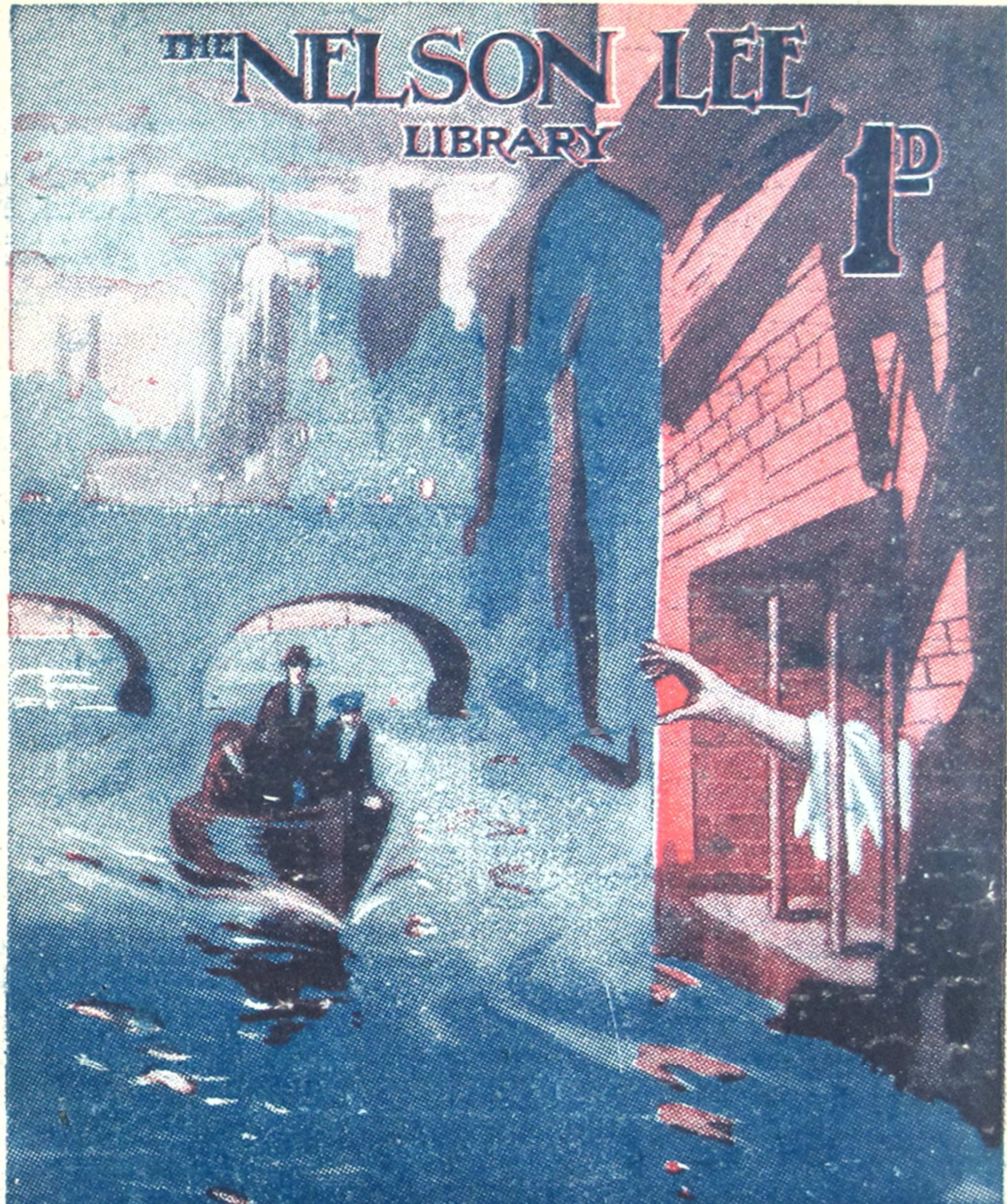


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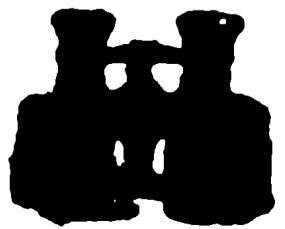
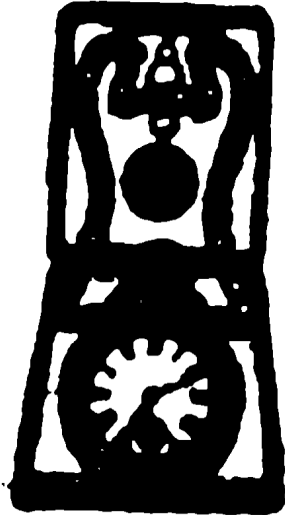
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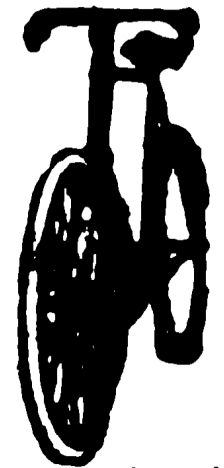
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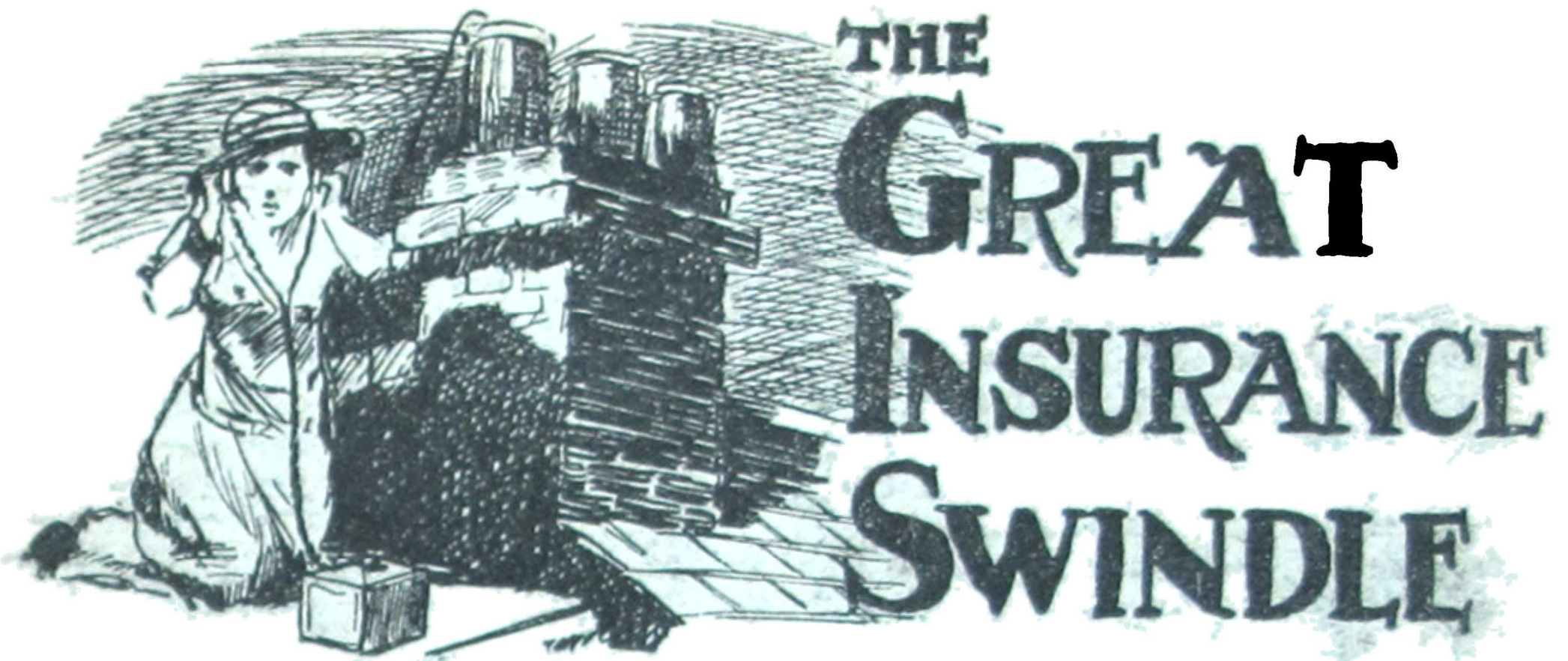
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CHAPTER I.

Eileen's Restless Mood—A Chance Meeting—On the Trail.

THE Thames Embankment was dark and strangely still. It was not quite ten o'clock, and the September night was mild and delightful. The river lay placid under the stars, and stretched away dully to the opposite bank, where no lights of any sort gleamed.

The Embankment here at Chelsea—and elsewhere, too—was practically devoid of the brilliant rows of electric lamps which one associates with the riverside walks. Just here and there a drastically dimmed lamp showed a dull patch, which for lighting purposes was almost useless.

Three people were walking along the Embankment—a man, a youth, and a girl. The two former were dressed in light flannel suits and straw hats, and the girl in a fresh-looking striped linen costume, with white shoes and stockings and a dainty Panama hat.

"It has been a lovely walk, Mr. Lee," the girl was saying. "But I'm afraid I have been wasting your time——"

"Not in the least, Miss Eileen," Nelson Lee hastened to interject. "Nipper and I have been busy indoors all day, and so this delightful walk is just clearing our brains. Besides, we may possibly drop in at a revue of some sort to finish up with."

"I'm not particular," remarked Nipper cheerfully. "It's jolly nice strolling along the Embankment here, although it is a bit gloomy. Walking's always ripping when you've got nice company."

"I suppose I must take that as a compliment, Nipper?" laughed Eileen Dare. "It is very good of you both to escort me home in this way. Doesn't the old river look grim of a night nowadays?"

Eileen had paused, and stood contemplating the Thames. Nelson Lee and Nipper paused, too, and the great detective seized the opportunity to light a cigar.

That evening Eileen Dare had visited her friends at Gray's Inn Road. And

Eileen was more than a friend to Nelson Lee—she was a trusted assistant, and on several occasions she had proved her sterling worth as a detective of astonishing ability.

In many ways the girl was every bit as astute and as sharp-witted as Nelson Lee himself. And the famous criminologist was the very first to admit that fact. He valued Eileen's help as much as he valued that of Nipper, and would have trusted her implicitly with almost any task.

In some ways, indeed, Eileen was better able to deal with certain cases than he was himself. For example, he had on one occasion sent her to investigate a case in the country, and she had filled the post of companion to another girl. Thus she was able to watch over her charge by night and day, and finally arrived at the root of the plot. Her assistance on such occasions was invaluable.

Eileen lived at Chelsea, near the Embankment, and Lee and Nipper were just accompanying her home. Eileen's flat was a delightful place, and she lived with her Aunt Esther—a homely old soul, who cared for the girl with a motherly regard.

For Eileen was an orphan. Her mother had been dead many years, and the girl scarcely remembered her. But her father's death was still fresh in her memory—was still vivid and horrible. For Mr. Lawrence Dare had been morally murdered by a scoundrelly combine of rich men.

By secret plotting these men had made it appear that Eileen's father was a spy in the pay of Germany. And he had been sentenced by court-martial to be shot. The shock, however, had caused a collapse, owing to a weak heart, and Mr. Dare had been saved from the disgraceful death.

But in the eyes of Heaven he had been deliberately murdered, and no one man could be brought to book. For the plot had been concocted by many, and after his death the scoundrels had appropriated a wonderful invention of Mr. Dare's—he had been a clever engineer—and they were now reaping the benefit and profit of his life work.

Eileen had been able to do nothing with the law. The law was incapable of touching the men she regarded as her enemies. Any ordinary girl would have been forced to suffer the tragedy without action; but Eileen was a very extraordinary girl—and that made all the difference.

She possessed the true detective instinct, as Nelson Lee had long since found out for himself. And she was daring and audacious to a degree, and was as brave and fearless as the great detective himself.

Just prior to her father's death she had solemnly sworn that she would bring his enemies—her enemies—to justice. The law could not touch them, and so she resolved to take the law into her own hands.

Already three rogues had paid the penalty, but there were others—many others. And when the opportunity presented itself she would strike another blow. As fate was to have it, that opportunity was destined to come sooner than Eileen expected.

Very soon the girl and her escorts arrived outside her flat, and they stood talking for a few moments. Then Eileen smilingly held out her dainty hand.

"Good night, Mr. Lee," she said quietly. "I'd ask you to come in, but I'm not sure whether my aunt is back—for she has been visiting friends, too. But I hope I shall see you again before long. That, of course, includes Nipper."

Nipper grinned, and said he hoped that Eileen would be able to find time to pop round the next day. He cheerfully added that if his "guv'nor" happened to be out, he would be quite capable of entertaining the visitor.

"That is very nice of you, Nipper," laughed Eileen. "And, Mr. Lee, if

anything turns up—you know what I mean—you'll ring me up at once, won't you?"

"Without delay," Nelson Lee promised. "But you must not be impatient, my dear young lady. It is not long since you brought about the downfall of Basil Illingford, and weeks may elapse before another chance to strike presents itself. But you may rely upon me to give you any information that comes into my possession."

After shaking hands and raising their hats, Nelson Lee and Nipper took their departure, and very soon they were walking briskly along the Embankment on the look-out for a taxi, having decided to see the last hour of the Hippodrome revue before making for home.

Meanwhile, Eileen remained standing where they had left her. A glance up at the dark windows of her flat told her that Aunt Esther had not yet returned. In fact, Eileen did not expect her until about eleven.

The girl felt restless, and her mood was a curious one. She felt just ready for an adventure of some sort. She wanted to be at work; the desire for excitement was strong within her, and she would have been glad then for something of an exciting nature to turn up.

She little guessed what excitement—grim, perilous excitement—the night was to bring forth!

After thinking for a few moments she decided to take another stroll along the Embankment. Somehow she did not feel inclined to go indoors just at the moment, and she was not in the least nervous of the dark streets.

Eileen was well capable of taking care of herself under almost any circumstances, and she really enjoyed night adventures. She did not hope for a moment that anything was to occur now, but a special providence seemed to direct her actions.

When she arrived upon the Embankment she walked slowly along eastwards, and almost lost count of the time in her thoughts. For, naturally enough, she had fallen to pondering over the great task she had imposed upon herself.

Eileen Dare was not a vindictive, revengeful girl. Nobody possessed a sweeter nature than hers; in all respects she was a very delightful girl. But her campaign against the band of men who called themselves the "combine" was not revenge in the usual sense of the word.

They were all men who were constantly and continually working for evil, and by unmasking them she was not only keeping faith with her vow, but she was seeing that justice was done.

Eileen was the very first to admit that without Nelson Lee's assistance she would not be equal to the task. But the great detective took a tremendous interest in the girl, for he himself had worked strenuously to prove her father's innocence. Lee felt that it was his duty to work his very hardest upon any case which Eileen brought to his notice.

On one occasion Eileen had fallen foul with the law, and she had, indeed, found herself arrested and taken before the magistrate. And she had escaped, not because she was innocent, but because Nelson Lee had come to her assistance in the nick of time, and by a trick had effected her release.

But she had been guilty of housebreaking, and Lee had sternly reproved her for taking such risks. But her action, although against the law, had been prompted by her sense of justice, and her enemies had suffered another defeat.

Eileen thought all this as she strolled along the Embankment, and she had traversed quite a considerable distance before she realised that over

half an hour had sped by. She laughed softly to herself, and leaned against the stone parapet before retracing her steps.

The dark river was before her, and she stood watching the cold waters musingly. She was conscious that two men were approaching, and that they were talking together. But she had already passed a number of people during her walk, and she took no notice of the strangers.

And then, as they came quite near, Eileen suddenly gave a little start. But she did not move from her position, although all her senses had become tense and alert. As the two men passed right by her they were still talking intently.

"You know very well, Bridger, that it is a huge scheme——"

Eileen heard the words distinctly. They meant nothing to her, of course, and she could form no opinion of the subject of conversation; but she was not startled by the words she heard, but by the identity of the men themselves.

For on the instant she recognised the voice as that of Mr. Ford Abbercorn, a rich City merchant. His companion was Mr. Jonathan Bridger, another man well known in high City circles.

And both were members of the scoundrelly combine Eileen Dare had sworn to destroy.

There was nothing whatever strange in the two men walking along the Embankment, for all classes stroll there, and after a warm day it is really a delightful spot to take one's self to.

Eileen was not at all astonished at the coincidence of two of her enemies passing within a yard of her. After all, it was really no coincidence at all, for she was in a spot where such a meeting was quite probable.

But to-night the girl detective was in one of her reckless moods; she was keen, alert, and as fresh as a flower. And she had seen that Bridger and Abbercorn were very intent upon their conversation. She had shrewdly observed that they were not merely idly discussing the latest play or the current phase of the war.

They were, on the contrary, deeply discussing some private subject, and the few words she had overheard, although of no value, told her that a "huge scheme" was in the making.

Any scheme which those men formulated was necessarily criminal, and Eileen, without any hesitation, decided to act. Accordingly, she strolled along the Embankment not far behind the two men, and kept them just within view.

"I will follow them and see where they go," she told herself. "I don't suppose for a moment anything will come of it—but it's detective work, and I am just in good form to-night."

Yet inwardly Eileen had a feeling that something of a grave nature was afoot. And she never lost an opportunity to strike a blow at her enemies. The law of chance had brought about this meeting, and she did not intend to ignore it. There was no knowing what it might lead to.

She half expected the pair to hail one of the taxis which frequently passed when they were in the neighbourhood of Westminster—for the walk was proving to be a long one. But Bridger and Abbercorn kept straight on, still talking, until at last they reached the end of the Embankment at Blackfriars Bridge.

Eileen had experienced no difficulty in keeping behind the men without their being aware of the fact. They had no suspicion that they were being followed, and never once looked back.

Rather to Eileen's surprise they crossed Blackfriars Bridge, and reached the south side of the river. From the deliberate manner in which they

directed their steps the girl was sure that they were bound for a definite destination. It was not merely an evening stroll, but a fixed journey.

The girl shrewdly understood that the rogues were walking in order to have an opportunity for conversation. Probably enough they were earnestly discussing the scheme which was in the making.

Eileen cared nothing about the lateness of the hour. She would be able to explain to her aunt when she got home, and it would be splendid if she could report to Nelson Lee in the morning that she had hit the trail of a fresh case.

Contrary to the girl's expectations, Abbercorn and Bridger did not continue their way down Blackfriars Bridge Road, but immediately turned off into a small alley, which led to the riverside warehouses and wharves.

All was dark and deserted here, and Eileen had to go very cautiously in order to avoid being observed. But the art of shadowing seemed to be a natural gift to her, and neither Nelson Lee nor Nipper could have performed the work with greater care than she did.

After proceeding down the alley for some little way, Jonathan Bridger pulled a bunch of keys from his pocket and opened a small door let in a wide gateway. The two men passed through, leaving the door slightly ajar.

This was positive evidence that they had no fear of being followed, and also, Eileen argued, that their stay was to be only a short one.

She approached the doorway, pushed it further open noiselessly, and saw two dim figures crossing a wide yard towards a tall, square building.

Eileen did not hesitate.

She nimbly stepped through into the yard, and walked lightly close against the wall until she came to a narrow buttress. Here she paused and waited. By this time she was greatly interested, and she had a premonition that villainy was brewing.

But what was the game?

Why had Jonathan Bridger and Ford Abbercorn come to this dark, deserted riverside warehouse between the hour of eleven and twelve at night?

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## CHAPTER II.

### A Doubtful Refuge—Trapped by Accident—A Terrible Adventure.

**E**ILEEN was uncertain as to the next move she should make. She knew well enough that her position was by no means an ideal one. Both these men knew her by sight, and they knew, moreover, that she had brought about the downfall of Basil Illingford, one of their former associates.

They did not know, however, that she was determined to deal with every single member of the combine, and so they had taken no action. All said and done, she was merely a girl, and they did not consider they had much to fear.

But this only proved they did not know Eileen's character; they did not know her amazing ability; they had no conception of her unflagging determination. If, however, they discovered her here, obviously tracking them, they would act drastically.

So Eileen had to be very careful. The scene before her was not exactly cheery. The night was very dark, and here, at all events, there was no lamp of any description. Everything lay enshrouded in gloom.

The yard itself was fairly wide, and a portion of it was hidden by the angle of the warehouse itself. This building, Eileen could see, was fairly

modern and prosperous. It wore a clean aspect, as far as she could see, and the yard was well kept and tidy.

The girl detective was much exercised in mind as to what Bridger and Abbercorn were doing. So far as she could tell, they were merely examining the exterior of the building. Bridger himself, a big, clumsy man, was talking in low tones, and pointing now and again as though to assist a point.

And then the pair slowly walked round the angle of the warehouse, and were lost to view. The girl at once slipped noiselessly across the yard, and cautiously peered round the building. She could see nothing—the men had vanished.

Fearing that she had lost them, Eileen stepped forward impulsively, and in a few quick steps she arrived at a further angle, and then paused. A low wall close against the warehouse was the only thing which divided the river from the firm ground, for she could hear the water lapping against the slimy brickwork.

Just to her left a flight of steep stone steps led downwards into a kind of area, and she wondered if the pair had descended them. Before she could make up her mind as to her next move she became aware of voices close at hand, from a corner just ahead. Bridger and his companion were retracing their steps—and Eileen knew instinctively that she had not sufficient time to slip back behind the angle. And for her to be seen would mean danger.

The girl did the only thing possible under the circumstances.

She tripped lightly down the stone steps, and found herself groping in darkness. She had only just been in time, for even as she paused, breathing quickly, she heard the men just above.

“Of course the details of the whole plan will be discussed to-morrow night in Stebbing’s library,” she heard Bridger say. “But, roughly, Abbercorn, I think you’ll understand—— Ah, and there’s this cellar place down these steps. I forgot to point it out as we came past.”

Eileen pressed a hand to her breast, and stood tense and rigid.

“Why, what has that cellar got to do with the business?” Abbercorn asked.

Eileen did not catch the answer; moreover, she was startled to hear footsteps descending. Her enemies were coming down, and they would trap her as she stood! And there, in that lonely spot, she would be completely at their mercy.

Instinctively Eileen’s hand went to a little hidden pocket, which always contained a tiny silver-plated revolver. Nelson Lee himself had advised the girl to carry it constantly, for the detective knew that she could be trusted with such a weapon, and that it would probably come in useful on many an occasion.

The revolver was merely a toy compared to many weapons, but it was quite capable of dealing death at close quarters.

And as Eileen gripped the revolver she groped her way backwards, and felt that a half-opened door was just at her rear. She passed into a dark, damp, evil-smelling apartment, the size of which she could not determine, and slipped behind the door.

It was the only thing to do in such a situation—and, as it proved, a wise move. Yet, although Eileen was saved from discovery, she was placed in one of the most appalling predicaments that had ever fallen to her lot. Indeed, could she have known what was to happen, she might have deliberately revealed her presence in order to escape.

Bridger came groping his way forward, and he paused as he stood in the doorway. He had been about to enter.



"Oh, I forgot," he exclaimed. "I don't suppose this cellar will be of any use, after all. It's been deserted for some months, because of an accident which happened last year. Didn't you notice how slimy those steps were?"

Bridger closed the door while Abbercorn was replying, and to Eileen's great dismay she heard a heavy bolt shot into a socket. In all probability Bridger had performed the action mechanically, for there was really no reason why he should bolt the door. But he was by nature a very careful man, and it was one of his habits to make doors secure when he left any building.

Eileen was quite positive that she had been imprisoned by accident. Neither of the men had the slightest idea that she was there, and the fact that they had bolted her in the noisome cellar was simply a matter of exceptionally bad luck.

The girl was undecided what to do. She stood perfectly still, listening intently. The footfalls of the men she had lately been following died away, and presently she was completely alone and everything was silent.

"Oh, dear!" murmured Eileen. "I believe I am in a fix now. But what was I to do? How was I to know that anything like this would happen?"

She was, in fact, blameless. Bridger and Abbercorn, too, were not responsible for the girl's position, but the fact that she had descended into the cellar had led to her undoing.

Eileen's clothes were unlike those of most girls. She had several pockets, and they were so cunningly concealed that their contents caused no unsightly bulges. From a second pocket she withdrew a delightfully dainty electric torch. It had been specially made for her—and this, too, had been another of Nelson Lee's suggestions.

The famous detective well knew, from past experience, how extremely valuable an electric torch can be upon certain occasions. Indeed, more than once Nelson Lee had extricated himself from a seemingly hopeless position chiefly because he possessed a good torch.

Eileen pressed a tiny switch, and a bright beam of light cut through the darkness. It did not take her many seconds to examine her prison. It was a square cellar, windowless, and the door was of solid oak, and in good repair. One glance told her that she would never be able to break it down by physical force.

There was no window, and the only air which was admitted, it seemed came from a grating, eighteen inches square, near the roof. From its position Eileen judged that the grating looked directly out over the river.

Up one corner the bricks seemed to be loose, and holes gaped. And the whole floor of the cellar—which was quite empty—was covered with mud and slime. Eileen knew at once what that slime meant!

And she guessed, too, the explanation of Bridger's words. He had said that an accident had taken place. Obviously a portion of this wall had become affected, and the river itself found its way, at high tide, into the cellar.

Naturally the water flowed beneath the door, and half filled the well-like area into which the steps descended. It was for this reason that the steps were slimy and wet.

And Eileen noted another fact—for about six feet the walls were damp on every side. Above that they were comparatively dry. It was clear to her that the water, when it came into the cellar, reached a depth of just over six feet.

"Oh, supposing the tide should come up before I can escape?" she asked herself, in alarm. "I should be out of my depth long before high tide,

and I couldn't possibly live until the tide turned— Oh, but what a silly I am! Nothing like that will occur!"

She reassured herself, and smiled at her thoughts. Yet Eileen knew very well that her imagination had not run loose. What she had suggested to herself was not only possible, but more than probable.

Down here, near the river, among the dark and silent warehouses, she might shout for help for hours in vain. Her voice could not carry far, for the door was thick and any sounds would be muffled. Moreover, the angle of the building prevented any direct sound reaching the road.

And the road itself was little more than an alley, which during the night was still and deserted. Eileen regarded her position in the true perspective, and she entertained little hope of being heard.

Therefore she decided it would be useless to shout. She did not know the state of the tide; but the appearance of the floor and walls suggested that no water had been in the cellar for some little time. This pointed to the fact that the tide was low at present, and would soon be rising.

Eileen realised that she would have to rely upon her own efforts and ingenuity to extricate herself from her unfortunate position.

She was angry and disappointed.

It was now impossible for her to carry out her original object. Bridger and Abbercorn had gone, and she was still unaware of their plans. And, instead of tracking them, she found herself in an awkward predicament—which promised, indeed, to become absolutely perilous.

If the two rogues had deliberately entrapped her, Eileen would have been easier in mind, for she would have known that there was something shady afoot. But the whole situation was just a caprice of fate.

That was what made it so galling. She had been imprisoned here, in this dismal cellar, unknown to Abbercorn and Bridger, and had nothing to thank but an exceptionally unkind stroke of ill-luck.

If she escaped, all well and good. For Eileen had an idea that she would soon be able to discover the truth of the new "scheme" which was under discussion. Already a plan was shaping itself in her active brain.

But how could she escape?

The most obvious course was to wait until morning, and then attract attention from the dock labourers, who would certainly be about very early. Time and tide, however, wait for no man; and time and tide have no especial respect for a member of the gentler sex.

It was the tide which worried Eileen.

And even as she switched on the torch, after a few minutes' thoughtful rumination, she gave a little cry and stared down at her feet.

The floor was covered with a thin film of murky water!

And, as she watched, the water rippled visibly, and she knew that the cellar was filling with the Thames! It was high time for her to find a means of escape. Yet the girl was in no way frightened.

She was as cool as possible, and considered the situation calmly and dispassionately. What would be her best move?

Exit by means of the door was impossible. She walked across to it and shook it with all her strength. But the bolt was shot home securely, and she could not even shift the door an inch.

Possibly, if she had possessed a stout piece of iron, she might have been able to beat one of the panels out, and thus reach the outside bolt. But there was no such piece of iron, and so it was a waste of time to think.

The place in the wall where the bricks seemed loose suggested a means of escape to Eileen. But upon examination the wall was by no means so insecure as she had imagined.

The stonework blocks were as firm as granite. She could see water trickling in rapidly between the cracks, and before a couple of minutes had passed it was entering the cellar in miniature cascades, and creating a hissing splash.

There was no doubt left in her mind now—the tide had risen beyond the danger mark, and with every minute that passed the influx of the water would become more violent, and it would not take long for the cellar to fill.

“There’s only one way, and I’m not at all hopeful,” Eileen murmured. “I believe this grating looks out upon the river, and I might possibly be able to attract attention.”

She stood beneath the grating, and flashed her light upon it.

It was high out of her reach, and the iron bars were stout and dry. The water never reached to that level, and the bars were sound and firmly fixed. She knew that she would never be able to bend them. Her only hope of rescue was the slim possibility of somebody outside becoming aware of her position.

And, thinking over the situation calmly, how could she expect to attract attention? The river was deserted, and she could not even flash her light directly out into the darkness. Moreover, she could see that the electric torch was already becoming yellowish and dim. The battery was only small, and Eileen remembered that it was becoming exhausted. She had, in fact, mentally decided to fix in a new battery that very week.

But things generally happen in that way. By merely flashing the light now and again she would, perhaps, be able to economise the “juice”—as Nipper called it. So she pressed the switch off and stood in darkness.

Although she knew the effort would be useless, she leapt lightly upwards and attempted to grasp the iron bars. If they had been set flush with the inner side of the wall she would have been able to gain a hold.

But the wall was of thick stonework, and the grating was set into the outer surface. Therefore there was a wide ledge intervening between Eileen’s hand and the bars themselves. By jumping she could reach the level of the grating; but it was impossible to gain a hold.

As she descended after the jump she splashed noisily into quite a foot of water. Her little feet were cold and soaking, and the water was already nearly up to her knees. She made a wry face.

“Oh, what a state my costume will be in!” she murmured, her thoughts, even in a time of peril like this, flying to matters of dress. Eileen was very feminine, after all.

But her costume was certainly doomed, for the water was now rising with alarming rapidity. Eileen realised that, as the tide rose, so the force of the water increased. And, the pressure being so much greater, the cellar filled accordingly.

The river water was murky and very cold. The level of it seemed to reach Eileen’s waist before she could form any idea as to how she could extricate herself from her awful predicament.

She groped her way round the walls, and flashed her light upon their smooth surfaces. If she could only find something which would give her just a glimpse of hope, her spirits would be raised. But there was nothing—there was no escape.

But Eileen by no means gave way to panic. A cool head, she well knew, was a valuable asset at any time, and more particularly when danger assailed her. To give way to fear and panic would be to admit defeat.

At first Eileen had not fully realised the awful nature of her position.

But now the truth was forced upon her grimly and thoroughly. She was imprisoned in a cellar, and the tide was rising.

The cellar itself was situated far out of earshot of human being, and the time was in the vicinity of one o'clock in the morning. Escape by the door was impossible, and the only other exit was the grating—and that was out of reach. Besides, it was composed of heavy iron bars, and even if she reached it she would be still far from freedom.

The truth was appalling.

She would drown in that cellar like a rat caught in a trap. It is not a happy simile, but terribly descriptive of her perilous position. There seemed no prospect of rescue coming from any quarter. Not a soul, indeed, knew of her presence there.

Once or twice in desperation she raised her voice, and gave a loud cry for help. But the minutes passed, and the only sound which came to her was the persistent ripple of the water.

If Eileen Dare had been deliberately trapped, with intent to murder, she could not have been more helpless.

But even now the brave girl did not give way to fear. The level of the water had risen to her breast, and she knew that within a few minutes she would be swept from her feet.

And after that?

Eileen did not care to think what would happen after that. She cherished a frail hope that her judgment had been wrong, and that the water would cease rising before she became out of her depth.

But, steadily and relentlessly, the water rose. The very ripple of it seemed like the sound of mocking laughter in Eileen's strained ears. Death was overtaking her, and there was no escape.

"Oh, there must be a way!" Eileen murmured huskily. "Heaven would never permit such a tragedy as this! I shall be saved—I know it—I'm positive of it!"

And then the Thames water rose round her neck, and the feel of it seemed like two icy cold hands clutching at her throat.

She attempted to keep her feet, and did so for a couple of minutes.

But the water came higher, and that which she had been long dreading happened. She was lifted from her feet, spluttering and gasping, and was forced to swim in order to keep her head above water.

How long would she be able to keep it up?

How long would it be before the end came?

Out of her depth, struggling for life in that murky water, Eileen knew that before so very long she would be forced to abandon hope. In all conscience, no girl ever found herself in such a ghastly predicament as this!

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## CHAPTER III.

### The Working of Fate—Down the River—A Startling Discovery.

NELSON LEE tossed his cigar end into the Thames, and both he and Nipper heard the faint splash and the resultant hiss as the water extinguished the glowing tobacco.

"Yes, Nipper, I agree with you heartily on that point," Lee was saying. "Miss Eileen is a girl in a thousand. And, although she is a girl, I value her opinion highly, and should never hesitate to take her advice."

Nipper nodded sagely.

"She's a ripper, gov'nor," he said. "Best girl I've ever struck, anyhow."

As a rule, I don't trouble much about girls, but Miss Eileen is so different. She's as pretty as a picture—ain't she, sir?"

"Undoubtedly, young 'un; although I do not care much for the expression," was Lee's reply. "A picture, after all, is cold and lifeless. However beautiful it may be, it can never approach the living reality. And Miss Eileen Dare is certainly the most beautiful girl I have ever seen."

Nipper grinned at the Thames.

"You'll have to be careful, guv'nor," he observed cheekily. "I think I know the signs pretty well, and before long you'll be falling in——"

"My hand will be falling upon your shock head in a moment, you young rascal!" interjected Lee severely. "And it won't fall lightly either. I want no absurd remarks of that sort from you."

"Sorry, guv'nor. But you do admire Miss Eileen, don't you—honest?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"One is forced to admire her, Nipper," he replied. "She is dainty, pretty, and her ways are delightful and altogether attractive. But it is not Eileen's personal beauty I admire so much as her sterling qualities. She is remarkably clever, young 'un, and she instils a confidence into one which cannot be overlooked. Her ability knows no bounds, and she is as keen as a needle."

"Right every time, sir," agreed Nipper heartily. "I wonder when——"

"Hallo, hallo!" interrupted a jovial voice suddenly. "Who's this, indeed? Who's this marching along the Embankment at this unearthly hour of the night?"

Nelson Lee and Nipper paused.

They had been walking briskly along, but a form now appeared before them in the gloom, and was standing full in their path.

"I am afraid——" began Lee.

"Well, that's too bad!" cried the stranger. "D'you mean to say that you don't know me, Mr. Lee? Upon my soul, I feel quite rebuffed!"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"Why, of course, it's Inspector Mead, of the River Police," he smiled. "Sorry I didn't recognise you at first sight, Mead. But these light restrictions, you know—— Your voice is a bit husky, too. What is it—a cold, or whisky?"

Inspector Mead chuckled in turn. As he was a firm teetotaler, and as Nelson Lee was well aware of that fact, he took no notice of the detective's bland inquiry. He shook hands with Lee and Nipper

"Knew your sweet voices instantly," he remarked. "Yes, I have got a bit of a cold, Mr. Lee—nothing to speak about. Well, anything doing to-night, or are you just taking the air?"

"The latter," Lee replied. "Not that the air is particularly refreshing. I am afraid the Thames in this neighbourhood is sadly lacking in ozone, Mead. You ought to know, considering that you practically live on the river."

Mead nodded.

"It's not so bad," he said. "A heap better than messing about the streets, anyhow. I'm just off down the river—Wapping and Rotherhithe way."

"Two lovely districts, sir," said Nipper. "You're welcome to 'em. The guv'nor and I have been looking for a taxi. We're thinking of dropping in to see the last bit of the Hippodrome revue——"

"Nonsense!" interjected Inspector Mead. "That's a foolish idea, anyhow. Fat lot of good you'll derive from sitting in a music hall. Why not come with me down the river? You'll enjoy the trip. I'll set you down

at Blackfriars Bridge on the way back—and it's an easy walk from there to Gray's Inn Road."

"Exactly—just up New Bridge Street, across Ludgate Circus, up St. Bride Street, into Holborn, and——"

"My dear Nipper, we don't want a lesson in London streets," put in Nelson Lee, interrupting the lad's flow of directions. "And, although the hour is not so unearthly as Mead intimates, I really believe we should arrive at the Hippodrome only just in time to witness the fall of the curtain. I am inclined to accept this invitation."

"Oh, any old thing!" said Nipper. "I'm willing."

And in a few moments Nelson Lee and Nipper were accompanying Inspector Mead, of the River Police, to the little jetty, against which a patrol launch was moored. The great detective little imagined what his change of plan was to lead to!

Very soon the police launch was quietly dropping downstream, in the centre of the wide tideway. Lee and Nipper stood and chatted with the inspector. The latter was full of a certain mysterious criminal case which had occurred off Shadwell.

Nelson Lee was not particularly interested, but the conversation was by no means dull. Mead was a jovial man, bluff and hearty. On more than one occasion Lee had enlisted his help when working on the riverside.

The trip was quite enjoyable. As Lee learned, the inspector had been told off for a special mission, and it was just a matter of luck that he had encountered Nelson Lee and Nipper. Ordinary civilians do not usually travel or take trips in the boats of the Thames Police—but Nelson Lee and Nipper were different.

The launch slid along quietly beneath the bridges until the dim bulk of the Tower Bridge loomed ahead. After this the river broadened in parts, and was lined on both sides with dingy wharves and ugly warehouses.

"Not so dusty," remarked Nipper critically. "I'm not saying the atmosphere's exactly like that of the Channel, but it's certainly fresh. We ought to sleep pretty well after this trip, gov'nor."

"My good Nipper, you sleep well after anything," was Lee's reply. "I don't think there's another person in this world who can slumber so thoroughly as you can. And you generally display a decided antipathy towards turning out in the morning."

Nipper grinned, and observed that he wasn't the only one. Possibly this was meant for an insinuation with regard to Lee himself; but the detective took no notice. He was well accustomed to Nipper's pleasantries.

There was some little delay at Rotherhithe while Inspector Mead went ashore to attend to certain business. When the return journey started the tide was well on the move, and rising fast.

The trip up river was devoid of incident until the police launch was nearing Blackfriars Bridge.

The boat was travelling in midstream, and the steersman was just about to turn her towards the north bank, so that the two passengers could be set ashore. It happened that Mead had just finished a sentence, and Lee paused before replying.

And during that pause there came a faint, far away cry. It was almost inaudible, and nobody but Lee heard it. His ears were exceptionally keen, and he knew that he was not mistaken.

"What was that, Mead?" he inquired sharply.

"What was what?"

"Didn't you hear a cry—a faint call from the south shore?"

"No."

"I didn't hear anything either," said Nipper.

"Do you mind stopping the launch for a moment or two?" asked Lee. "One never knows, Mead. All sorts of strange things happen on the river, as you have excellent cause to know."

The inspector nodded, and gave a couple of orders. The engines ceased their quiet beat, and the launch drifted round towards the south shore.

Mead and his two companions were now listening intently. For a few moments the inspector thought that Lee must have been suffering from imagination. But then, clear and distinct, but very low, came a cry:

"Help! Oh, help!"

There was something strangely pathetic in the cry—plaintive, and certainly in a woman's voice. And, from the intonation of it, there was grave danger of some sort.

"By George!" ejaculated the inspector. "You were right, Lee."

He gave another order, and the boat quickly gathered way again, and made straight towards the wharves and warehouses which lined the river. But Nelson Lee did not seem to be peering in the darkness as the others were.

"Good heavens!" he muttered in a strange voice.

"What's the matter, gov'nor?" asked Nipper.

"If it was not impossible, my lad, I could swear that that cry was uttered by Eileen!" the detective replied. "Of course, the idea is preposterous—but the voice, the voice!"

Nipper grunted.

"Oh, you must be wrong, sir," he declared. "How the dickens could it be Miss Eileen? You know jolly well that we left her at the door of her own flat up at Chelsea. She couldn't possibly be down here at Blackfriars. I expect it's some poor woman who has tumbled into the river."

"Or else a suicide!" put in Inspector Mead, who had heard the latter part of the sentence. "We sometimes get cases like that, you know. Some poor fools think they've had enough of this world until they find themselves in the cold water. Then they bellow out for help, and they're jolly glad to get on dry land again!"

Neither Nelson Lee nor Nipper paid much attention to Mead's words. And even as he ceased speaking the cry for help came again. But now there was a note of thankfulness in the voice which clearly showed that the police launch had been seen.

"Hallo!" shouted Nelson Lee loudly. "Where are you?"

"Give another hail!" added Nipper.

There was a short pause, and then the sound of an amazed gasp.

"Oh, it's Mr. Lee!" exclaimed a well-known voice. "Oh, how splendid! I'm here, behind this grating. For mercy's sake, come and rescue me!"

Nelson Lee choked back an exclamation.

"It is Eileen!" he exclaimed amazedly. "Well, this is more than I can understand, Nipper. Quick, lad—can you see any grating?"

"Yes, over there, sir!" panted Nipper, excitedly pointing. "Great guns! Are we dreaming, or is it real? You were right after all, gov'nor. But Miss Eileen down here, and in peril——"

Nipper broke off, completely at a loss for words.

And the River Police launch went nearer to a slimy wall, where a small iron grating showed some feet above the surface of the water. Being high tide, the boat was able to go right in, and Nelson Lee flashed his electric torch upon the rusted bars.

Two delicate hands were clinging to the bars, and, behind, Eileen's face, pale and wan, showed distinctly. But even at that moment she smiled, and her eyes flashed with thankfulness and relief.

"Oh, Mr. Lee, please come and get me out of this!" she panted huskily. "I had completely given up hope, and I certainly did not expect you, of all people, to come to my rescue."

It was, indeed, wonderful.

If Lee and Nipper had not undertaken this purely chance trip, Eileen Dare would never have been rescued from her awful position. For only Nelson Lee had heard her cry. She would have died in that noisome cellar, and her death would have been a mystery for ever.

Fate had indeed worked in strange paths.

## CHAPTER IV.

### Eileen's Determination—At Stebbing's House—The Scheme.

"HERE we are, guv'nor!" Nipper ejaculated the words tensely and eagerly. He and his master had just scrambled over the wall which divided the warehouse from the alley—for it had been impossible to open the gates.

They had followed Eileen's directions, and were now standing at the top of the flight of stone steps which led downwards towards the stout door of the cellar. Most of the steps were now covered with water, and it looked black and dirty—as, indeed, it was.

Nelson Lee could easily understand how the river found its way here, but he was filled with wonder as to how Eileen could have got herself into such an astounding predicament.

However, the first thing was to effect her rescue—questions could be asked afterwards.

Nipper stepped forward, intending to plunge down into the water. The lad was frantically anxious to release the girl from her prison. But Lee gripped his shoulder and held him back.

"There is no necessity for you to get soaked through, young 'un," he exclaimed crisply. "I am going down, and you must remain here until I return with Miss Eileen. I don't suppose I shall be more than two minutes."

Nipper didn't care a jot about getting soaked, but he never questioned any of his master's orders when it came to serious work. On every occasion he obeyed implicitly and without a murmur. So now he stood aside.

Nelson Lee stepped downwards, and in a few seconds he was up to his chin in the chilly water. He floundered forward, and arrived at the big door. After a little groping he found the heavy bolt and shot it back with difficulty.

The door swirled open, and in another moment Nelson Lee found himself grasping Eileen round the shoulders. She said nothing, but the detective could tell by the sigh of thankfulness which left her lips that she was intensely grateful.

What happened after that occurred briskly and without hitch. One of the River Police had been at once sent off beforehand to obtain a couple of taxis or private motor-cars from a garage—whichever were obtainable.

When Nelson Lee and Nipper arrived at the gates of the warehouse yard, they found that Inspector Mead had sent a couple of men to assist. The wall was not very high, and Eileen was easily hoisted over. Then, at the top of the alley, she was placed in a waiting taxi-cab. The girl protested that she was able to walk, but Nelson Lee and Nipper carried her to the taxi in spite of her words.

No strangers were present, and the whole incident had attracted no atten-



tion. Nobody, with the exception of the River Police and the taxi-cab drivers, knew that anything startling had occurred.

Nipper was bundled into the cab beside Eileen, who was wrapped round with a thick woollen rug. Then the taxi started off straight for Chelsea.

Nelson Lee, soaked to the skin, had a few words with Inspector Mead, and then he jumped into the second taxi and was driven straight to Gray's Inn Road—comparatively a short distance.

Jumping out opposite his door, he ordered the cabby to wait, and then let himself in. He was very anxious to learn how Eileen had come to be locked in a cellar at Blackfriars, but he knew very well that it was impossible for him to accompany her home, wet through as he was.

While he was rapidly changing his wet things his thoughts were busy. The whole affair was startling and mysterious, but he was quite sure that Eileen would be able to explain satisfactorily. He and Nipper had left the girl outside her own flat, and the next they had seen of her had been behind the bars of a grating beneath a great warehouse at Blackfriars!

The night's events were, without doubt, extraordinary.

Lee was not long in changing. Then he descended to the taxi again, and ordered to be driven to Chelsea. When he arrived he found Nipper and Eileen's aunt in one of the sitting-rooms talking earnestly.

"Oh, Mr. Lee, whatever has happened?" asked Aunt Esther, in a tone of anxiety. "Surely you can tell me what has been happening to dear Eileen? Nipper is quite in the dark."

"I am afraid my own knowledge is decidedly limited, Miss Gilbey," replied Nelson Lee gravely. "I thought perhaps that your niece had been able to explain——"

"I think she will be here in a moment," replied Aunt Esther. "At present she is changing into dry clothing. Oh, dear! The poor child has been having a terrible time, by what I hear. But she declared that she would not say anything until you came. I am so pleased you have arrived."

Miss Esther Gilbey was an elderly maiden lady, and she cared for Eileen as though she had been her own daughter. The good soul was of ample proportions, and possessed a heart of gold.

Before the conversation could proceed further, Eileen herself appeared. She had completely changed, and, in spite of the paleness of her cheeks, she looked delightful in a glorious rest gown. Her rich chestnut hair had been loosely tucked up, and her dainty feet were encased in silk slippers.

"Why, you have raced me, Mr. Lee," she exclaimed brightly, and with a brave attempt to adopt her customary cheeriness. "I thought that I should have to wait ever so long before you turned up. Oh, thank you ever so much for doing what you did. It is really impossible for me to express——"

"Please make no attempt to thank me," was Nelson Lee's quiet interruption. "After all, what have I done? Nipper and I happened to be on the police boat, and we heard your cry. We are very anxious to hear your explanation. But, first of all, I want you to satisfy me upon one point. Are you able to talk to-night? If not, Nipper and I will——"

"Oh, I am feeling almost myself," declared Eileen.

That was, of course, a slight exaggeration. After her dreadful experience it was surprising that the girl was able to converse at all. But she was extremely healthy, and her constitution was magnificent.

She seated herself in an easy chair, and then, in simple language she described how she had followed Jonathan Bridger and Ford Abbercorn, and how she had accidentally become locked in the cellar.

She declared positively that the whole affair had occurred by mischance.

Lee was rather doubtful at first, for he at once suspected that the two men had deliberately trapped their fair shadower.

But Eileen at last convinced him that such was not the case. She then went on to describe how the water had risen in the cellar, and how at last she had been compelled to swim.

"I thought there was no escape for me, Mr. Lee," said Eileen quietly. "The cellar was not large, as you know, and all I could do was to swim round and wait until I became exhausted. I am strong, and I believe I'm a good swimmer, but I was hampered very much by my skirt and other clothing. I knew that I could not last for long."

Aunt Esther held up her hands in horror.

"Oh, my darling, how dreadful!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

"Yes, I suppose it was dreadful," said Eileen simply. "But I didn't give up hope even when everything seemed terribly black. While there was a prospect of life I did not mean to go under. Once or twice, indeed, I mentally decided to give up the fight, and admit defeat. Then I set my teeth, and told myself that I would not be cowardly."

"Cowardly!" protested Nipper, with indignation. "Why, miss, you're about the bravest girl under the sun."

"I don't think I am, Nipper. I was awfully afraid in that cellar, and as the water rose high I suddenly had an idea. While I had been standing on the floor I found it impossible to reach the bars of the grating. But it suddenly struck me that, as the water rose, I might be able to gain a hold. And from there I knew that I should be looking out across the river."

"How long after that did you succeed in your object?"

"I couldn't tell you, Mr. Lee. I lost all count of time, and everything was terribly black," replied Eileen. "My dear little electric torch dropped out into the river as I clutched at the bars—for I still had it in my hand. I had been intending to flash it across the river. I clung to the bars after grasping them, and every now and again I pulled myself up in order to see if any boat was passing. Oh, how my arms do ache now!"

"I am not at all surprised," was Lee's comment. "But I am surprised that you were able to stand the strain for so long. It was a great misfortune to lose your torch at such a moment—just when you could have used it to advantage."

Eileen nodded and smiled wanly.

"That is all, I think," she said. "When I had nearly given up all hope of sighting any boat I saw that police launch coming along. Oh, my heart gave such a jump! And I was amazed when I heard your voice, Mr. Lee. You have yet to tell me how you came to be aboard the boat."

"At first sight one would think the most astounding coincidences had occurred," said Nelson Lee. "But, when we examine the affair in all its points closely, we find that the incidents which led to this end were, as a matter of fact, almost commonplace. You merely followed two of your enemies, and I went down the river for a trip. It was not at all surprising that I should hear your cry for help."

The detective then described how he and Nipper had met Inspector Mead, and how the latter had persuaded them to accompany him down the river.

"Thank Heaven, nothing really serious has occurred," concluded Nelson Lee. "Your constitution is splendid, Miss Eileen, and I really do not think that you will come to much harm. A long sleep in a good bed will be all that you need."

Eileen laughed softly.

"I am feeling ever so much better already," she replied. "I swallowed no water, thank goodness, and my adventure has only made me tired. And,

in a way, I am rather glad, for I believe I shall have an opportunity of striking again at my enemies. I am sure those two scoundrels were up to no good, and I mean to investigate as soon as possible."

Eileen did not tell Lee of the plan she had in mind—for her brain had already been busy formulating a scheme. She was rather afraid that the famous detective would persuade her to abandon the plan, for it was a risky one. The girl was very determined, and wished, if possible, to give Nelson Lee a surprise.

The detective and Nipper took their departure soon afterwards, satisfied that their pretty friend was not harmed. And they returned to Gray's Inn Road, discussing the night's adventures, and wondering what the next move would be.

Nelson Lee had a conviction that the case was only just starting, and that Eileen would not be long before she made some important discoveries. Lee agreed with her in thinking that Bridger and Abbercorn were engaged in some new shady enterprise.

Eileen did not get up until late the following morning. The sleep had done her the world of good, and she ate a very hearty breakfast. Aunt Esther was very pleased to see that the girl was practically none the worse for her trying experience.

Indeed, Eileen seemed even brighter than usual after her rest. In reality she ached in almost every limb, but she would not admit this, and she knew well enough that it was only a temporary discomfort.

Rather late in the morning she went out on an errand, and told her aunt that she would be back during the afternoon. She arrived at about three o'clock, and seemed in very high spirits.

The day passed, and night came on fine and calm. High clouds obscured the stars, and there was no moon. Consequently the night was exceptionally dark, and a stiff breeze caused the autumn leaves to fall in profusion.

Eileen remained indoors during the evening, and her thoughts reverted to the few words she had heard Jonathan Bridger utter. They had been scant enough, in all conscience, and did not seem of much value. He had merely said that "the whole scheme would be fully discussed in Stebbing's library the next night."

The next night, of course, was to-night, and the girl detective wondered what could be happening at Stebbing's house.

And who was Stebbing?

Eileen was well aware that he was one of the most powerful members of the combine she was fighting. Rudolph Stebbing was a solicitor by profession, and he had a very extensive practice. He was regarded as one of the best lawyers of the day, and one of the most trustworthy. It was his solid position, in fact, which made him so secure.

His offices were situated in New Court, Lincoln's Inn, and on one occasion Eileen had had an exciting adventure there. And his private house was fairly close by, enclosed in its own grounds, and surrounded by high trees.

It was rather an unusual residence to find in the heart of London, although there are many similar ones. Towards ten o'clock visitors began to arrive at the solicitor's house, and they were all men of high standing and repute.

The first two were Jonathan Bridger and Ford Abbercorn. Then, within five minutes, Mr. Roger Haverfield put in an appearance, accompanied by a gentleman named Sydney Bradford. Then, close behind one another, came two other men, who announced themselves as Sir Caleb Hurst and Mr. Melville J. Ross.

Others followed, and all were members of the private criminal combine

which worked together at periodical intervals. There was no chief—no principal member—but they were all rogues.

Rudolph Stebbing himself received his visitors cordially. He was an elderly man, with a small beard and with bent shoulders. His eyes now wore a crafty look behind his glasses.

“Wilmore said that he might not be able to get along,” remarked Jonathan Bridger, “so I don’t think we had better wait for him. If he comes, all well and good, but it is not essential that he should be present.”

Stebbing’s library was very comfortable, and his visitors were all seated in easy chairs, and whisky and soda flowed abundantly—the former especially. The air, too, was soon blue with cigar smoke. All the men were in evening dress, and they had apparently merely dropped in for a friendly chat.

Yet, to tell the truth, this was nothing less than a criminal consultation. These men had no special meeting-place, but Stebbing’s residence was handy for them all, and so they often congregated there. Roger Haverfield lived in the Midland city of Birmingham—for he was chief of the Haverfield Steel Company—and all his companions within that apartment were large shareholders.

“Well, Bridger, what’s the game?” asked Sir Caleb Hurst genially, as he sipped at his whisky. “I understand you called us together to-night?”

Jonathan Bridger nodded.

“It will mean big profit for us all,” he replied. “We’ve mutually agreed to share the proceeds of these ‘extra’ business transactions, and I am of the opinion that this particular affair will be one of the best we’ve worked. I have already explained things to Abbercorn, and he is quite enthusiastic.

Stebbing waved his hand.

“Let us all share in the enthusiasm then,” he suggested. “If Abbercorn is pleased, I’ve no doubt that there’s something good on hand. He’s a good judge, at all events.”

Jonathan Bridger glanced at the door.

“This conversation must be absolutely private,” he remarked. “Your servants are all out of the way, I suppose?”

“My dear man, you know well enough that there is a baize-door half-way down the passage,” replied the solicitor. “I closed and locked it five minutes ago. But you can get up and satisfy yourself, if you like.”

“Thanks,” said Bridger. “I will.”

He raised his heavy body from the chair and crossed to the door. Obviously, his subject of conversation was to be exceptionally private. He had no intention of placing himself and his friends in the hands of any spying servant. There was another aspect, too—it would never do to allow any inkling of the projected plot to leak out.

Bridger opened the door and saw a wide passage, with a single electric-lamp burning from the ceiling. A little way down a green baize-covered door was set across the passage, and Bridger soon found that this was securely locked. Moreover, there was a brass bolt, and it was shot home. There were no windows.

“Safe enough here, anyhow,” muttered Bridger.

He returned to the library, closed the door, and locked it. Rudolph Stebbing watched him with interest and amusement.

“Satisfied?” he asked, with a smile.

Bridger did not answer at the moment. He crossed to the only window which the room possessed, and drew aside the heavy curtains. The window was open a little at the top, but it was impossible for anybody to approach it, although the library was situated on the ground floor.

The house was of the semi-basement type, and a wide well lay beneath the library window, and it completely separated the window from the garden. It would be impossible for any spy to get near.

Bridger drew the curtains again, and looked round the room. There were no screens, and no articles of furniture which could conceal anything bigger than a cat. It was perfectly obvious that eavesdropping was utterly impossible. These men were quite in private.

"Well?" asked Ford Abbercorn curiously. "What's the idea of this, Bridger?"

Bridger sat down and drank some whisky.

"I'm a cautious man," he said. "Precaution doesn't cost anything, and we can't be too careful over an affair like this. I'm satisfied now that we're safe here. So I'll get to business."

"Guess it's about time," growled Melville J. Ross—whose birthplace had been Chicago, but who had lived many years in London.

"First of all I am going to outline the scheme in brief," said Bridger. "Then, when you've got it clear in your minds, I'll go into full details—figures, and all the rest of it. It's a matter of insurance—big insurance."

Stebbing, being a solicitor, pursed his lips.

"Dangerous ground, Bridger," he remarked doubtfully.

"In some ways, perhaps," agreed the other. "But my plan is as safe as anything we have ever done. As you all probably know, I own the Handstrong Co.'s warehouse, close to Blackfriars Bridge. It's a large modern building, well-fitted, and always full of valuable stock."

"The Handstrong Company is dead, isn't it?" asked Sir Caleb Hurst.

"Yes, I bought it up, lock, stock, and barrel, although I still carry on business under the old name," was Bridger's reply. "Well, this great warehouse is mine—freehold, you understand. At the present time it is full of highly valuable stock—chemicals, most of it. I am storing it up until after the war, because I shall be able to sell it for double the figure then. The whole building and its entire contents is insured for a tremendous figure—insured against fire."

"Good heavens!" said Stebbing, startled. "You are not suggesting——"

"Wait. Just hear me out," interjected Jonathan Bridger calmly. "That's the situation. The warehouse is insured against fire for a fabulous sum, owing to the extreme value of its contents. Well, to-morrow night the place is to catch fire, and it will be entirely gutted. I shall lay my claim, and obtain the insurance money without a hitch. That's the bald scheme—at least, a part of it."

There was a short silence, and Bridger smiled as he saw the doubtful expressions of his companions.

"Well," he asked genially, "what's wrong?"

"To begin with," said Stebbing, "it is a risky game to defraud an insurance company, although it is done often enough. And where are you, Bridger, when you have succeeded? Considering the valuable nature of the stock you won't have much margin of profit, even though the warehouse and the stuff is over insured——"

"Well, I haven't finished yet," said Bridger coolly. "Let me go into further details. When the fire takes place to-morrow night there won't be a farthing's worth of the original stock left in the building!"

"Phew!" whistled Roger Haverfield. "So that's the game?"

"Yes," replied Bridger, "that is the game, my friends. And it's a big game, too. Well played, however, there's no possibility of a miscarriage. Unknown to anybody except myself and six of my men there is a short tunnel under the Handstrong warehouse, communicating with another ware-

house—ostensibly owned by another company, but really owned by me. For the last fortnight my men have been transferring the entire stock—it is all in handy cases—from the Handstrong building into the other. By to-night the transfer will be complete.”

“And the warehouse is now empty?” asked Haverfield.

“Not at all. Outwardly, it is exactly as before,” was Bridger’s reply. “If a representative of the insurance company goes over the building to-morrow, from top to bottom, he won’t suspect a thing. For I’ve done the thing properly. In place of the cases of chemicals I have substituted other cases—precisely similar in appearance—containing nothing of value, although of a highly inflammable nature. Once the fire has gained a hold, the whole Fire Brigade of London would not put it out.”

The others were keenly interested now, and they were all listening tensely.

“I am taking other measures, too, to ensure a fatal fire,” proceeded Bridger. “The chemicals and other stock are of an inflammable nature themselves, so the insurance people will suspect nothing when they learn that the whole building has been razed to the ground and the valuable contents utterly destroyed. You can take it from me that they’ll pay up on the nail without a word. They won’t be able to prove any case if they try for six months—and I’m quite sure they won’t even try.”

“But they’ll smell a rat later on when they find you disposing of the stock which was supposed to have been burnt,” said Stebbing doubtfully.

“My dear chap, you don’t expect me to make such a hopeless blunder as that?” asked the schemer. “I am making adequate plans to deal with that aspect of the business when the time comes. I tell you there will be tremendous profit for us all, and we shall have a fortune to share!”

“And what of the men who have been doing the transfer?” inquired Haverfield. “They’ll know all about it, of course, and we sha’n’t be very comfortable, knowing that they share the secret——”

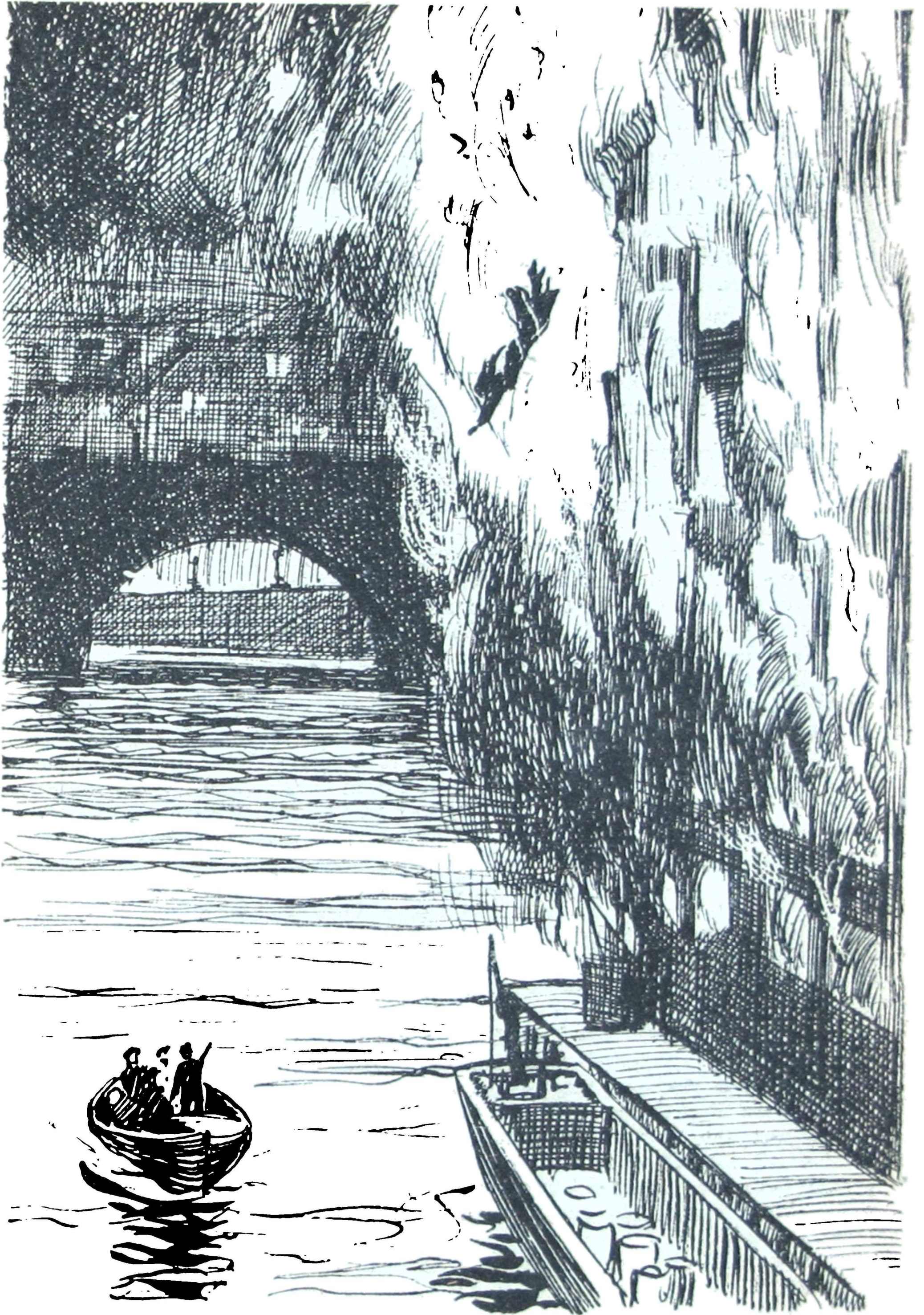
“Well, that’s my concern, anyhow,” said Bridger. “If the whole thing falls through, I shall be the man to suffer. You don’t come into it at all—not one of you. But it won’t fall through. And my men know better than to ‘blab.’ They’re trustworthy, and they’ll all stand to gain a good bit for themselves.”

It was a daring plan, and an infamous one. Not that this was any disadvantage, provided there was no risk attached to it. These men were all unscrupulous, and they knew that Bridger was sharing his secret with them because they were all influential and powerful in the financial world. If any slight hitch occurred they would be able to set matters right between them.

Defrauding an insurance company is, of course, an old game; but this particular case possessed certain novel features which the insurance people would not be able to guard against. The fire would be a tremendous one, and to salvo any portion of the building would be practically impossible. All evidence of the fraud would be destroyed, and no suspicion of incendiarism could arise. For Bridger had a clever scheme in mind for starting the fire. Provided the wind was in the right quarter—as it was now—the fire would be engineered on the following night.

The subtlety of the whole proposition lay in the fact that the insured property would be all removed before the fire took place. Everything that would be burned was practically valueless, and the combine would rake in a huge sum.

Bridger went fully into details. Many questions were asked him, but he satisfied his companions completely. The adjoining warehouse, into which



Eileen snot down and disappeared into the fringe of roaring flame.—(See p. 36.)

the property had been removed, would be quite safe from the fire, and no investigation would take place there, for it was quite a separate building, presumably owned by another firm, and insured by quite a different company.

It was late when the party broke up, and every man had agreed that the plan was to go through. So far as they could see, nothing could possibly upset Jonathan Bridger's schemes. Everything was straightforward, and not another soul in the world knew what was to occur on the following night.

Yet the actual happenings were destined to be very different from those which had been outlined.

## CHAPTER V.

### Nelson Lee is Amazed—An Investigation—In the Enemy's Hands.

A TAXI pulled up jerkily before Nelson Lee's door in Gray's Inn Road, and a dainty, girlish figure stepped out on to the pavement. It was Eileen Dare, and she was paying a morning visit to the great detective.

She found Nelson Lee in his consulting-room, attired in dressing-gown and slippers, lolling in an easy-chair, reading the morning paper. Nipper had just come in from the City, where he had been sent on an errand, and was receiving further orders from his master. Both were pleased to see Eileen, for they were anxious to know how her health had been affected by her terrible experience in the riverside cellar.

They did not find it necessary to ask any questions, for the girl's very appearance told them that she was perfectly fit. Her cheeks were glowing and her eyes alight with interest and enthusiasm.

They possessed a certain twinkle, too, which told Nelson Lee at once that something unusual had either happened or was about to happen. There was an air of alertness about Eileen which almost caused Nelson Lee to feel ashamed. It did not seem quite right that she should come here, obviously hard at work, while the great detective himself was luxuriously taking his ease.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Miss Eileen!" exclaimed Nelson Lee, as he shook the girl's hand. "And I judge, by the signs, that you have not been idle since our last meeting. I hope you have not been endangering—"

"I am afraid I must plead guilty to a very serious charge, Mr. Lee," said Eileen smilingly. "But I have escaped scot-free and I gained my object. It was rather a perilous business, but I have obtained splendid results. I am quite sure that I am going to surprise you."

"Really, I believe you are," said Lee. "You are always surprising me, Miss Eileen. But if you have been working, why did you not consult me?"

Eileen gave a delightful little laugh.

"Because I was afraid you would forbid me to put my plan into action," she replied naively. "I'm very much afraid of you, Mr. Lee, and I am positive, in fact, that you would never have consented to the idea I have carried out if you had known of it beforehand. So I did it just by myself—and I was more successful than I ever dreamed of being."

"My hat!" ejaculated Nipper. "What have you been up to, miss?"

Eileen opened her bag, and produced a neat reporter's notebook. This she placed before Nelson Lee with the cover turned back. The detective



picked it up, and saw that many pages were filled with neat shorthand characters.

"This is the exact text of a conversation which took place in Mr. Rudolph Stebbing's library last night," said the girl easily. "Before explaining how I set to work I want you to read all that, Mr. Lee."

Nelson Lee merely nodded, for he was already reading them. Eileen's shorthand outlines were as neat as those in a printed manual. And Lee, being an expert shorthand writer himself, had no difficulty in transcribing Eileen's work straight off.

As he turned over page after page his expression remained calm and immobile. But his eyes gleamed intently, and he ceased pulling at his cigar, and allowed it to smoulder out between his fingers.

At last he laid the notebook down, and looked at Eileen with an expression of real astonishment. There was grimness in his glance, too.

"By James! And this is the exact text of our excellent friends' conversation?" he exclaimed musingly. "If any other person had handed me these notes to read I should have been sceptical. What a daring scheme! What a scoundrelly plot!"

"You might let me into it, gov'nor!" exclaimed Nipper, in an injured voice.

"You will know all about it later, young 'un," said Lee. "For the present I will just say that Stebbing, Haverfield and Co. are up to a decidedly shady fraud. They intend to commit arson, and obtain a huge sum of insurance money."

"Gee-willikins!" gasped Nipper.

"I hardly think such an exclamation as that is necessary, Nipper!" remonstrated the detective. "But tell me," he added, turning to Eileen, "how in the name of wonder did you obtain this information, my dear young lady? How could you set the whole conversation down, word for word?"

"Well, you see, I heard it all."

"Obviously. But where were you to hear it?" Nelson Lee persisted. "I really must scold you sternly for risking your liberty in this way. Without a doubt you concealed yourself in Mr. Stebbing's library!"

"No, I didn't!" interrupted Eileen tantalisingly. "I thought of doing that at first, but I decided that it would be too perilous. And I couldn't listen at the window, because it's impossible to get near the window. In addition—well, there's no way at all to get near the library."

"But, in order to hear this conversation, you must have been near the library," objected Nelson Lee.

"I wasn't!" said Eileen, with a merry twinkle.

"Then where the dickens were you?" burst out Nipper. "You're not a giddy wizard, miss, and I don't suppose Stebbing would be such an ass as to provide a special table for you to sit at while you practise shorthand!"

"It is really too bad of me to tease you like this," laughed the girl. "You see, Mr. Lee, that night I followed Bridger and Abbercorn I caught a few words which seemed, at the time, of little or no importance. Bridger simply remarked that something was to be discussed in full in Stebbing's library last night."

"That was a valuable piece of information," said Lee. "Why didn't you tell me of it before?"

"Because I was afraid that you would guess that I intended acting. I had already decided what to do, and I was ever so anxious to give you this surprise," said Eileen, with a mischievous smile. "I wanted to prove

to you, Mr. Lee, that I am capable of undertaking a risky piece of work all by myself."

"Please go on; I am very interested."

"It really amounts to little," the girl continued. "Towards ten o'clock last night I set out from home, suitably dressed, and went to Stebbing's house. I had been previously, in the afternoon, and had taken a look round, so I knew just what to do. The building is an old-fashioned one, and low. At one part a high elm-tree grows quite close to the house. I climbed into this tree, got on to one of the topmost branches, and worked my way along until I reached the gutter—for the branch actually overhangs the roof. It was rather difficult in the dark, but I managed it."

Nelson Lee simply stared.

"Good gracious!" he ejaculated. "Can this possibly be true? Do you seriously mean to tell me that you climbed into a tree in the pitch-darkness and clambered on to the roof of Stebbing's house? Why, Heaven above, you might have fallen and sustained fatal injuries!"

"But I didn't, did I?" said the girl complacently. "Besides, it wasn't half so difficult as it sounds. Well, when I was on the roof my perils were at an end. For the roof is practically flat, and I knew, from previous calculation, exactly where the chimney of the library was situated."

"Your story grows more amazing every second."

"And yet, really, it was wonderfully simple. I had provided myself with a small, self-contained telephone. I simply lowered the transmitter down the chimney until it hung almost in the firegrate. Then I sat down at the base of the chimney-stack, with two receivers strapped to my ears, and was able to hear every word that was spoken as though I had been in the room. It was quite simple, wasn't it?"

Nelson Lee jumped to his feet.

"It was so amazingly simple that I am at a loss for words with which to express my admiration!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "But you must not tell me that you wrote these neat outlines in the dark?"

"No. I took a big electric-torch with me," was the reply. "But, of course, I had blacked the bulb entirely except for one tiny spot. This just provided me with sufficient light to see my notebook. But I am quite sure that nobody could have seen anything from below. Oh, Mr. Lee, it was such a curious experience! I was sitting up there, all in the dark, quite alone, and yet I could hear everything that was being said."

"Of course. A small telephone such as you describe would act admirably," said Nelson Lee. "It is not necessary for the speaker to be close to the transmitter. Even a whisper would have made itself audible to your ears."

"But what a wheeze!" exclaimed Nipper admiringly. "Well, bless my buttons, you're a wonder, miss! I knew you were jolly clever, and I knew you were as smart as the gov'nor himself, but I'm blessed if you ain't teaching him his own business!"

Eileen laughed.

"No, I am not doing that, and I have no wish to," she replied. "I should have told you all about it, Mr. Lee, but I was so afraid that you would forbid me to adopt the plan. And I badly wanted to carry it out all myself!"

"I should certainly have objected strongly," said the famous detective candidly. "But as you have been so successful it would be churlish of me to say a single word other than an expression of approval and admiration."

Truth to tell, Lee was amazed, almost startled. Without any risk, once she had gained the roof, Eileen had been able to set down the scoundrelly

conversation in full detail. The girl's astuteness was extraordinary, and Lee knew more certainly than ever how extremely valuable her help was.

"And that warehouse is to be set on fire to-night!" exclaimed Eileen eagerly. "Oh, I am ever so eager to expose Jonathan Bridger as the scoundrel he is. These shorthand notes of mine, I know, prove nothing. The police would not act even if they had possession of them. But to expose Bridger will be easy now that we know what his game is. I want you to come on an expedition with me to-night, Mr. Lee."

"Dear me! Another?"

"Yes. But this one is merely to satisfy ourselves that we are making no mistake. We must go to that warehouse, find a way in——"

"Examine some of those cases of so-called chemicals—eh?" suggested Lee. "That is a very excellent idea. Once we have seen for ourselves that a fraud is contemplated—once we are in a position to bear witness to the fact—Bridger is doomed. The insurance company, moreover, will be more than grateful for the tip. We have merely to inform the police, and the scoundrelly plot can be nipped in the bud at the outset. Before the morning, Miss Eileen, you will have securely netted still another of your enemies."

The girl's eyes sparkled at the thought. A sweeter nature than hers was not to be found, and the idea of cruel revenge was distasteful to her. But this was justice; she was working for the good of her fellow-people, and not merely for the sake of her own desire for retribution.

It was midday before Eileen took her departure. By that time the plan for the night was cut and dried, and everything was arranged. The enemy was placidly unconscious of the peril to come. Bridger was fondly imagining that everything was running without a hitch. Yet, in reality, all was in train for his exposure and disgrace. He was blind to the peril which was near to him, and would awaken to the danger too late.

There was a slight drizzle of rain falling soon after nine that night, and more than a suspicion of fog was in the air. Three figures made their way down the small alley at the back of the great, silent warehouse which was presumably owned by the Handstrong Co.

The trio were Nelson Lee, Nipper, and Eileen Dare. It was early yet, and they knew that they were several hours in advance of the time which had been arranged for the starting of the conflagration.

But, although nine had only just struck, everything was silent and deserted down here among the warehouses and wharves. Without speaking the three climbed the wall into the warehouse yard, Eileen being assisted over by her companions. But she was as active as any boy, and really needed no help.

They remembered vividly the occasion of their last visit to the spot, Eileen with a little shiver. The recollection of that awful experience in the cellar was not pleasant. She realised now why Bridger and Abbercorn had come that night. The former had been explaining his deep-laid scheme, and had brought Abbercorn to the spot to show him how easily the building could be fired. Abbercorn's opinion at the council in Stebbing's library had been very valuable.

Lee had come well provided. To tell the truth, he had brought a regular kit of burglar's tools, and in a very short space of time one of the warehouse windows had been forced without any mark being made and without any signs that strangers had entered.

The examination within the building was brief. It was only necessary to be quite certain that the contents of the warehouse was quite valueless

and that it consisted of cases filled with all sorts of rubbish of a highly inflammable nature.

Lee opened several cases in the biggest of the store-rooms, and Eileen made notes of their contents in her pocket-book. After the investigation was concluded, she laid her notebook on one of the packing-cases, and helped Lee and Nipper to replace some articles in their original positions.

The huge building was strangely silent and deserted. There was no watchman, and not a soul was near. Yet, as the marauders well knew, for over a fortnight past Bridger's men had been systematically engaged in removing the original stock and replacing it with the present valueless substitute.

The trio regained the alley without having been observed, and as they crossed Blackfriars Bridge they saw that the rain had ceased, and that the mist had thinned somewhat. A few stars, indeed, were endeavouring to peep out between the drifting clouds.

"An idea has struck me," said Nelson Lee, after a short pause. "Upon my soul, I have a good mind to adopt it. We have ample proof to convince the police that a fraud has been perpetrated. We three are witnesses to the fact that the warehouse contains nothing of any value. Moreover, we shall give the information that the original stock is contained in another building close by—and that will be sufficient proof in itself."

"But what is your idea, Mr. Lee?" asked Eileen.

"Why should we put a stop to the fire?" was Lee's astonishing question. "Would it not be better to let the plan proceed as arranged? The very situation of the building will not endanger any of those adjoining. Only Bridger's warehouse will fall a victim to the flames."

"Let the fire happen!" repeated Nipper blankly.

"Exactly! That would be poetic justice, my lad. What do you think, Miss Eileen? We will let the fire burn itself out; we will let the combine think that their scheme has been successful. Then, just when they are congratulating themselves, we will spring our bombshell and have Bridger clapped into prison. He will be arrested for fraud, and the insurance company will not pay a farthing. The entire loss will be Bridger's—and, consequently, his associates."

"How splendid!" exclaimed the girl, with sparkling eyes. "It is only just that they should bear the loss, and it will be a startling surprise for them to learn that the whole plot has fallen to the ground."

And thus it was decided.

The combine had planned to defraud the insurance company, and would fondly imagine that everything had gone successfully. Then would come the shock! Jonathan Bridger would be arrested, and the whole dastardly truth would be revealed. As Nelson Lee had said, it would be poetic justice.

Soon after crossing Blackfriars Bridge Eileen Dare parted from her friends, promising to meet them two hours later at an arranged spot, for they intended witnessing the conflagration which was to lead to Bridger's undoing.

But while Eileen was being taken homewards she suddenly sat upright on the seat of the taxi and uttered a little gasp of dismay. For thirty seconds she remained perfectly still, without moving a hair.

Then, quite impulsively, she whistled through the tube and instructed the driver to turn about at once and to take her to the south side of Blackfriars Bridge.

Cabby complied without hesitation, and the taxi turned round and once more sped towards the river.

Eileen had suddenly remembered something which alarmed her, and which caused her to think uncomplimentary things about herself. For she had blundered, and knew that, unless the blunder was rectified, all Nelson Lee's plans might go wrong.

In short, she had left her notebook in the warehouse!

Eileen was not a forgetful girl, nor was she careless. On the contrary, nobody could be more thorough and painstaking than she. But she called to mind now how she had laid her notebook down in order to help Lee in shifting some boxes. When that operation had been done the trio had left the place, and Eileen had thought no more of her notebook—until now.

It was imperative that it should be recovered. It contained shorthand notes, and one or two sentences in Eileen's ordinary handwriting. If that fell into the enemies' hands—as it probably would—they would certainly be warned, and would abandon the whole project. And that, of course, would mean that Jonathan Bridger would escape.

Dismissing her taxi, the girl made her way down to the warehouse yard again. She had decided to make another entry to recover the notebook, and to proceed home as before. If Nelson Lee had been handy she would certainly have informed him.

But the great detective and Nipper, after putting Eileen into a taxi, had gone off, and were now far away. A minute's loss of time, too, might mean disaster. It was necessary to regain possession of the notebook without a moment's delay.

And so Eileen was forced to undertake the task herself.

She had the advantage of knowing just where to go to get into the warehouse easily. The window had been refastened, but Eileen knew that she would be able to open it, for she carried several useful little tools in her own handbag.

She was five minutes at the window, working hard all the time. Then she stepped lightly into the building, and made her way into the darkness to the exact spot where she had left the precious book.

To her joy she found it just where she had left it, and she quickly placed it in one of her secret pockets. Then, feeling full of confidence again, and with a glad little sigh, she made for the window.

It was the work of a moment to slip through, and as her feet touched the ground outside she felt two pairs of hands seize her and hold her tight.

Eileen was so startled that she could only gasp out a little cry of dismay.

But in the gloom she saw that her captors were none other than Jonathan Bridger and Roger Haverfield!

She was in the hands of the enemy!

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## CHAPTER VI.

### A Terrible Decision—Nelson Lee is Worried—Waiting.

**J**ONATHAN BRIDGER uttered a harsh, short laugh as he stood before the prisoner. Several minutes had elapsed, and Eileen had been taken back through the window, and had been marched up many stairs and steps, until now she was at the very top of the warehouse.

She was in a small square apartment, her wrists tied behind her back, and Bridger and Haverfield were standing before her with flushed faces and angry frowns. They had both been startled and intensely alarmed by the discovery they had made. But now, having had time to review the situation, they were calmer—and grim!

The two rogues had come there to see that everything had been made ready for the great fire, and to make a few final preparations. But as they had crossed the yard they had seen, in the gloom, that one of the lower windows stood half open. They approached quietly, and Eileen had simply walked into their hands.

It was the height of misfortune, but not at all singular. Nelson Lee had remarked that their mission, although necessary, was a risky one, and he had been extremely pleased to get it over.

And now, just because Eileen had overlooked the notebook, the very worst had happened. She had been caught redhanded, and she knew quite well that she could expect no mercy. Haverfield had often met her before—previous to the tragedy of her father's death—and both he and Bridger were well aware that the girl had taken a hand in the ruin of Basil Illingford.

Bridger stood before the captive and laughed cruelly.

“Oh, so we've got a young lady for a burglar, eh?” he exclaimed. “Well, Miss Dare, I don't think we need waste time over formalities. It's pretty obvious why you came here, and it is just as plain that you know a good deal more than you ought to know.”

Eileen looked defiant.

“And what are you going to do?” she asked mockingly. “You can't hand me over to the police, because you are afraid of me. Besides——”

“Oh, stop this!” interjected Roger Haverfield curtly. “Leave the girl here, Bridger, and we'll hold a discussion by ourselves. Something must be decided quickly, for there is not much time to spare.”

The two men left the small apartment, and locked the door behind them. Then they descended a steep flight of frail wooden steps, and found themselves on one of the upper floors of the warehouse. All was in darkness, but here, in an enclosed passage which had no windows, Bridger switched on an electric light. There was no fear of the illumination being seen from outside.

“Well, what's to be done now?” demanded Bridger harshly.

“My dear man, don't snarl at me like that,” protested Haverfield. “I realise as well as you do that we have got to do something with the girl without delay. Look here, Bridger, she's dangerous.”

“But she's only a slip of a girl——”

“You don't know her—I do!” was Haverfield's grim reply. “She came very near to proving her father's innocence when we plotted against him. We won in the end, but it was a near shave. I tell you, Eileen Dare is one of the smartest girls under the sun—infernally pretty, too!”

“You're right there,” agreed Bridger. “It's a pity she's up against us, you know. One doesn't like to be on bad terms with such a girl. But, of course, we've got to consider our own safety. Didn't she help to ruin Illingford?”

“She didn't help—she did it all herself,” said the other bitterly. “I tell you plainly, Bridger, that the girl is more dangerous to us than we have hitherto realised. She is a determined little woman, and although we scoffed at the idea of her doing us any harm, she's been working against us all the time. The idea, I suppose, is to avenge her father. Just think of the facts.”

“What facts?”

Well, fairly recently, Basil Illingford, Sir Ambrose Shore, and poor old Martin Hallton have gone—and I can detect this girl's hand all the time,”

went on Roger Haverfield. "She is a power to be reckoned with—and we must do the reckoning now. If we don't, she'll become active enough in other directions. Why, man alive, can you read the signs?"

"You mean——"

"I mean that she is here, in this building," was the significant reply. "We discovered her here by accident. What was she doing? Why had she come? How in the world did she know that anything was in the wind? Eileen Dare is a marvellously smart girl, and she was here, Bridger, to upset this plan of yours."

"By thunder! She sha'n't do that!" snarled Bridger furiously. "It seemed to me, Roger, that we've just caught her in time. We've got hold of her before any real mischief has been done. Well, what do you propose?"

There was a short silence.

"If we let her go——" began Haverfield.

"Don't be foolish. We can't do that."

"I say, if we let her go she will probably make tracks for the nearest police station," said Haverfield thoughtfully. "And, even if she doesn't do that, we have shown our hand to her so completely that we should be in constant danger afterwards. In short, Bridger, we can't let her go—we can't let her leave this building."

Jonathan Bridger started.

"Great Heaven! You are not suggesting that——"

"Exactly. Don't look as though you are going to faint, man!" snapped Haverfield sourly. "Which is it to be—this girl's mysterious disappearance or the forfeiting of our liberty? It's one or the other, and you know it. Eileen Dare must be left in this building, up in that attic."

"And the fire!" muttered Bridger. "The fire is to start—— Oh, it's a horrible thing, Haverfield, but, of course, you are right. We must not hesitate at such a time as this."

"The girl is only loosely bound by her wrists," said the other. "It is fairly certain that she will be able to free herself before so very long. I think we had better go up and bind her securely."

Bridger shuddered.

"We will get away from this place!" he muttered hoarsely. "I'm not such a cold-hearted brute as you are, Haverfield, and I don't relish going up to that attic again. Why, man, I couldn't face the girl again, knowing what we intend. Wouldn't it be better to put her out of her misery——"

"Don't be so babyish," rapped out Haverfield. "If we killed her now, straight away, it would be murder. But if she is caught by the fire there will be nothing to prove how she met her death. She will, in fact, be destroyed as thoroughly as though she were a fly. And the smoke will put her out of her misery long before the fire reaches her. But can she escape from that attic?"

"No, there's no escape at all."

"What about the skylight?"

"The skylight is the only window, and it is far out of her reach," replied Bridger huskily. "That attic is completely empty, and if she shouted for a whole day she wouldn't make her voice heard. And the door, as you know, is exceptionally strong, and is fitted with two patent locks. At one time the room was used as a kind of storage apartment for explosive chemicals."

Accordingly the scoundrels did not visit Eileen again, and the girl was left uncertain as to her fate.

Meanwhile Nelson Lee and Nipper were making certain preparations. Totally unconscious of the disaster that had happened to their fair friend, they were genial and light-hearted. The thoughts of what the night would bring forth caused them to chuckle occasionally.

The knowledge that the entire loss of the fire would have to be borne by the combine was decidedly amusing. They were deliberately committing arson, and they would find out, too late, that they would lose heavily instead of gaining a fortune.

The great detective and Nipper did not go home to Gray's Inn Road. They made preparations to take a small motor-launch out upon the Thames, and at midnight precisely they were waiting at a small jetty close to Chelsea for Eileen. She had arranged to meet them there, being anxious to witness the fire.

The spectacle would be very interesting for all, and Nelson Lee had no intention of upsetting the enemies' arrangements. If he had only known the actual state of affairs he would have rushed off on the instant, and would have put a stop to the whole plot.

But he knew nothing, and took a keen pleasure in allowing the scoundrelly scheme to follow its course. Since Bridger chose to set fire to his own property, that was his own doing. By speaking now, Lee would be simply doing the scoundrel a good turn. And the detective wished to bring home the defeat thoroughly and completely.

"Ten past twelve, guv'nor," remarked Nipper, as they waited by the jetty. "It's not like Miss Eileen to be unpunctual, is it?"

"No. I can't quite understand," Lee replied. "But girls are curious creatures, Nipper. One never knows what they are going to do. But I am certainly surprised that Eileen should be so late as this. I expect she will turn up breathlessly in a few moments."

But the "few moments" lengthened into several minutes, and at twenty past twelve there was still no sign of Eileen. Considering her position, it is not surprising that she did not turn up.

"Well, this is a rum go!" said Nipper gloomily. "I'm pained, guv'nor. I didn't think Miss Eileen would play us up like this, blessed if I did. I'm disappointed. She's failed us for the first time."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"The most probable explanation is that Eileen laid down, intending to take a little rest," he said. "And she has gone off into a sound sleep, and her aunt hasn't thought it necessary to awaken her. Well, perhaps it is better that she should not be present."

"Oh, rats!" said Nipper promptly. "We can't go without her, guv'nor."

"I'm afraid we must. And I recollect, young 'un, that Eileen added, as an afterthought, that if she did not turn up within a quarter of an hour of the time arranged, we weren't to expect her," said Nelson Lee. "I suppose she had an idea, then, that her aunt would persuade her to stop at home. However, I think it will be advisable to get off down stream."

Nipper was decidedly disappointed, but there was nothing else for it. And Nelson Lee, although he was outwardly easy, admitted to himself that it was very strange. Inwardly he was worried, but not worried sufficiently to make any inquiries. There was really no reason why he should.

Never for an instant did he guess that Eileen had not taxied home as he supposed. And, after all, there were a score of different reasons which could explain the girl's non-arrival.



The motor-boat slid down the Thames, and nothing of any interest occurred during the journey. After passing under Blackfriars Bridge, Lee brought the little craft round and stopped the engine.

There was nothing to do now but wait—wait for the dramatic incidents to come.

The great warehouse stood in total darkness, and was quite deserted—at least, to all appearances. Lee, with a grim smile, guessed that Bridger's men were already preparing to cause fires in many parts of the building.

And while the great criminologist and his assistant sat in their boat waiting, they had no inkling that Eileen Dare was near them after all; that the girl was imprisoned at the very top of the warehouse, with no prospect of escape, but with a certainty that a horrible death awaited her.

The situation was dramatic, and all the more so because Nelson Lee was unaware of the true peril.

He and Nipper were waiting—waiting for the fire to start which was intended to encompass the death of Eileen Dare!

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## CHAPTER VII.

### The Fire—Eileen's Terrible Peril—The Only Way of Escape!

**T**HE fire was started very ingeniously.

At one o'clock a big motor-car crossed Blackfriars Bridge, and came to a halt just on the south side. A constable was standing on the pavement, and the chauffeur leaned over and asked the nearest cut to a certain thoroughfare not far distant.

"Why, you've just got to cut down this first turning to the left, turn the corner, and go straight along until you come to a public-house on the corner," directed the policeman promptly. "'Turn down by that, and you'll be there in half a shake.'"

"Thanks, old man," said the chauffeur.

He slipped the clutch in, and as the motor-car started off it spluttered and gave several loud explosions in quick succession. But, after a little coaxing, the automobile was got going, and the policeman looked after it with a smile.

"Don't reckon they'll get far with that old 'bus," he murmured to himself.

And he was quite right. But the chauffeur had known his way well enough without asking the policeman. That little bit of by-play was just for effect, and to strengthen the case for Jonathan Bridger.

The motor-car turned down the side street, went past the entrance to the alley, and descended a short slope. The dark bulk of the Handstrong warehouse was upon the left, and not a light showed anywhere.

The car—which contained Rudolph Stebbing himself—came to a sudden standstill, and without any warning a huge sheet of flame flared up beneath the bonnet, in front. The chauffeur let out a roar of alarm, and jumped to the ground. As he did so he kicked over a can of petrol which had been resting near the step. For some reason the screw stopper fell off, and a flood of petrol ran out on the road and flowed swiftly away.

Stebbing by this time had jumped out too, and he and his chauffeur stood

back, with eager eyes, as they watched. Everything depended upon the events of the next few moments. According to calculations, a certain thing should happen—and it did happen.

The flowing petrol streamed across the road in a direct line. There were smooth cobbles here, and the road descended steeply down towards a grating right against the warehouse.

The inflammable spirit splashed down into the well of the grating in a miniature cascade, and from there it flowed right into the building.

All this happened in about three seconds. The chauffeur had pulled up at the exact spot, otherwise there might have been a miscarriage of the plan. But, several nights previously, Stebbing's chauffeur had tested the idea which was now being carried out in earnest. It was not possible for the petrol to flow in any other direction.

And the inevitable happened.

The motor-car was now blazing furiously in front, and great columns of black smoke were rising from it. And then, less than twenty seconds after the stoppage, the flames suddenly spread to the body of the automobile.

And as they spread, so the petrol upon the ground caught fire. One blinding sheet of flame crossed the road with a kind of roaring hiss, and the next second great flames were leaping up from the grating of the warehouse.

Outwardly it would seem that the flames were caused by the petrol which had flowed there; and, in a way, they were. But the well was already prepared. There were six inches of petrol down there, and the whole floor of the cellar into which the grating looked was also wet with the spirit.

Consequently the flames assumed alarming proportions on the instant, and caused a tremendous glare in the night sky. The car itself, too, was now blazing merrily, sheets of yellow flame rising into the air to a height of twenty feet.

"It's worked, sir," said Stebbing's chauffeur hoarsely.

"Be quiet, you fool!" was the solicitor's nervous command.

And then the constable they had spoken to came pelting down, accompanied by two or three other men.

"Great thunder, what's happened?" gasped the policeman in alarm. "Phew! I reckoned as how that car wouldn't go far without a haccident. She's fair doomed now. How did she catch afire?"

"Don't know!" panted the chauffeur, who now seemed frightened out of his wits. "But she's an old 'bus, and she's been behavin' nasty for a long time past. She went into flames like a fire-bomb, and while I was getting out I kicked over a can of petrol."

The constable gazed at the warehouse with staring eyes.

"But you don't carry petrol cans open!" he said sharply.

"'Ow was I to know?" whined the chauffeur. "That rotten car vibrates cruel, and the stopper must have come undone. Anyhow, the juice got spilt, and the stuff run down into that there grating— My goodness! Looks as if the 'ole building is catchin' fire."

"It is terrible—terrible!" exclaimed Stebbing distractedly.

The constable did not wait for further explanation. He pelted away for the nearest fire alarm. But two other men were running in that direction also, and they arrived first. And very soon a fire engine was on its way to the spot—for it was thought, at first, that the outbreak was not serious.

But to those who stood watching it was quite obvious that a terrible con-

flagration was spreading. The flames roared from the warehouse with truly appalling intensity, and in some parts they were blue, green, and violet. This was caused by certain cheap chemicals, which had been purposely placed there—in order to make the effect more real. For it was known that the warehouse contained a large quantity of chemical stock.

The effect was magnificent. It was one of the grandest sights that had ever been seen. And a big fire is always wonderful as a spectacle; and this promised to be one of the finest that London had been treated to for many a year.

In less than ten minutes, it seemed, the whole lower floor of the warehouse had caught. Flames were reaching from windows on the opposite side of the building, and already the second floor was becoming involved.

And there were several people ready to swear that the whole outbreak had been caused by an unfortunate accident. Never for a second would it be presumed that the warehouse had been deliberately set ablaze.

The whole thing had been carried out so ingeniously that success was certain. The motor-car, of course, was now a mere mass of twisted red-hot iron. It had been an old car, and the sacrifice was trivial. Stebbing was quite ready to bear witness to what had occurred; and his evidence would be valuable.

When the first engine arrived the firemen at once saw that this was a case for a district call, and very soon all the outlying fire stations were sending out engines and escapes.

But it was hopeless from the start. The firemen, as they got the hoses to work, shook their heads grimly and gave one another significant looks.

“We can't save the place, Bill,” remarked one of them, above the roar of the flames. “It's the most furious blaze I've seen for many a year. All the water of the Thames itself wouldn't put this lot out.”

Perhaps that was an exaggeration; but, certainly, the thousands of gallons of water which were being pumped upon the building seemed to have little effect. Great crowds were held back by the police, and the excitement reached the high pitch.

There was one thing the firemen were very thankful for. The building was empty so far as human beings were concerned; it did not contain a living soul. This, at least, is what was supposed. The flames were roaring upwards with the most terrible fury.

The second floor was already well alight, and the flames were leaping from the windows and curling into the night in great livid shafts. The heat was appalling, and not one of the people who witnessed the fire doubted that a general collapse would occur very shortly.

For with all the foundations weakened, and the lower floors burnt out, it was fairly obvious that the upper part of the building would crash down in one terrible disaster.

Accordingly the crowds were kept well back, and the firemen were thankful that the warehouse stood quite alone and that there was no prospect of any other building becoming involved.

From the river the pumps were at work, and huge streams of water were being directed upwards. Nelson Lee and Nipper sat in their boat, almost awed by the spectacle. But they were quite satisfied in mind. Jonathan Bridger and his associates had set fire to their own property and it was only justice that they should suffer.

The knowledge that the building was quite empty was welcome to every-

one, for with such a fierce fire it would have been difficult to effect rescues, especially from the upper storeys.

But, unknown to a soul—with the exception of Bridger and Haverfield—Eileen Dare was at the very top of the burning warehouse. The poor girl's doom was certain, as her murderers had well known.

It was only a matter of fifteen or twenty minutes before the final crash would come, and she would be buried amongst the ruins and lost for ever.

At first Eileen had refused to believe that the scoundrels meant to leave her to her doom. But then she heard the uproar of the fire-engines, the hissing crackle of the flames, and the dull crashing of burning timbers below.

Every now and again, too, the very walls shook and quivered. The attic became filled with a haze of choking smoke; but, thanks to the close-fitting nature of the door, the smoke was not able to enter in deadly quantities.

"Oh, the demons! The inhuman murderers!" panted Eileen to herself, when cool realisation had come to her. "They have left me here to die—to burn to death! God will surely punish them!"

She had long since rid herself of the loose binding round her wrists. The glare which lit up the sky reflected flickeringly through the skylight, and the small apartment was dimly illuminated in a reddish, lurid manner.

Eileen could see everything distinctly, and she instinctively knew that her chances of escape were very slim.

Indeed, how could she escape?

Nobody knew that she was here, and even Nelson Lee himself was probably watching the fire complacently, unconscious of her peril. The skylight was well out of reach, and the door was heavy and thick. A close examination told her that she would never be able to break the door down.

And, even supposing she did, what better off would she be?

It was certain that the whole building below was now a raging mass of white-hot fire. The stairs would be demolished, and escape cut off. Eileen looked up desperately, and her heart sank and almost seemed to pause in its beating as she gazed at the skylight.

"I cannot reach it," she groaned to herself, "and there is nothing here—no rope—not even a piece of wood. Oh, Heaven, what shall I do—what can I do? I am trapped—trapped!"

The adventure of the cellar had been slight compared to this. The awful thoughts which filled Eileen's mind nearly drove the girl to distraction. But necessity is the mother of invention, and Eileen was keen-witted.

She set her brains to work now, and thought rapidly and clearly. To begin with, she only had a few minutes grace, so whatever she did would have to be accomplished without delay.

The skylight was fairly large, she saw, and was covered by one heavy sheet of plate-glass. Right across the framework a stout iron bar was fixed. If she could only reach that she would be able to haul herself up and gain the roof. And once on the roof——

But Eileen did not allow her thoughts to run away with her.

How could she possibly reach that bar? The heavy glass intervened, and even if she could manage to leap upwards she could not possibly smash that glass with her dainty fists. Moreover, the heavy splinters would crash down upon her and probably cause a fatal injury.

And then, in that crucial moment, Eileen was blessed with an idea.

It was a desperate plan, but it was the only chance. She took from her pocket her tiny revolver, and rapidly examined it. The weapon was loaded in every chamber. The girl set her teeth, and stood well back against the wall.

Then she pointed the revolver at the skylight and pulled the trigger. A sharp report followed, and a crash of glass made itself heard. When Eileen looked up she saw that the skylight had been cracked and starred, but not broken.

Again and again she pulled the trigger until every chamber of the revolver was empty. And she achieved her object. The repeated shots weakened the glass everywhere, and at last it lay upon the floor, and a square opening looked directly out upon the night sky, now made unearthly by the terrible glare.

Eileen knew that her shots had not been heard, for the roar of the flames drowned everything. A wave of heated air drove down into the attic, and almost choked her. But she clenched her teeth and leapt upwards. Eileen was a magnificent jumper, but the distance was just too much for her. Her fingers came within four inches of the bar, but she did not grasp it.

But even now the girl's resource was not at an end. She had noticed that some of the floor-boards were not fixed very tightly—she had noticed this only within the last minute.

And now, desperately, she pulled several of them up by sheer force, and wedged three of them beneath a rafter in such a way that they formed a kind of springboard. It was a hasty expedient, and the girl could not delay to fix it properly.

She took a short run, jumped upon the end of the arrangement, and she flew upwards quickly. Her fingers just touched the iron bar, and she clutched at it desperately. For a second she thought that she would fall, but then she gained a hold and hung there.

The boards themselves did not possess much spring, but Eileen was light and they had served their purpose well. With astonishing agility she pulled herself up, fearful all the time lest the iron bar should give way, for she could feel it bending and quivering.

But the next moment she was outside upon the roof. The waves of heat came up to her like the blast from a furnace. On every side she could see nothing but a lurid mass of flame. The whole lower part of the building was roaring intensely, and the flames were leaping higher and higher every moment.

When such a huge fire as this gets beyond control it spreads with almost unbelievable quickness. Eileen could see nothing except the glare of the flames, yellow and awful. She knew that fire-escapes were below, that thousands of eyes were watching. But she could not see them, nor could they see her.

But away beyond the glare, exactly facing her, she caught the ripple of water. This told her that she was on the side of the warehouse roof which looked straight down on to the Thames. Until that second she had given up hope, but now her heart leapt and raced madly.

She had one chance!

And that one chance was to dive blindly downwards, through the outer edge of the flames, into the river. She might possibly crash upon a barge or a boat, but that was a risk that had to be taken. It was the only way, so there was nothing else for it.

For a moment Eileen stood there, and she closed her eyes in prayer; then, biting her lip almost until the blood came, she sprang forward and dived clean down into the very midst of the flames.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### Saved—In the Insurance Office—Bridger's Downfall.

**N**ELSON LEE'S face was pale and haggard, and Nipper looked as though he had just seen a ghost. For some little time had elapsed since Eileen Dare's terrible dive.

The famous detective had sat watching the flames from his motor-boat, and suddenly he had seen the girl's form shooting downwards in a superbly clean dive. Both Lee and Nipper saw it distinctly, for they were well out in the river.

It was a strange spectacle.

Eileen shot down and disappeared into the fringe of roaring flame; then, after an interminable period, so it seemed, she appeared again, and struck the water cleanly and neatly.

The girl came up at once, and immediately struck out away from the burning heat behind her. At the same second Nelson Lee started the engine of the motor-boat and sent the little craft racing across the intervening space of water. The whole scene was as bright as day, for the warehouse was now simply one towering mass of flames, and myriads of sparks were shooting skywards like a thousand fireworks.

Owing to Lee's prompt action he was the first to reach the swimming form. A police-launch was also making for the spot, but it arrived just too late. Firemen, too, hastened to the girl's side.

And then Nelson Lee received one of the most dreadful shocks he had ever experienced. The very instant he saw the swimmer's face he recognised her. But, in spite of his stupefied amazement, he acted quickly and without hesitation.

Eileen was lifted aboard and laid gently in the stern of the boat. The poor girl was practically exhausted—not merely by her physical efforts, but owing to the dreadful nerve-strain.

Yet she managed to produce a wan smile as Nelson Lee bent anxiously over her. She was incapable of speaking, and after that one smile she fell back, half swooning. Both Nelson Lee and Nipper were appalled. They had been sitting there, in their boat, waiting for the fire to start, and Eileen had been imprisoned in the building all the time!

Nelson Lee had never felt so terrible in all his life before, and his face became haggard and grim.

“By Heaven above, if this girl is injured, Nipper——”

Nelson Lee ceased speaking, the words almost choking in his throat, for his inward rage was terrible, and his anxiety great. At first he thought that Eileen was badly injured. But after she had been taken ashore she was attended by a doctor. The latter declared that there was no danger, and that Eileen was only suffering from shock. Her bodily injuries consisted of slight burns about the hands and wrists, and her hair was singed; but, beyond that, she was not harmed.

“I think I can understand the seeming miracle,” said Nelson Lee gravely. “The girl dived right through the flames, but her passage was so swift that

the fire had no time to take effect, and a second later she was in the cold water, efficiently protected from the raging heat. Her face was protected by her arms, and it was only the latter which suffered."

But the girl had been very near to death, and the great strain had been too much even for her strong constitution. She was taken straight home in an ambulance, and a nurse remained with her all the night.

In the morning Eileen was well on the road to complete recovery, but she was not able to leave her bedroom until three days had elapsed. And then she insisted upon driving round to Nelson Lee's, in Gray's Inn Road.

The morning was beautifully fine, and the drive did Eileen a world of good. Her hands and wrists were bandaged, but the colour had returned to her cheeks and the smile to her lips.

Lee and Nipper were more than delighted to see her and welcome her. She had already told them exactly what had occurred, and Nelson Lee was terribly grim. Jonathan Bridger should be made to suffer the full penalty for his dreadful crime. There was no direct evidence against Roger Haverfield, and Eileen, moreover, did not wish to bring him into the affair. With a look of deadly earnestness in her eyes she declared that she would deal with Haverfield later.

It happened that Nelson Lee was just about to start out for the City, and when Eileen learned what his errand was to be, she insisted on accompanying him. She learned now, too, that the Handstrong warehouse had been reduced to a mere pile of smouldering ashes. Not a single wall was left standing, and not an atom of evidence could be produced to show that arson had been committed.

But Nelson Lee had yet to play his trump card.

Jonathan Bridger's exposure was dramatic and spectacular—as Nelson Lee had intended it should be. He had purposely refrained from acting until a certain moment arrived, and then he acted drastically.

The insurance company was one of the biggest in London, and Bridger, after having paid two or three visits, was this morning interviewing the chairman. Everything was in order, and the company was satisfied in all details.

The chairman knew that the fire was a great misfortune, but he handed Bridger a cheque with a smile and without regret. The cheque was for a fabulous sum, and Bridger felt an inward thrill as he placed the slip of paper into his pocket-book.

"Fires are terrible things," he remarked complacently. "Although my loss is covered by this insurance, I am afraid my business will be largely affected. But in misfortunes such as these we must bear it without grumbling."

Bridger could afford to be pleasant under the circumstances. The whole scheme had gone through without a hitch, and Eileen Dare, moreover, was now no more. For the news of her rescue had not been allowed to leak out, and the fact that she was alive was a dead secret.

And then the door of the chairman's private office opened, and Nelson Lee strode in. He came unannounced, and was, indeed, intruding. Both the chairman and Bridger frowned as they looked at the new-comer, and a curious change came over Jonathan Bridger's face.

At first he flushed deeply; then, in a moment, the blood left his cheeks,

and they became sallow and yellow. His eyes bulged, and a hoarse cry came from his throat.

For Eileen Dare had followed Nelson Lee into the room!

The stricken man stared at her as though he had been struck a fearful blow; then he staggered back, holding his hands before his eyes.

If any man showed positive signs of guilt, Bridger did at that moment.

"I am mad!" he screamed shrilly.

"Not at all!" exclaimed Nelson Lee, as he laid a hand upon the wretched scoundrel's shoulder. "You are sane enough, Bridger, and your time has now come. Fuller, here's your prisoner!"

Detective-inspector Fuller, of Scotland Yard, strode briskly into the office, and five minutes later Jonathan Bridger was on his way to Bow Street. The news of his downfall spread like wildfire, and the other members of the combine were subdued and almost terrorised.

The fraud was exposed completely, in all its details, and at Bridger's trial he had not a single sympathiser. He was charged with arson, fraud, and attempted murder, and he received a nice little term of ten years penal servitude in which to ruminate over his past crimes.

Once again Eileen had triumphed, and another of her enemies had met his deserts. But it had been a strenuous case, and it was one of the most astonishing features that Eileen Dare was herself again within a week, and more keenly determined than ever to bring the rest of the scoundrels to book.

THE END.

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They meet with many adventures, but their original quest appears hopeless until, one day, Alec and Clive are lost in a rocky and cavernous part of the island. They sit down to talk matters over, but immediately become the targets of a troop of huge apes, who throw pebbles at them from the rocks above. Alec examines one of the stones and finds it to be one of those for which the party is searching! After a fierce fight with the apes, during which Alec is injured, the chums set out towards the camp, but lose their way amongst the caves.

(Now read on.)

## Rescuing the Fugitives.

"THIS is our last chance," Clive muttered, as they entered the third opening; but he had hardly said the words when he stooped and picked something up. Then, moving onwards, they came to the beginning of a passage with a rough floor of sand and loose stones.

Here Clive flashed his light about and uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. Stooping again, he picked up some pebbles and held them out to Alec.

"Do you see?" he cried. "This is where they got the pebbles from that they threw down at us. There seem to be plenty more here, and though the gold appears to have got knocked off a good many of 'em, there's enough left to prove that they are similar to those Ben Grove showed us. Now, what do you make of this?"

"Don't know. Give it up," said Alec. "What do you make of it, O Wise One?"

"Well," returned Clive thoughtfully, "I read it this way. This is the bed of an underground stream at present dried up. At times—perhaps only when there is a storm or very heavy rainfall—the water rushes down from somewhere above and brings these pebbles with it. It must sweep down pretty violently, you see, and rub them together a lot to scrape the gold off as we see here. The water is bound to find an outlet somewhere, so I guess if we follow this passage we shall find our way out."

"Hurrah!" cried Jack. "You talk like a book, O most-learned pundit."

(That's a good word, isn't it?) Let us then hasten along this water way, as you call it, and put your theory to the test as quickly as we can."

They started off along the passage, which was a kind of tunnel washed out by the water in the course of years through the solid rock, and as they proceeded they soon came upon many traces of the apes. Remains of cocoanuts and various fruits, twigs, and small branches of fruit-bearing trees showed the way and told them that they were on the right track.

Presently they came to a place where there was another passage which opened at right angles into the one they were in. There they paused in doubt. Clive, however, soon settled the point to his own satisfaction.

"You can see," he reasoned, "that that pass goes up farther into the mountain, whilst the one we are in goes continually on the downward course. When there is water here it rushes down from that pass into this one and divides, part going towards the place we have left, and part to some outlet farther on. So we must follow this one."

Alec had no fault to find with this line of argument, and they went steadily on their way, and presently had the satisfaction of seeing the glimmer of daylight in the distance.

"Hurrah!" Alec began; but Clive stopped him.

"Hush!" he cautioned. "We may find some of the apes hanging about the entrance; we'd better go quietly."

Alec had no wish to precipitate another encounter with the fierce animals, so he promptly desisted from further expressions of delight, and they trudged onwards and were soon able to dispense with their rough torches.

Then they came to an opening, and very delightful did it seem to be in the fresh free air and the clear daylight.

They found that they were high up on the side of the mountain looking over the low lying interior of the island. It was evidently getting near sunset; but it was still quite light, and the air was so clear you could see for a great distance.

They had a view out over the wilderness of rocks and low rocky hills with extensive low lying marsh ground between.

They could even see the sea in the far distance. Then something caught Alec's eyes—something which made him hastily pull out his field glass from its case. Clive did the same—for they always carried glasses with them—and they both stared for awhile in silent surprise.

"By jove!" cried Alec in excited tones. "Just look at that! Some people running—I can see 'em. White men I should say running after—yes, running after some blacks. Oh! Did you see that?"

Yes; Clive had seen too. They had both witnessed a shameful and cowardly thing. As Alec had said, some white men were pursuing some blacks, had fired at them, and brought two down. And when the cowardly pursuers had reached the fallen men, they had clubbed them cruelly, brutally, unmercifully.

"I see what it is!" exclaimed Clive. "These are some of the black-

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birding rascals—slave hunters—we have heard about. Some of their wretched captives have tried to escape and they are hunting them and shooting them down, and not content with that, are beating them to death. What wretches they must be!”

The two chums looked at each other. “We must take a hand in this,” said Alec slowly. “I can’t stand by and see the poor beggars clubbed to death in that horrible fashion!”

“Nor can I!” cried Clive. “Let’s hurry and get down there. We may yet be in time to save some of their miserable victims!”

Alec, who had been looking very carefully through his field-glasses in another direction, uttered an exclamation.

“Ah!” he said, drawing a deep breath. “Yes; I thought I caught sight of something over yonder. There are some more natives further away to the left—running away like mad. I can make out three. Can you see them?”

Clive gazed steadily through his own glasses, but made no reply for a few seconds. Then he spoke.

“Yes, yes; you’re right! They are just disappearing round some rocks?”

“That’s right. Well, now look at that low hill with a lot of trees on the top of it, nearer this way—to the right of the men we first saw. There is a thin spiral of blue smoke rising from the midst of the trees. See it?”

“Yes; I can see that, too. I see the smoke.”

“Well, we’d better wait a bit and watch what the beggars are up to. I think you will find they will take those two poor blacks they knocked over to that hill where the smoke is. If they do, we’d better stop here and watch ’em further.”

“Why? What’s your idea?”

“It’s an idea that has just come into my mind. That smoke, of course, means a fire for cooking, which suggests that they’ve got a bivouac there and mean to spend the night there. But before that they will go out again after the three we saw running away. If they do they must leave the camp pretty much to itself. See?”

“I think I do. You mean that if we see them start out after the others we can slip down and get a peep at their camp and see what they’ve left there.”

“Exactly. There may be some more of their victims there, and we could set ’em free. That would be doing some good, at any rate. They may leave someone in charge of their camp or they may not, but I don’t suppose they would leave more than one or two, and we could manage them.”

“It’s a jolly good idea, Alec,” Clive declared approvingly. “We’ll try it on, anyway. Look! You were right. They are taking those two poor wretches towards the hill where the smoke is, as you said they would.”

The two slavers—to call them by the name that they undoubtedly deserved—had made their two wounded prisoners get on their feet, and were now half leading, half dragging them along with them.

A moment or two later they were hidden amongst the trees and rocks, and the two chums, seeing nothing to do for a while but stay where they were and await developments, began looking more carefully at their immediate surroundings.

The subterranean water-course, whose dry bed they had been traversing, had its outlet high on the side of a precipitous hill or mountain well covered with foliage which afforded them a good screen from where to watch what went on below. The trees also effectually hid the opening from the view of

(Continued overleaf.)

anyone below, and it was further so concealed by thick bushes that those who did not know of its existence might have passed and repassed within a few yards of it without discovering it.

The two young fellows had taken up a station on a small terrace of rock to the right of it, where they could see not only over the bushes, but over the tops of the trees in front of them—for the ground sloped suddenly just below the terrace.

"I wonder," said Alec, peering about among the tree-tops around, "what has become of the apes? I can't see any sign of the brutes. Not that I want to," he added very decidedly.

Clive laughed.

"You can't forget 'em, I see," he remarked.

Alec shivered.

"No, nor would you if you had been through my experience," he said seriously. "You were not so close to them as I was to that horrible old brute. You didn't feel the clutch of his great hairy paws on you, or have his hideous, grisly face thrust close to yours and see his mouth, with its frightful fangs gnashing and working and trying to get at you to tear your flesh from your bones, or gaze at close quarters into those frightful, red, rolling eyes. I know you must have had a bad time afterwards, when you were facing that great serpent; but I tell you I felt as if I were in the clutches of a veritable demon! Only the accident of our both slipping and then rolling down, and so getting separated, saved me from something dreadful, I know. What horribly powerful creatures they are! Why I felt quite helpless in the grasp of that brute. He shook me as if I had been a child!"

"Poor old chap!" said Clive sympathisingly. "Yes, I can understand. I am jolly glad I managed to shoot the beast. And I hope we sha'n't encounter them again; though, if we do, I quite believe my little dodge will scare 'em away more quickly and surely than all your firearms. I ought to have thought of it before, for we all know well enough how monkeys hate and fear snakes, and how they always bolt at the first signs of one being about. Well, now to see what these chaps below are doing."

They peered carefully through their glasses, and presently again saw the men they were watching.

They were now making their way through some swampy ground, and finally they arrived at the foot of the low hill from which the smoke was ascending.

Then they once more vanished from sight.

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

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FRIEND!**

— The Editor

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