful.

And Basil Illingford met his deserts.

Nelson Lee found Eileen at his rooms, and the meeting was cordial and effusive. Lee was inclined to be severe with the girl; but her achievement was so splendid that the detective had not the heart to scold her too much. But she had had a very narrow escape, and she herself fully realised it.

Mr. and Mrs. Quinton had already been wired for by Lee, and they arrived at the detective's rooms an hour later. They heard the story of Eileen's burglary with bated breath, and their relief and gratitude was truly great. To the girl they owed everything.

The combine had been defeated on all points, and there was every reason for Eileen to feel satisfied. The swindle had been frustrated, and the downfall of Basil Illingford—who had engineered the whole scheme—was imminent.

Mrs. Quinton, accompanied by Eileen and Nipper, paid a visit to Stebbing's office, and handed him back the banknotes which had been paid to Mrs. Quinton. They were intact, and Stebbing was, in a measure, relieved. He had been fearing that the sum would never be returned.

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee interviewed Detective-inspector Fuller, of Scotland Yard. With this capable C.I.D. official Lee visited the Victoria Street establishment of Basil Illingford. They found the mining engineer alone in his office, savage and morose over the affairs of the morning; for Stebbing had informed him of the disaster.

Without delay, Nelson Lee charged Illingford with the murder of Julius Quinton. The scoundrel was startled, but he kept up a bold front. Then, at a given signal, Quinton himself entered. He was able to walk now, and well on the road to complete recovery.

The sudden sight of his victim made Illingford lose control of himself, and his actions were ample evidence of guilt. Quinton charged the mining engineer with attempted murder, and Illingford brokenly confessed. Under the circumstances, it was the best thing he could do.

Later on he was tried, and sentenced to a stiff term of imprisonment. His disgrace was utter and complete, and, so far as the combine was concerned, he was finished with. Eileen Dare had dealt effectively with another of her enemies.

Who would be the next to meet a well-deserved fate?

THE END.

Next Week's Story is entitled:

“The Mystery of the 10.20 Express.”

A Tale of NELSON LEE & “JIM THE PENMAN.”

THE ISLAND OF GOLD

*A thrilling story of Adventure and
Treasure Hunting in the Southern Seas*

By **FENTON ASH**

You can begin this Story to-day!

ALEC MACKAY, the hero of our story, with CLIVE LOWTHER, an old chum, and BEN GROVE, a hearty old "sea dog," are comrades in an expedition to the South Seas in search of a supposed treasure island.

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. Before anything can be done the lads find themselves being towed along at a tremendous pace. They race up a narrow creek between high cliffs; and then suddenly enter a dark tunnel, where their "catch" escapes. The chums find themselves surrounded by a lot of curious caves, and try to find a way out. (Now read on.)

A Great Find.

SOME of the caves they noticed were choked up as though by falls of rock from the roof, and Clive declared that these had to him the appearance of artificial galleries rather than natural caves. And of these again they came upon one or two which were comparatively free, and which seemed as though they might extend for any distance. But on account of the darkness they were unable to explore them, even if there had been time.

Descending once more to their boat, they rowed across to another part—the opposite side to that they had come in by—and there found, to their surprise, that the tunnel was continued on that side.

Where it might go on to was a matter for curious speculation; but they did not care to attempt to find out by actual experiment. It would be simpler and better, as Clive remarked, to return by the other tunnel. They did, at least, know where that went to, and that there was an outlet the other end into the open.

Indeed, it began to look as if this was what they must do, after all. They could not stay in that gruesome place and starve. There seemed no other possible way of escape save returning by the way they had come, taking

their chance of being able to run the gauntlet of whatever danger might be lurking there in the darkness.

So occupied had they been with the question of how they were to escape from the place that they had thus far forgotten to feel hungry; but now Alec suddenly remembered that, expecting to be out the greater part of the day, they had brought with them both food and drink.

"I'm getting peckish," he said. "I vote we have something to eat. If we are compelled, after all, to try to negotiate that beastly tunnel, we may as well have a meal before we start."

To this there could be no sort of objection, and accordingly they unpacked the refreshments they had brought and, sitting down on the sand near the boat, set to work upon them.

For a while neither spoke. Each was busy disposing of the provender they had brought, and dead silence prevailed.

Suddenly it was broken by an uncaunty, cackling laugh, which appeared to come from somewhere above their heads.

They started, and stared about, both aloft and below, but could see nothing to explain the puzzle.

After a pause and the interchange of some remarks they started eating again, when there came a rushing, scraping noise somewhere amongst the rocks above. Ere they could turn to look in the direction of the strange sounds something fell on the sand near their feet.

"There, another stone!" cried Clive, in low tones. "Confound it! What does it mean? Can there be someone here watching us and playing tricks?"

"I'm afraid not," Alec returned despondently. "To suppose that is to suppose there must be an easy way in and out, and I'm afraid there's no such luck about."

Clive went and picked up what had fallen. It was a round pebble, and after a glance at it he dropped it on the ground.

"I suppose you're right," he said. "I guess the water trickling down must loosen a pebble or two here and there, and then they drop down. All the same, though," he added musingly, "it's a bit curious that stones should fall near us like this though we're now in a different part of the place. The same thing happened over yonder, you know."

Alec regarded the fallen pebble idly as it lay on the sand. Then he bent forward to look at it more carefully. First he picked it up and turned it over and over in his hand.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "If this isn't funny!"

"Why funny?"

"Why, I declare this pebble reminds me of those Ben Grove showed us, only there isn't much gilding on it. It seems to me there is still some, and it looks as if the rest might have been rubbed off."

At that moment there was again scraping and scuffling sounds somewhere above; then suddenly quite a shower of pebbles came about their ears. Two of them actually struck them, but the fact was almost unnoticed in the excitement of a more startling discovery.

The pebbles were shining with a metallic lustre—that is to say, some of them were. But of a dozen that had fallen, three or four were quite bright, while several of the others, like the first one, showed traces of metallic coating here and there.



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The two young explorers looked at each other for quite a long space without speaking. Such a crowd of thoughts rushed tumultuously through their minds that they could at first find no words to voice them.

They could scarcely credit their own senses; they could not realise this sudden good fortune that chance had thrown their way, or grasp its full meaning.

Though they had both believed thoroughly in Ben Grove's story, though they had looked forward with confidence—or thought they had—to finding the wonderful water of gold which, in the course of time, covered everything that came in contact with it with a coating of pure gold, yet they now knew that they had had, at the back of their minds, as it were, certain doubts such as would naturally be felt by most level-headed, sensible people.

Those doubts had in no wise troubled them, however. They had been well content to join in the expedition from a sheer love of adventure—even as the doctor had done so from a scientist's usual readiness to explore unknown ground.

It would not have greatly troubled them if they had failed to find any gold. They would have felt themselves sufficiently rewarded, like the doctor, by the pleasures of a trip to an unexplored island and the satisfaction of having done something very few other young fellows of their age could boast of.

Therefore it was that this wonderful proof which they held then in their hands that Ben's story of untold treasure actually had a solid foundation came upon them with a sort of shock.

They both felt the same way, and each one knew what the other was thinking in those first few moments of agreeable surprise.

Then their delight found expression in the way most usual with young fellows full of good spirit and overflowing with energy—they began to dance and shout.

"Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah!" cried Clive, and commenced jumping about as though he had suddenly found himself standing with bare feet on an uncomfortably hot plate.

Alec was not more than a second or two behind him in his hurrahs, and he quickly showed he was not going to be outdone in cutting capers. No Highland fling ever danced by the most frenzied Scottish piper could have outdone this performance on the margin of that dismal underground lake.

Had the sober-minded doctor happened along just then he would probably have thought either that they had both gone stark, staring mad, or that they were practising a new and most extravagant kind of cake dance with which to surprise him perhaps on his next birthday.

The echoes took up the chorus, as it were, and certainly did their share. They were not so noisy here as they had shown themselves at the other place; where they had so astonished the laughers, but they did their best to show that they were still there and wanted to make a sort of general rejoicing of it.

"Eureka! We've found what we came for! We're on the track of the gold!" cried Clive, and the echoes took up the word and cried it from a dozen different directions. "Gold, gold, gold!" was shouted at them from the roof, flung back at them from the opposite rocks, and muttered in dark corners.

Clive laughed, and shouted more than ever as he listened.

"Yes, gold!" he cried again. "Gold, gold, gold!" And "gold, gold,

(Continued overleaf.)

gold!" was heard here, there, everywhere. The words seemed to start from a dozen points at once, and to meet with a clash in the centre. They rose and fell now loud and harsh now deep and sonorous, anon becoming soft and subdued, finally floating in gentle whispers across the water.

By degrees the demonstrations quieted down a little, and then they were brought to an abrupt conclusion by the discovery that others besides the echoes seemed to be joining in.

"Jupiter! What's that?" exclaimed Clive, becoming suddenly grave and on the alert. His manner altered so quickly and decidedly that Alec became silent, too, and gazed round.

Scarcely had the last soft whispers of "gold" died away than there came again the mocking, cackling laugh they had heard before, and the echoes took up this, too, though not with the same whole-hearted vigour.

The strange, eerie laughter was so unmistakable this time, and lasted so much longer, that the two young fellows seized their rifles and began to gaze about on every side trying to locate the point it had started from.

The echoes died away, and silence followed, and then was heard once more the scratching and scuffling sounds. Clive glanced up at some caves high up in the rocks behind them, and was in time to catch sight of some dark forms just before they vanished back into the shadows.

Alec had seen them, too, and had already raised his rifle, and was taking aim, when Clive caught hold of his arm.

"Don't shoot, man!" he breathed in a loud whisper. "For goodness' sake, don't shoot!"

Alec lowered his rifle in surprise and with evident reluctance.

"Why not?" he asked. "I saw what they were. They're some wretched monkeys, the impudent beggars!"

"Monkeys? H'm! No; apes!"

"Well, apes, then. What's the difference? And why shouldn't I shoot one of the beggars?"

"I'll tell you why, old chap," Clive answered, and now he was looking very serious and thoughtful. "In the first place, it would be ungrateful. They threw those pebbles down at us which meant such good news to us. In the second place, you will probably frighten them away."

Alec laughed.

"That's just what I wanted to do," he declared. "Why not?"

"They may be jolly useful to us, my friend—that's why not. Can't you guess how?"

"I'm blessed if I can! What have you got in your mind?"

"Well," said Clive slowly, "they don't live here, do they? They can't! There's nothing for them to eat—nothing that monkeys care for. They come in here, I suppose, as a sort of snug sleeping-place or something of that sort. But they must get their food——"

"By jingo, you're right, Clive!" Alec exclaimed suddenly, brightening up. "I see your drift! They must go out to feed, and where they can get out we may be able to!"

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