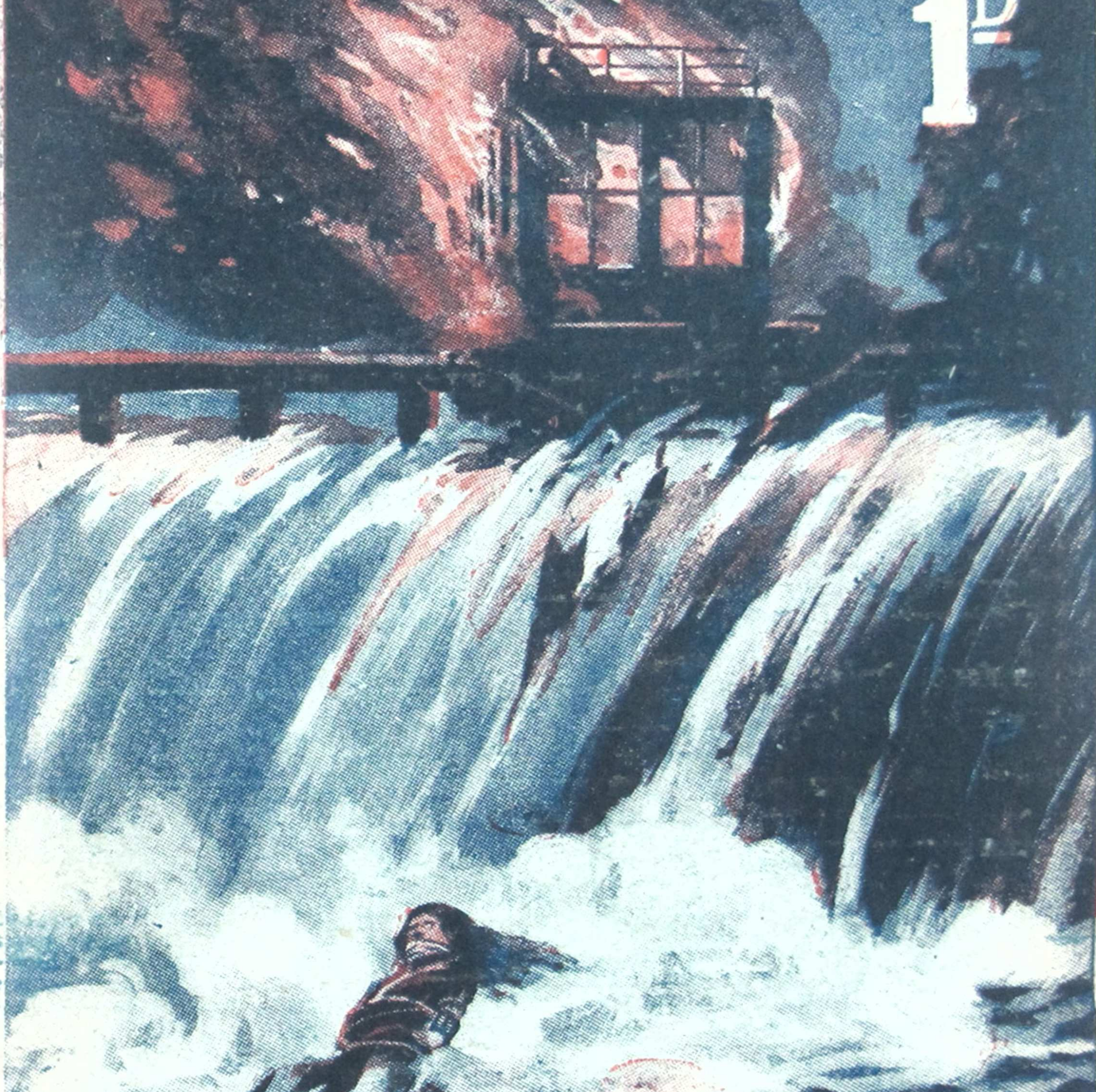


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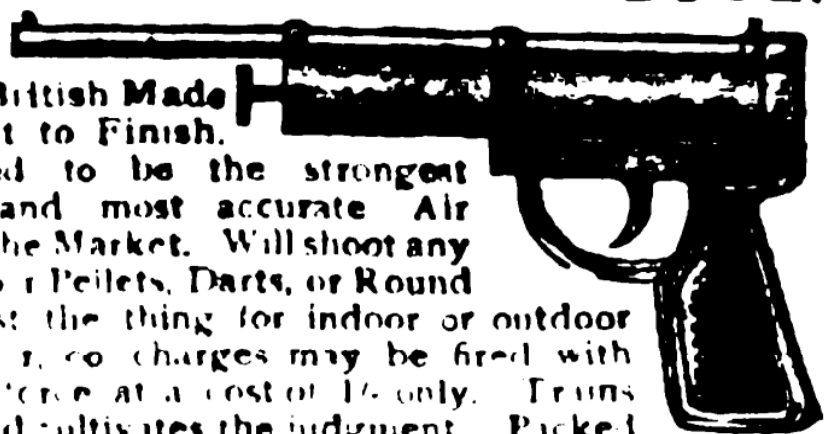
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A Tale of NELSON LEE and EILEEN DARE, the
Girl Detective.

By the Author of "*The Spectre of Scarcroft*," "*Against the Law*,"
"*The House in the Hollow*," etc.

CHAPTER I.

The Leap of Death—Eileen's Pluck—Saved From Herself.

"O H, bother! What a train this is!"
Eileen Dare stamped her little foot with vexation, and rose from the cushions of the first-class compartment and lowered the window. The train was nearly at a standstill, and a fine rain hissed against the window-panes.

Eileen had made her remark aloud, but there was nobody to hear, for she was the sole occupant of the compartment. The girl was frowning impatiently, and with very good cause. The suburban train was a wretched thing, and had been crawling and stopping ever since she had entered it at an outlying station.

The train was now on the outskirts of London, and the murky day was turning into a still murkier night. For it was evening, and the dusk was already dim. Subdued lights were struggling on every side to make themselves seen through the haze. Eileen stood by the window and looked out.

She was impatient to be home—mainly because she wanted a cup of tea, and had a slight headache. She had been visiting some friends about twelve miles out, and had left early. But the train service was very poor, and only slow, stop-at-every-station trains ran.

Eileen loved speed, either by road or rail. She usually drove her own little motor-car faster than the regulations permitted; but she was, nevertheless, a very cautious driver. And when she travelled by train she preferred expresses.

Consequently, the snail-like progress of this particular train was getting on her nerves, and she would be extremely glad when her destination was reached. Eileen was attired in a daintily cut, tailor-made costume, which suited her to perfection.

She was a rather small girl, very dainty and wondrously pretty. Indeed, it would have been a difficult task to find a more beautiful girl in the whole of Great Britain; for hers was not merely superficial beauty.

Her nature was as lovely as her face and figure. She was sweet, pure, and delightfully charming. Yet, in addition to her daintiness and almost fragile girlishness, she was possessed of the most astonishing ability.

Her cleverness, in fact, had led Nelson Lee, the famous detective, to value Eileen's assistance very highly indeed. She had helped him in many important cases, and had proved herself to be an able and ingenious aid.

Eileen Dare was a detective in every sense of the word. She was able to reason things out, and to follow up the slightest clue to the best advantage. Her powers of deduction, too, were remarkable, and she had often proved that she could be stern and relentless.

Eileen was engaged—and had been engaged for months—in the self-imposed task of bringing to ruin a scoundrelly set of criminals. These men, who privately called themselves "the Combine," were all City business men, in prominent positions, and with no breath of suspicion against their names.

Yet those men had plotted against Eileen's father, Mr. Lawrence Dare. They had caused him to be branded as that most foul of all creatures—a traitor to his country. Lawrence Dare had died from the shock of it all—had died the night before he was to have been executed. Morally, the villainous combine had been guilty of base and cruel murder. And more than that. They had stolen a wonderful invention of Mr. Dare's, and it was now being produced in large quantities at the Haverfield Steel Works, in Birmingham. Roger Haverfield was the man who had engineered the plot, but he was no less to blame than the others; they were all equally guilty. And now they were reaping the fruits of Dare's life work.

And Eileen had sworn to her father that she would avenge him; that she would bring every individual member of the combine to disgrace. They had killed her father, and they should suffer. The law could not touch them, for there was absolutely no evidence of their villainy. But Eileen, by her own efforts, was able to strike powerful blows when the chance came—and she had struck many times already.

Several of the scoundrels had been struck down. Sir Ambrose Shore, Martin Hallton, Jonathan Bridger, Rudolph Stebbing, Basil Illingford—they had all paid the penalty owing to Eileen's efforts.

But there were others, several of them the most powerful of all. The girl-detective had yet to reckon with Roger Haverfield, Ford Abbercorn, Melville J. Ross, Ransome Wilmore, Sir Caleb Hurst, and many others. They were all members of the combine of crime. One of the highly-placed "gang"—Dr. Munro Taggart, once a famous West End physician—had disappeared, but Eileen hoped to deal with him effectively in the near future.

At present the girl was resting, and yet she was eager enough to be at work again; she loved excitement and adventure. It might be thought that Eileen was vindictive and revengeful; but she was sweet-natured and generous. This campaign was different; all the men she was fighting were criminals of the worst type. They were supposedly honourable men, and yet they were rogues. She was doing humanity a great service by wiping out the combine.

But she had not been working alone; in every episode she had been guided by Nelson Lee, the celebrated criminologist. He and his young assistant, Nipper, had worked hard with Eileen, and the detective was more than delighted with the striking ability and cleverness of his young lady assistant—for that is what she preferred to call herself. She did not want to be alone. She valued Lee's guidance, and scarcely ever acted without consulting him.

And now, on this dull October evening, she was anxious to be home out of the chilliness.

Eileen lived in a dainty little flat at Chelsea, and she was cared for and looked after by an elderly maiden aunt. Miss Esther Gilbey was a dear

old lady, and she cared for Eileen as though the girl had been her own daughter. She was of ample proportions, and her heart was of gold.

It was not often that Eileen felt irritated, for her disposition was sunny and merry. But now, as the wretched train nearly slowed to a standstill for the tenth time during the short journey, she stamped her foot and rose to see what could be the cause of the delay.

It was nearly dark, but the murky sky was still somewhat grey with the evening light. The rain was very fine, and it beat upon Eileen's cheeks as she leaned a little out of the window.

She saw that the train was upon a fairly high bridge, and close to the low parapet. Consequently, Eileen could look straight down upon the dingy waters of a river or a canal, she hardly knew which. Glancing ahead, she saw that a signal was against the train, and at that moment the brakes grated on more firmly and the train jolted to a standstill.

"Oh, another wait!" murmured Eileen. "How annoying!"

She was about to withdraw her head when she observed a rather surprising thing. The door of a third-class compartment, in the same coach, suddenly opened wide, and Eileen saw a slim, sombrely-dressed woman emerge on to the footboard.

It was such an unusual thing for a passenger to get out of a train between stations that Eileen opened her eyes for a moment in astonishment. But the next second her astonishment changed to horror and alarm.

For what happened during the next ten seconds was unexpected, dramatic, and terrible.

The unknown woman, who seemed to be youngish, did not see Eileen, for she was gazing straight before her down upon the river. There was still plenty of light for Eileen to see everything clearly, for she was quite close.

The strange woman gave a clean leap, and alighted upon the low parapet of the bridge. She hovered there for one tense moment, and then deliberately hurled herself downwards, her arms outstretched wildly.

"—mercy on my soul!"

The words came up to Eileen as though from afar. They quivered with intense fear and passion, and seemed to be the wailing of a departed spirit. But Eileen knew that they had been uttered by the unknown woman who had just flung herself down into the water.

"Oh!" gasped Eileen, in horror. "She has committed suicide!"

Those few words were positive proof that Eileen was right. The woman had flung herself out of the train for the purpose of taking her own life! Eileen guessed at once that the woman had been insane. But she was down there, in the water, drowning!

A dull splash came to Eileen's ears, but the parapet of the bridge hid the terrible sight from the girl's eyes. She looked at either bank, but not a soul was in sight; nor had anybody else witnessed that desperate leap.

Eileen Dare thought quickly.

A dozen notions flooded into her mind. She would shout for help; she would pull the communication cord, and prevent the train restarting; she would attract attention— Oh, but what was the good?

"There is nobody in sight," muttered the girl frantically. "The river-banks are deserted, and the poor soul is drowning beneath my very feet! What shall I do—oh, what shall I do?"

And then a sudden metallic clang in the distance came to Eileen's ears. Almost simultaneously the engine gave a short whistle, and the train commenced moving. The signal had been lowered, and the journey was resumed.

Eileen was being taken away from the scene of tragedy, and the poor woman would be left to drown. The whole incident had taken place with

appalling swiftness; and now, just as the suicide was struggling for life, the train was proceeding. There was not one second for hesitation.

It was one of Eileen's characteristics that when action was necessary she would act effectively and instantly. She knew very well that the poor woman was probably insane, and therefore it would be a terrible thing to allow her to drown.

And Eileen acted—she acted drastically.

It was one of the pluckiest feats which have ever been performed. The train was moving off the bridge, gaining speed with every revolution of the wheels. But Eileen flung the carriage door open, crouched-down, and then gave a superb leap.

She rose cleanly, cleared the parapet by a bare inch, and then swept down to the cold, murky waters of the river in a magnificent dive. - There were no witnesses of that courageous action.

But it was wonderful; a truly inspiring spectacle.

And the risks which Eileen had taken in going to the rescue of a perfect stranger were almost ghastly. If she had failed to clear the bridge she would have been flung back beneath the wheels of the train. It was almost too horrible to contemplate.

But Eileen was an extremely athletic girl. She could ride, she could jump, she could swim. Not so many years before she had won splendid prizes for swimming and diving. And she always took care to keep herself in perfect condition. But in an emergency like this everything was against her.

The evening was cold, and she was fully dressed. And she did not know whether she would be able to reach either of the banks. Even if she succeeded there was a chance that they would be high, and that to pull herself and her companion ashore would be impossible.

But, at the time, Eileen did not think of those things. She only knew that a human being was drowning, and that she was probably the only one who knew of the tragedy. And so she had dived; she had risked all for the sake of another.

She struck the water beautifully, and came up gasping a little, for it was icy and extremely unpleasant. Subconsciously, she was aware that the train was already off the bridge and gathering speed. Eileen looked round her, dashing the water from her eyes.

At first she saw nothing, and she feared, prompt as she had been, that her heroic effort was in vain. And then, about ten feet away, she saw a mass of dark hair rise above the surface. The face beneath it was pale and seemingly lifeless, and Eileen only caught a glimpse of it for a brief moment.

She struck out quickly and strongly, in spite of the great drawback of her clothing. Fortunately, however, she was wearing a wide skirt and underskirt, and so her legs had a comparative amount of freedom. All the same, it was difficult to swim fully clothed, and Eileen did not progress so fast as she would have liked.

When she arrived at the spot there was nothing there, no body upon the surface. With a quick intake of breath Eileen dived. By a great stroke of luck she grasped a mass of tangled hair at once, and the next moment she was upon the surface, supporting the unconscious form of the desperate woman who had leapt from the train.

Eileen was glad, in a way, that the other was unconscious, for her task was much the easier because of that. She struck out for the river-bank with set teeth and a light of determination in her eyes.

It was touch and go, that swim. The current was fairly strong, and the

water itself icy cold. Hampered by her clothing, and by the woman she had rescued, it was really astonishing that Eileen ever reached the shore at all.

Indeed, she only did so by a tremendous effort of will. It would have been easy for her to abandon her companion, and reach safety in that way; but Eileen had no intention of doing that.

She struggled on determinedly, foot by foot. From the train the river had seemed almost narrow; but now that she was actually swimming, both banks appeared to be a terrible distance away. Eileen made for the left-hand bank at random—it mattered little which side she chose, for she had been in the centre, and it was impossible to see clearly in the gloom.

The fine rain hissed softly upon the dark water, and there was small prospect of anybody being in the neighbourhood, for the river was bordered by marshes, and there were no houses quite close, although subdued lights gleamed on every hand.

The brave girl set her teeth and persevered. Gradually she reduced the distance, and with a thankful, gasping sigh, she knew that she would succeed. It was tough work, but Eileen was equal to the task, and at last she felt the soft, muddy bottom beneath her feet.

A minute later she had dragged herself ashore, and her unconscious companion with her. Then she noticed, for the first time, that a small urchin was standing a little way back, looking on with round eyes and pale cheeks.

He came forward now, somewhat nervously.

“You got ‘er, miss?” he said huskily. “My! You didn’t ‘arf dive grand——”

“Never mind how I dived,” said Eileen, panting heavily. “Tell me—is there a place near here where a motor-car can be hired? Hurry there and tell what has occurred. And bring a car——”

“There’s a garridge just over the bridge, miss,” said the urchin eagerly.

“Then run—run as fast as you can!”

“Right, miss! You’ll tip me arterwards, won’t yer?”

The youngster commenced running as he first spoke, and flung the latter part of his sentence back over his shoulder. Eileen, in spite of her exhausted condition, and the tragic nature of the situation, could scarcely help smiling.

But it was splendid news to hear that there was a garage close by, and that the prospect of having a motor-car on the scene was not beyond hope. She had expected to find the river-bank deserted, and it was a tremendous relief to know that help was probably being brought. Car or no car, the urchin would certainly bring assistance of some sort.

Eileen was feeling numb, and the fine rain did not tend to comfort her. But there was no sense in sitting down and waiting for help which might not arrive at all. Eileen was an expert in first aid, and without a moment’s delay she commenced practising artificial respiration upon the half-drowned woman. This was good for both of them, for it warmed Eileen considerably, and probably prevented her contracting a very severe cold.

The minutes went by, and it seemed a tremendous time to the shivering girl before she heard, in the far distance, the hum of a motor-car. Could it be one coming to her aid?

It was a tense moment for Eileen. She knew very well that much delay in that rain would probably be fatal for the unknown woman and serious for herself. But the sound grew nearer, and at last she saw two shaded lights approaching rapidly.

And as Eileen looked down again she saw a sign of movement, and a faint moan came to her ears. At all events, the woman was not dead, and

was, indeed, on the point of recovering consciousness. With chattering teeth Eileen rose to her feet, and swayed a little. She really had no idea how much time had actually passed, but it was far longer than she had thought. It was now pitch dark, and raining more furiously than ever.

To tell the truth, the urchin had experienced some little difficulty in getting the garage owner to send a car, and the garage itself was much further away than he had intimated. However, relief had come, and perhaps it was just as well that it had arrived fairly late, for by this time Eileen's first aid methods had had excellent effect. The car proved to be a closed limousine—old and ramshackle, but capable of travelling.

"Lor' bless my soul!" ejaculated the garage owner, who had come himself. "So the kiddy was right. What's this, miss? I've been told you jumped out of a train after some woman——"

"It's quite right—quite right!" interjected Eileen, with chattering teeth. "I want you to take us both to Chelsea as fast as ever you can. The hospital? No, no! The woman is getting better already. I will put her to bed and look after her. Oh, do not waste time!"

The man promptly opened the door of the car and helped Eileen to lift the moaning woman within. Then Eileen herself was about to enter when she became conscious of the ragged urchin hovering close by.

"Ain't fergot me, 'ave yer, miss?" he asked anxiously.

"Indeed, I have not," replied Eileen, with a faint smile. "You acted splendidly, my little man." She felt in her coat pocket, and removed her purse. "Here is something for you; it is a little damp, but none the worse for that. Thank you very much for what you have done. All right, driver!"

The urchin dodged round to the front of the car and held something in front of one of the lamps.

"Crikey!" he gasped. "'Arf a quid note! You're a good 'un, miss—you're one of the real toffs, you are!"

But he spoke the latter part of his sentence to the damp air, for the driver had slipped his clutch in, and the car was moving slowly away.

CHAPTER II.

Nelson Lee and Nipper Arrive—Mrs. Dixon's Story—The Vulture's Grip.

EILEEN laughed merrily, and squeezed Aunt Esther's arm.

"Oh, you nervous old dear!" she exclaimed. "I'm quite all right now, auntie. Don't I look ever such a lot different?"

"Indeed you do!" said the old lady, not without anxiety. "But, Eileen my darling, I am sure you have caught a very severe cold, and you ought to be in bed. I must admit, though, that you are lively enough. What a wonderful girl you are, to be sure!"

The last words were true enough. Eileen was certainly a wonderful girl, and she was proving it to-night more than ever before.

She had been home little over half an hour, and much had happened. During the drive home in the limousine the strange woman had recovered sufficiently to be able to speak, and the first words she said were an expression of thankfulness that she had been saved from her own folly and cowardice. In a weak voice she had said that her name was Mrs. Dixon, but beyond that Eileen could learn nothing.

By the time the girl-detective's Chelsea flat was reached Mrs. Dixon had progressed so well that she was able to walk, with Eileen's assistance. The driver of the car was paid liberally, and he returned to his garage through the darkness and rain cheerfully telling himself that he had done a very good stroke of business.

Aunt Esther had been nearly overcome with astonishment and alarm to see Eileen's dishevelled and soaking condition. The girl had undoubtedly been almost unrecognisable. But she had explained in a few words, and while her aunt kindly and gently dealt with Mrs. Dixon, Eileen removed all her damp things and jumped into a hot bath.

The bath refreshed her, and brought back the colour to her cheeks. Eileen was superbly strong, and her constitution was as sound as a bell. Her exciting experience had left her tired and somewhat exhausted, but she was physically none the worse. And she declared that she was as hungry as a hunter.

Now, her bath over, she was looking almost her own self in a delightful "rest" gown, and with her hair roughly but neatly plaited down her back. To tell the truth, Eileen was really looking more radiant than ever.

Naturally enough, however, Aunt Esther was anxious, but her fears were soon allayed. She had just left the woman who had attempted to commit suicide, and the good old lady was surprised.

"She seems to be a real lady, Eileen," she said confidentially. "And you must have been doing something wonderful to her, for she is quite able to attend herself and was only a little sick. I'm sure I don't know if it's right, but she insists upon dressing and coming to us here. She won't consider for a minute being placed in bed. Perhaps we ought to have a doctor——"

Eileen laughed.

"No, of course not, aunt dear," she interrupted. "There's no necessity to worry about a doctor. I applied first aid, and Mrs. Dixon is quite a strong woman. If she wants to dress herself let her do so. There are plenty of my clothes she can wear. You have given her some, of course?"

"Yes, darling. And she really wouldn't let me help her any longer," replied Miss Gilbey. "She says she will be with us very soon, and that she will tell us her story. You know, Eileen, you saved her life. Tell me all about it."

Eileen modestly related what had occurred, and her aunt listened with upraised hands. There had been no opportunity to tell her the actual facts before. They were both sitting in Eileen's dainty drawing-room, and a cheerful fire blazed in the grate. The softly shaded electric light glowed down restfully upon the rich furniture, and a small table was already burdened with delicate sandwiches and an assortment of cakes. The maid would bring tea in when it was required.

Eileen was just about to rise from her easy-chair before the fire, in order to go to Mrs. Dixon, when the door opened and the latter appeared. She stood just inside the room, pausing nervously.

She was not a big woman, and modelled delicately. Her age was certainly well under thirty, and she had been a very pretty girl at one time. But it was obvious at a glance that she had been through great hardship, for her eyes were sunken, her cheeks sallow, and her face had a haggard appearance which excited keen pity. Perhaps her deathly paleness was due to the dreadful experience in the river, but it could easily be seen that she had been wan and careworn previous to that.

Yet she was strong. The manner in which she had so quickly recovered was evident proof of that. And there was an air of refinement about her which told at once that she was of good parentage and upbringing.

"Oh, I hardly know what to say!" she exclaimed falteringly. "I feel so ashamed—so dreadfully, dreadfully ashamed. Oh, Miss Dare, how can I thank you for saving me from that mad——"

"Please don't try to thank me now," interjected Eileen quickly, rising

to her feet and crossing to Mrs. Dixon's side. "Sit down and have some tea and some food. It will do you good. You must—you really must!"

There were tears in Mrs. Dixon's eyes as she sank into one of the chairs, and for the next twenty minutes not a word was spoken of the adventure which had led to this curious little tea-party. The evening was still fairly early, and tea was not so very later, after all.

Eileen ate heartily, and the visitor also managed to eat the special food which had been provided for her. Both she and Eileen looked and felt very much better, and it was obvious that they would neither develop anything more serious than a cold.

And then, just as they were about to sit round the fire, so that Mrs. Dixon might tell her story, there was a curious treble-ring at the front-door bell. Eileen at once jumped to her feet with a look of pleasure and eagerness upon her face.

"Oh, I know that ring!" she exclaimed. "It is either Mr. Nelson Lee or Nipper. I do hope they have both come."

Her hope was realised, for a minute later the famous criminologist and his clever young assistant were ushered into the drawing-room. During the brief space beforehand Mrs. Dixon had expressed her willingness to tell her story before Nelson Lee and Nipper. They were friends of Eileen's, and that was quite good enough.

"Why, Miss Eileen, you are not looking quite yourself," exclaimed Lee, as he took the girl's hand. "And, dear me! I seem to have come at a rather inopportune time. I hope I am not——"

"We just wanted you, Mr. Lee," interrupted Eileen. "I have such a lot to tell you. This lady has had a terrible experience, and she has already consented to tell her story in your hearing. Nipper, of course, is a detail."

"Thanks, awfully!" said Nipper, with a grin.

To be called a "detail" by anybody else would have caused Nipper to become highly incensed. But his admiration for Eileen Dare knew no bounds, and she could have called him just whatever she pleased, and he would have been quite serene.

Nelson Lee sometimes—very infrequently, it is true—paid Eileen a visit, and it was generally in order to acquaint her with some facts connected with her campaign against her enemies. But to-night he and Nipper had popped in out of the rain, he explained.

The detective was greatly interested in the story which Eileen told. She simply explained what she had seen from the railway carriage, and how she had jumped into the river at the last moment. Lee listened with a grave face, and looked from Eileen to Mrs. Dixon critically.

"Upon my soul! This is astonishing!" he exclaimed. "One would hardly think that you had both passed through such a terrible experience. But perhaps it is distasteful to you, Mrs. Dixon, to relate your story in my hearing——"

"No, no, not at all!" put in the woman quickly. "Indeed, Mr. Lee, I shall be glad to do so. I have heard of you very often, and I know that you are a gentleman and a splendid adviser. And I want somebody's advice—so very badly!"

Her voice broke a little, and there was a pause.

"I have been a fool—oh, a mad fool!" she went on passionately. "I don't know what possessed me to jump into the river. But my worries have been driving me nearly out of my mind. My worries—my worries! Oh, how thankful I am to be able to tell somebody—somebody who will understand. I owe my life to Miss Dare, and I shall never be able to repay

her. She risked her life to save mine! Oh, it was wonderful, it was glorious! Miss Dare, you are brave and——”

Eileen smiled rather uncomfortably.

“Please don’t!” she interrupted quietly. “Tell us why you threw yourself out of the train, Mrs. Dixon. If you will excuse me, you seem to be such a sensible woman that I am at a loss to understand why you should have acted so madly.”

“I do not understand myself,” replied the other huskily. “But I saw the water below me, and the parapet of the bridge was low. The train had stopped—and it looked so easy—so wonderfully easy. I went insane for that moment. I felt absolutely impelled to open the carriage door and fling myself out. Before I had time to reason with myself—to curb the horrible impulse—I was in the river. And when I felt the cold water closing over my head I realised what a coward I was—what a treacherous, pitiful coward!”

There was a look of despair and misery in Mrs. Dixon’s moist eyes, and she hung her head down in shame.

“You are wrong in saying that, my dear lady,” exclaimed Nelson Lee softly. “There was nothing cowardly in what you did. It was the impulse of a moment—an impulse over which you had no control. It was only when it was too late that the dread realisation came to you. You are glad, now, that you were saved from yourself.”

Mrs. Dixon looked up.

“Yes, I am glad,” she murmured. “I will face it all out bravely to the last. But if there is any justice in this land I shall not suffer much longer. But I feel so despicable. I attempted to kill myself while my poor husband is lying weak and ill with nobody to care for him. We live at Chiswick, you know, in a tiny riverside cottage.”

“Your husband?” hinted Eileen.

“Mr. Philip Dixon,” was the reply. “He used to be the chief cashier at Messrs. Stokes & Glenister, of Threadneedle Street. Oh, no, he was not discharged. He had to leave on account of ill health, brought on by excessive worry. Oh, the trouble we have gone through, my husband and I!”

Nelson Lee leaned forward in his chair.

“It was this trouble, no doubt, which caused you to take the rash step of which we have spoken?” he asked. “I have no wish to be inquisitive, Mrs. Dixon, and I do not press you to speak, but if you will tell us what this trouble is, I am sure that both Miss Dare and myself will do our best to help you.”

“I mean to tell you everything,” replied Mrs. Dixon steadily. “It is private and personal, but it will give me wonderful relief to be perfectly frank. In brief, Mr. Lee, we have been in the hands of a moneylender for months past.”

“Ah! Do you know, I half expected as much,” said Nelson Lee grimly. “There are more suicides on that account than the general public know of. But please continue. You may be sure that everything you tell us will be treated confidentially.”

“You are so kind—so wonderfully thoughtful,” said Mrs. Dixon earnestly. “You have made me feel comfortable and easy. Well, the moneylender I have referred to is well known, I believe. His name is Mr. Ransome Wilmore——”

“Oh!” exclaimed Eileen suddenly.

“By James!” came from Nelson Lee, and Nipper made a vague remark concerning his hat!

And all three exchanged swift, significant glances.

"Why, whatever is the matter?" asked Mrs. Dixon wonderingly.

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Mr. Ransome Wilmore is known to us," he replied. "At least, by name and repute. And I can well understand that you have been worried and victimised, Mrs. Dixon. Wilmore, in spite of his fair name, is one of the biggest scoundrels in London!"

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" put in Aunt Esther concernedly.

But, as a matter of fact, those glances which had been exchanged, and the explanation which had accompanied them, were not merely caused by the knowledge that Mr. Ransome Wilmore was a scoundrel. There was something deeper behind.

Nelson Lee and Eileen and Nipper were fully aware that Ransome Wilmore, the moneylender, was a powerful member of the infamous criminal combine which Eileen was fighting. He was a brutal human shark whom the girl detective had long intended dealing with. Now, perhaps, she would have her chance.

"It is Wilmore who is responsible for everything," went on Mrs. Dixon, a sudden fire entering her sad eyes. "Oh, that man is a brute, a fiend! He drove me to suicide, when I am needed by my husband's side. Thank Heaven, I was saved from my own folly. I have said that my husband and I live at Chiswick. But that little house was only our riverside retreat—a place we went to at week-ends. Now it is all we possess in the world, and it is to be taken from us——"

"Will you please tell us everything right from the very beginning?" interrupted Eileen gently. "When did you first find it necessary to obtain a loan from Mr. Wilmore?"

"It was not really necessary—that is the terrible part of it," was the answer. "Months ago we lived in a dear little house at Hampstead. It was our own—freehold—for it had been left to my husband by his father upon the latter's death. And every stick of furniture was our own, too. It was a wonderful little house—detached, surrounded by a beautiful garden, and a home for any woman to be proud of."

Tears welled into her eyes, but she forced them back with an effort.

"I am foolish to give way like this, but I cannot help it—oh, it is all so hard to realise," she went on. "At that time my husband, as I said, was chief cashier at the big business house of Messrs. Stokes & Glenister, and he was in receipt of a very comfortable income. We had been married two or three years, and everything had been joy and happiness for us. Philip had been exempted from the Army on medical grounds, for he is not physically strong. And then, when everything was so dreamily happy, the cloud came. But it came disguised—it came under a cloak."

"How did it occur?" asked Nelson Lee interestedly.

"One day Philip's brother came to see us," replied Mrs. Dixon. "James Dixon was his name. He was a year younger than Philip—a fine man, honourable and clever. He had been abroad for some time, and came to tell Philip of a new invention he was working upon—for James was a skilled engineer. I am only a woman, and I don't know much on that subject, but he absolutely thrilled my husband with the prospects he outlined."

"Do you mean he wanted money?" asked Eileen.

"No, he did not particularly want it," replied Mrs. Dixon. "By that I mean it was not essential. But he told Philip that if he could put a thousand pounds, cash down, into his hand right away, the sum would be

trebled at the end of a few months. My husband was so struck with the scheme that he decided to obtain the money by hook or by crook."

Mrs. Dixon paused as she saw the significant expressions upon her listeners' faces.

"Oh, no! It was not a swindle!" she went on, with a faint smile. "James Dixon was a straight man to his finger-tips. It was a 'good thing' he put my husband on to, and Philip knew it. The scheme was thoroughly sound. Well, we did not possess the money, and the little we had in the bank was hardly worth touching. And Philip thought it would be a good idea to raise a loan on our property. Why shouldn't we? It was certain that the sum would be trebled, and so the interest which accumulated on the loan was really unimportant."

"Well, what actually happened—that is the point?" inquired Lee quietly.

"Philip went to Mr. Ransome Wilmore, whom we thought to be an honest man," replied the simple Mrs. Dixon. "We weren't versed in such matters as that. We had no idea that moneylenders were such sharks and scoundrels. Philip raised a loan of a thousand pounds, giving our house and furniture as security. He signed papers—legal papers. Oh, they were so confusing that even he did not know what they actually were. For the first two or three months we were happy, and made plans as to what we should do when we got the expected money. Then, like a bombshell, came a tragic piece of news. James had met with a terrible accident at his experimental work, and had been fatally injured. He died before we could reach him—and that was the beginning of all our troubles."

Nelson Lee nodded slowly.

"I think I can guess what comes next," he remarked. "Upon Mr. James Dixon's sudden death the whole scheme fell through, and your thousand pounds was swallowed up and lost."

"Yes, that is exactly right," said the poor woman. "Our money was completely gone, and there was no way in which we could raise it to pay off the mortgage. Philip went and saw Mr. Wilmore, and I believe he signed some fresh papers, but I don't know. It all confuses me, and my brain is in a whirl when I think of it."

The detective nodded again. He could see everything. These simple folk, unsuspecting and innocent of moneylenders' wiles, had easily fallen victims to the scoundrelism of a vulture like Wilmore. He had twisted them round his little finger, and had "sharked" them—but legally and lawfully.

Eileen rose from her seat, and placed her slender arm around Mrs. Dixon's shoulders.

"Oh, I understand!" she murmured. "I realise everything."

"My brother-in-law's death seemed to break Philip up," went on Mrs. Dixon sadly. "He worried tremendously, and his nerves were unable to stand the strain. After a time he was forced to leave his business and to stay at home. And the continual worry of the loan prevented him getting well. Oh, I don't want to weary you, although I am afraid I am doing so. But, in the midst of our troubles, Mr. Wilmore foreclosed on the mortgage, and forced the bill of sale—or whatever it is termed."

"You were driven from your home, you mean?" put in Aunt Esther, with tears in her eyes. "Oh, how cruel! What a monster!"

"Yes, we were driven from our home," agreed Mrs. Dixon. "What could we do? A terrible amount of interest has accrued—at least, so Mr. Wilmore told us. It appalled my husband when he knew. The more we struggled, the deeper we seemed to get into the mire."

"That is usually the case," observed Nelson Lee grimly. "I should not care to think how many poor victims have suffered such a lot as yours, Mrs. Dixon. I assure you that yours is no extraordinarily exceptional case, although I grant it is unusually harsh."

"We were forced to leave Hampstead," continued the distracted woman. "Our house, our home—everything we had left—was taken from us, ruthlessly and relentlessly. And yet the property was worth every penny of four thousand pounds—even more, I believe."

There was an angry frown upon Nelson Lee's brow.

"Then this particular case is certainly more exceptional than I supposed," he exclaimed. "Please go on, Mrs. Dixon. I am greatly interested. I do not think that Mr. Wilmore would care for these facts to be made public. He may have performed his rascality legally, but by absolute trickery nevertheless. The law cannot touch him, I am sure of that. Mr. Wilmore is an expert at engineering matters so cleverly that he cannot be brought to book. But it seems to me that he has been stepping very close to the edge of a precipice here. And people are liable to trip under such circumstances. Perhaps I shall be able to trip him myself."

"He is inhuman," said Mrs. Dixon passionately. "He is like a demon from the pit itself! My husband was ill—dreadfully ill—and yet he turned us out as though we had been dogs. How could Philip attend to business in such a condition? I knew nothing—I know nothing even now—and we were both easily deceived and duped. But, thank Heaven, we had the little cottage at Chiswick."

"Was that your own?"

"Yes, absolutely, together with the furniture it contained," was the reply. "But, you understand, it was only a tiny place, furnished just for week-ends. We had not been there long before Wilmore descended upon us again. He was not satisfied with turning us out of one home," went on Mrs. Dixon, with flashing eyes. "He came and removed every article of furniture from the bungalow—everything, everything! We were left with the bare boards to sleep upon; and in order to satisfy his demands we paid him almost every penny we had in the bank!"

"By Heaven, what a story!" muttered Lee. "What a pitiful story!"

"You may ask why we did this," went on Mrs. Dixon. "We were forced to. If we had refused Wilmore would have had us both put into prison, sentenced to penal servitude!"

Nelson Lee laughed grimly.

"Upon my soul!" he exclaimed, clenching his fist. "And you believed that, Mrs. Dixon. You actually believed that he could put you into prison?"

"Of course. He did not say so in actual words, but by insinuation and suggestion. Both my husband and I thought it was within his power to do so. Wasn't it?"

"By James, no! The man couldn't have touched you!" replied Lee angrily. "The infernal blackguard! I don't blame you, my dear lady. I don't blame your husband. He was weak and ill—and you are a woman. You are both innocent of such wiles of villainy. You believed what you were told, and were naturally afraid to seek advice. If there is any justice in the land I shall make Wilmore pay dearly. But please go on—tell me the rest. I must know all!"

"There is not much more to tell," replied Mrs. Dixon, now animated and eager. "After stripping our Chiswick cottage he drained us of the money we had. Things got terrible, but we dared not seek advice or ask for help. We were too ashamed to go to any of our Hampstead friends. We had left there in disgrace. I suggested going to a lawyer, but my husband was nervous:

Wilmore had made him believe that he was liable to imprisonment. I see now that it was trickery and roguery. Wilmore knew perfectly well that Philip was dying, and yet he was firm and harsh; he had no pity."

"But how have you been living?" asked Eileen, pressing the woman's arm tenderly.

"I don't know—oh, I don't know! We had just a little money left, and we scraped along for several weeks. But—but"—and there was a break in Mrs. Dixon's voice—"for weeks past now we have been practically starving, and my husband is at death's door."

"Starving!" breathed Lee, between his teeth. "And you only borrowed a thousand pounds! But surely, Mrs. Dixon, Wilmore had got to the end of his tether then? He did not persecute you further?"

"I have seen him to-day," was the reply. "I went in fear and trembling, and he harshly told me that within a week we are to be turned out of our cottage—turned into the street, destitute and penniless! I was broken up, and I sat in the train not knowing where I went. I found that I had gone too far, and it was on the way back that I saw the river below me. I gave way to a moment of madness, and jumped, hoping to end it all. But I was a coward—oh, I was a coward!"

Nelson Lee rose to his feet, and there was an expression of mingled pity, tenderness, and anger upon his face.

"No, you mustn't say that, Mrs. Dixon," he said smoothly. "I can quite understand why you took that desperate leap. To tell the truth, it was the very best thing you could have done, for it has led up to this meeting. Miss Eileen Dare and myself will see that Wilmore is made to pay for his dastardly cruelty. I am furious with rage at what you have told me, and I shall make it my business to look deeply into the matter. As far as I can see, you have been swindled out of a sum approaching three thousand five hundred pounds!"

"Oh, the rotter—the horrible brute!" said Nipper hotly.

"He is certainly a brute, young 'un," agreed Lee. "Of course, Wilmore has been working on the right side of the law. He obtained Mr. Dixon's signature for certain documents, thus making his actions legal and lawful. But he has, nevertheless, stolen—actually stolen—the sum I named. You and your husband have been his victims, Mrs. Dixon, as thousands of people have been in the past. It is a terrible story, and the worst I have ever heard."

"But he is safe, you say?" asked Mrs. Dixon pitifully.

Eileen Dare took a deep breath.

"From the law—yes," she replied, with hidden meaning. "But there are other ways of dealing with such a scoundrel, Mrs. Dixon. I pity you from the bottom of my heart, and swear that, with Mr. Lee's help, I will make the vulture disgorge!"

And Nelson Lee gave Eileen a keen, steady glance, and nodded.

CHAPTER III.

Lee's Inquiries—Eileen Gives Instructions—Arrested.

FOR the first time for many weeks Mrs. Dixon slept peacefully that night. She suffered no serious ill effects from her immersion, but she was tired out and weary. Her mind had found peace at last.

She was put into bed by Aunt Esther soon after she had told her story, and then Nelson Lee, Nipper, and Eileen held a discussion. This case had a deep significance for them.

Ransome Wilmore was one of the men who had conspired against Eileen's father, who had taken an active part in Lawrence Dare's murder. Hitherto Eileen had had no opportunity of crushing him. But she felt that her chance had come now.

Lee had promised Mrs. Dixon that he would go over to Chiswick that very night and tell Mr. Philip Dixon that his wife was in good keeping, and that there was no need for him to worry further. The days of misery were over, and reparation was to come.

Lee was as good as his word. After arranging for Eileen to call at the detective's rooms on the morrow, Lee and Nipper left the girl's flat and took a taxi to Chiswick. It was still raining miserably, and the night had turned out to be an absolute "howler," as Nipper put it.

At Chiswick the great detective found everything as Mrs. Dixon had described. The cottage was a small one, not far from the river, and it was destitute of furniture, save for a few deal chairs, a rough table, and a mattress and some blankets in the bedroom. Mr. and Mrs. Dixon had been suffering untold miseries and hardships in silence. Nobody had known—nobody had suspected. There was no food in the house, and Mrs. Dixon herself had practically the last penny on the fare to London.

Philip Dixon was a small man, and he was thin and emaciated. His eyes were hollow and altogether too bright. Nelson Lee saw at a glance that the man was half starved, and that the worry of the past months had brought him almost to the door of death.

He was almost too weak to walk, and had scarcely been able to crawl to the door to answer Lee's knock. He had, indeed, been compelled to rise from his mattress in order to do so. He had been expecting his wife for hours; he had expected her to bring food, and he nearly fainted when he saw strangers upon the step.

Just the sight of Philip Dixon aroused all the pity and sympathy in the breasts of Nelson Lee and Nipper; but it aroused anger, too—anger against the vile wretch who had bled his victims until death itself would have been merciful.

Softly and gently Lee explained that Mrs. Dixon was in safe hands, and that there was no need to worry, and in less than two hours Dixon was safely inside a first-class nursing-home in the West End. He would be looked after well there, and would regain his old health and strength.

On the way home to Gray's Inn Road Nipper unburdened himself. The lad had simply been boiling, and now that the excitement was over he told Nelson Lee in plain, straightforward language exactly what he thought of Mr. Ransome Wilmore and all his works.

Lee was capable of some pretty strong terms himself, but Nipper fairly broke the record. Not that he used words that were profane; he simply applied to Mr. Wilmore the names which suited him best of any. If the moneylender had heard them, he would certainly have been far from complimented.

And in the morning both Nelson Lee and Nipper set to work to secretly obtain the absolute facts of the case. They returned to Gray's Inn Road at luncheon time and compared notes.

They had been busy all the hours of the forenoon, and from various sources they had learned that every word of Mrs. Dixon's story was perfectly true. The villainous moneylender had victimised the poor couple cruelly, and the percentage he had received for his original loan was utterly appalling.

But Lee made certain of other points.

Wilmore had safeguarded himself. He could not be prosecuted for what he had done; there was no way in which the matter could be brought before

a court of justice. Philip Dixon had apparently signed papers and documents—signed them all innocently—which placed him in such a position that to prosecute the moneylender was impossible.

Yet Nelson Lee was quite sure that if the facts were made known in a court of law Wilmore would be condemned.

But the scoundrel's cunning and cleverness had foreseen that Mr. Dixon had no funds for bringing the matter into court, even if it were possible. He knew very well that the couple were simple and easily tricked, and he had played the game for all it was worth. Heartless, relentless, he had thought of nothing save his own gain.

But, as Lee had said, he had overstepped the mark. While thinking himself absolutely safe from exposure, he would nevertheless be shown up for exactly what he was.

During the afternoon Eileen Dare called at Gray's Inn Road, and in Lee's consulting-room she and the detective had a long, serious talk. It was nearly teatime before that talk was over; and the pair acted, too. While talking they had been employed in another way, and Nipper took part in the scheme, too. The lad chuckled every now and again, and seemed highly delighted.

When Eileen returned to Chelsea she found her guest almost cheerful, for she had been told that her husband was safe in a nursing home, and that everything was being done for his comfort.

Eileen held a consultation with Mrs. Dixon during the evening.

"You are to follow implicitly the instructions I have given you," said the girl detective. "Now, Mrs. Dixon, you know that Mr. Lee and myself are working our hardest in your cause. And you must obey——"

"Oh, Miss Dare, I am only too anxious to do everything I am told," said the other eagerly. "I understand exactly. And you are so good to me that I feel like sobbing."

Eileen laughed.

"You mustn't do that," she exclaimed. "Everything will be all right before long. But to tell you everything clearer. You must visit Mr. Wilmore in the morning, and tell him the story I have already outlined; he will believe it, for it is plausible and straightforward. Say that you are anxious to raise another loan—a larger loan. This is my scheme, and I know it will succeed. Mr. Nelson Lee approves of it as the only positive means of attaining our end."

And on the following morning Mrs. Dixon, still pale and haggard, but much stronger, presented herself at Mr. Ransome Wilmore's office. He condescended to grant her an interview—but opened his eyes considerably when his client was once within his private office.

For she calmly stated that she wished to raise a loan of three thousand five hundred pounds! This was to be quite a new transaction, apart from the other.

She was not asking for the loan without security. On the contrary, she produced securities which Wilmore opened his eyes to see. He knew at once that they were absolutely "cast iron"—and that they were, in fact, worth treble the sum Mrs. Dixon had asked.

The moneylender was only too willing to advance the sum, for he cunningly saw that here was possibly another chance of obtaining huge percentage.

Without the least hesitation he handed Mrs. Dixon an open cheque, which she could cash at the bank immediately upon leaving. She signed documents without even reading them, and Wilmore rubbed his fat hands with inward glee.

He was a large, fleshy man, with coarse features and vile habits. He literally chuckled with evil delight after his client's departure. He very seldom had such security brought to him, and he celebrated the occasion by breaking a new bottle of champagne.

He gloated over the innocence of his victim. There was not the slightest reason for him to suspect that anything was wrong. What Mrs. Dixon had told him had been obviously true, and he had long since found that he could twist her round his little finger.

And Mrs. Dixon herself went straight to the bank and obtained the money in cash. She was feeling excited and somewhat nervous; but she carried out Eileen's instructions to the letter. The securities which Eileen had given her were so absolutely "safe" that Wilmore had paid up on the instant. He had, of course, wanted to know where Mrs. Dixon had obtained the valuable securities, for he had known that she was practically at her last gasp.

But her explanation—given to her by Eileen—was quite satisfactory, and the moneylender congratulated himself upon ensnaring his victim afresh. Poor fool that she was! She thought that he was acting straight with her! Well, if she was idiot enough to plunge herself deeper, that was her worry.

So thought Mr. Ransome Wilmore.

He little guessed that it was he himself who was being ensnared!

How could he guess the actual truth? He had no notion that Mrs. Dixon was now acting upon expert advice—the advice of Britain's most famous detective. And he was so consumed with his own cleverness and cunning that it never struck him that he could be tripped.

The securities had been so splendid that he had almost stumbled over himself in his eagerness to loan the sum required. And Mrs. Dixon went to the bank, drew the money out in notes, and then returned to Gray's Inn Road.

She found Nelson Lee and Eileen Dare waiting for her.

"You were successful?" asked Eileen eagerly. "Oh, I knew you would be! And Wilmore will fall into the trap without a suspicion of impending disaster. Tell us how you got on."

Mrs. Dixon did so in a few words, and Nelson Lee and Eileen listened interestedly. When she had finished Lee nodded, and smiling held out his hand.

"Give me the money, will you?" he asked.

"It is all here," replied Mrs. Dixon, handing a package across.

The detective took it, and found that it contained banknotes and currency notes to the value of £3,500. He placed them upon the table, and then handed Mrs. Dixon a bulky leather wallet.

"This contains precisely the same amount," explained Lee. "I have changed them, because notes can be traced, and I do not intend you to be troubled in any way. I will see that the notes you obtained from the bank are disposed of so that they cannot possibly be stopped. This sum is approximately the amount which Mr. Ransome Wilmore has swindled you out of."

"But—but——"

"You are to keep it," smiled Lee. "It is yours."

"Oh, it is so good of you—so very, very good!" said Mrs. Dixon, with moist eyes. "But I know, from what Miss Dare told me last night, that all is not yet over. But I am ready to face anything, and I am in your hands completely."

"Then we are all satisfied," smiled Eileen. "Remember, Mrs. Dixon,

that what follows after this is all being done for your good, and to bring about the ultimate disgrace of the scoundrel who has treated you and your husband so badly."

"I should be terribly frightened if I were not acting under your instructions," said Mrs. Dixon simply. "But, as it is, I do not worry in the least. I know that everything will be all right in the end, and that I have to thank you from the bottom of my heart for all that you have done and are now doing."

The woman's gratitude almost overwhelmed her for a moment, but then she smiled bravely and departed with Eileen for Chelsea. Meanwhile, Nelson Lee and Nipper were busy. The banknotes which Mrs. Dixon had obtained were manipulated and disposed of so that it would be a matter of sheer impossibility to trace them.

But what was the scheme?

Mrs. Dixon had obtained the money which morally belonged to her husband. But it had been obtained at a costly price, for the moneylender knew that the securities which were now in his keeping were worth at least treble the sum.

The following morning, however, Ransome Wilmore received the shock of his life.

It happened soon after he arrived at his office for the day's work.

He was particularly cheerful this morning, for he had been doing excellent business, and there were splendid prospects ahead. What Mr. Wilmore considered "excellent business" really consisted of heartless villainy and blood-sucking. The more money he could wrest from his victims the greater he was pleased.

He sat in his private sanctum, a fat cigar in his coarse, evil mouth, and a smile upon his face. He was engaged in looking through his correspondence. One letter claimed his attention more than the others, for it was marked "Urgent" in great black letters, and underneath were the words "Private and confidential." Wilmore tore the flap open, and shifted his cigar.

"H'm! Wonder what this can be?" he murmured. "Somebody wanting a loan in a hurry, I presume. Afraid he won't get it unless there's big security——"

He paused, and the cigar almost dropped from his thick lips. He stared at the letter aghast, his eyes glaring and his breath forced. The letter was written upon a plain sheet of notepaper, and bore no address, and no signature. It was an anonymous communication. But it was the startling significance of the words which caused the moneylender such perturbation.

The letter ran:

"Mr. Ransome Wilmore:

"Just a word of warning from a friend. You advanced the sum of £3,500 to-day to a certain Mrs. Philip Dixon. Have you examined the securities which were given to you in the transaction?

"If not, look into the matter at once. Those securities are faked and worthless. They are not worth one penny. This is just a friendly tip from
"ONE WHO KNOWS THINGS."

The moneylender stared at the letter as though dazed for a moment, and then he pushed his chair back and rose to his feet. The cigar fell from his mouth to the floor, and he uttered a curse.

"Bah! This must be a joke!" he went on harshly. "Faked! By thunder, I've never been caught napping in all my life—especially by a fool of a woman!"

Nevertheless, Wilmore was vastly upset, and he brought out his keys and opened a big safe at the back of his office. In another minute he was closely examining securities which Mrs. Dixon had handed to him.

"They're genuine—as safe as the Bank of England," he muttered, with a sigh of relief. "All the same, I will make inquiries and make absolutely certain. Waste of time, of course, but it's best to make absolutely certain. An infernal nuisance, this fool of a letter!"

Wilmore was quite sure that the communication was an alleged attempt at humour. But he at once went out and visited a certain establishment where he could find out the positive truth. He had never thought of going there before because the transaction had been obviously in perfect order.

When he emerged into the street once more, however, his face was purple with terrible fury.

He had learned that the securities were, indeed, worthless!

He—Ransome Wilmore—had been duped and taken in!

It was almost too much for the moneylender, and he seemed to be on the point of an apoplectic stroke. It was not as though the matter were a small one, for it was not; it was one of the biggest jobs he had ever tackled.

Three thousand five hundred pounds!

It was lost—absolutely gone! And he had nothing in his hands but a few worthless pieces of paper. He had been defrauded and deceived, and he did not appreciate the grim humour of the situation. He had been treated as he himself had treated hundreds of innocent people.

"By Heaven, I will make that woman pay!" he snarled, as he paced furiously along the street. "How did she do it? Three thousand——"

Wilmore nearly choked, and he suddenly came to a decision. His cruel jaw set firmly, and his eyes shone like demoniacal fire. He had been swindled; he had been defrauded of thousands!

There was only one thing for it. In his blind fury he only thought of his loss, and of making the woman pay who was responsible for it. Almost sobbing with passionate fury, he rushed to Bow Street Police Station, and informed the police of the fraudulent transaction.

And before luncheon two plain-clothes police detectives met Mrs. Dixon just outside Eileen's flat and arrested her! This startling development was a fearful shock, but Mrs. Dixon bore up with wonderful fortitude.

She was taken by taxi to Bow Street, and charged with obtaining money under false pretences and deliberate fraud!

What was to be the next move?

CHAPTER IV.

According to Programme—Bailed Out—What Ford Abbercorn Knew.

NIPPER pelted up the stairs to his master's consulting-room in Gray's Inn Road. A newspaper was waving in the youngster's hand, and when he burst into the room he found his master sitting with Eileen Dare. They both looked round quickly as Nipper thundered.

"Why, whatever is the matter, Nipper?" cried Eileen.

"It's in the paper, miss!" panted Nipper excitedly. "Happened this morning! Mrs. Dixon's been arrested——"

"My dear Nipper, I really wish you would refrain from bursting into rooms with news which is lamentably second-hand!" remarked Nelson Lee smoothly. "We knew that Mrs. Dixon had been arrested long ago. I

'phoned through and obtained the information almost as soon as the prisoner was brought into Bow Street."

Nipper's face assumed a crestfallen expression.

"Why, I thought I'd be the first, guv'nor!" he exclaimed. "But it's all right, ain't it. Mrs. Dixon's in the soup properly now. What's the next item on the programme?"

"Miss Eileen and I were discussing the matter when you made such a dramatic entry," was Lee's reply. "But, as you have appeared, Nipper, let's see what it says in the paper."

It was nothing much. The newspaper was an afternoon edition, and the item of interest was in the stop-press column. It was short and badly printed, as stop-press announcements usually are:

"WOMAN ARRESTED FOR FRAUD.

"Just before one o'clock a young woman named Mrs. Philip Dixon was arrested at Chelsea on a charge of conspiracy and fraud. It is reported that she obtained a sum of money, running into thousands, by false pretences from Mr. Ransome Wilmore, the well-known financier. Mrs. Dixon was conveyed to Bow Street, and will be brought before the magistrate in the morning."

"H'm! The newspaper men have been pretty smart," observed Nelson Lee calmly. "Of course, this is all very unpleasant for Mrs. Dixon, but no harm will come to her, and she is quite prepared."

Neither Nelson Lee nor Eileen Dare seemed at all alarmed or perturbed at the startling news of their client's arrest. On the contrary, they were obviously pleased.

To be frank, the whole thing was a put-up job.

Eileen had suggested it, and Nelson Lee had approved. And Mrs. Dixon had known, even when she went to the moneylender's office, that she would probably be arrested for fraud. There was no disgrace—or would be none when the whole facts were revealed.

She had been rather alarmed at the idea at first, but she knew that it was all for her own good, and so she followed Eileen's instructions to the letter, and was not in the least put out when she found herself under arrest.

These securities, which Ransome Wilmore had thought "cast-iron," were, to tell the truth, some forged documents which had come into Nelson Lee's possession while he had been engaged on a difficult case in which Douglas James Sutcliffe, the notorious forger, had figured. Sutcliffe, known generally as "Jim the Penman," had forged the securities in every detail. He was a genius at every branch of forgery, and these supposed securities were examples of his finest work. It was little wonder that Wilmore had been deceived. Nelson Lee had realised how suitable the forgeries were for the purpose in hand, and the detective had not hesitated to use them. Lee was fully aware of the gravity of the step he had taken, but he considered that the end fully justified the means. And Wilmore had suspected nothing until the receipt of the anonymous letter.

But why had the plot been engineered?

Mainly for one reason. Eileen fully intended exposing Ransome Wilmore for the scoundrel he was. But, to do so, publicity was absolutely necessary. And by having Mrs. Dixon arrested for fraud there would certainly be publicity enough. It had all been done so that the whole story—the actual truth—should be stated in a court of justice.

But Mrs. Dixon had obtained the money which Wilmore had morally stolen, and the rest would all come right after the trial. For it was certain

there would be a trial. The evidence against the prisoner would be conclusive, and it was out of the question that she would be discharged after the police court proceedings.

Ransome Wilmore himself had not the slightest idea that it was all part of a deep scheme to have the truth revealed. He thought that Mrs. Dixon had perpetrated the trick on her own initiative.

Moreover, he knew that she was simple, and easily led, and that her husband was too ill to appear in court, or to make any statement. A clever counsel would be able to muddle her, and make her convict herself beyond hope of acquittal.

After calm thought Wilmore had realised that he had acted hastily. But three thousand five hundred! If it were humanly possible, he meant to regain the sum which had been stolen from him.

But at first he had uneasy thoughts that the full facts of the first transaction—when he had criminally bled Mr. and Mrs. Dixon—would come out at the trial. But then, after due consideration, he comforted himself by realising that Mrs. Dixon would be altogether too confused to tell any connected narrative regarding the loss of her house and home—he would take care of that!

Besides, why should he worry? She was a criminal now, and her word would be discounted. Even if she did manage to tell some of the truth, he would be prepared, and would explain away everything glibly and easily. She would be able to prove nothing whatever.

She was a woman—a weak, nervous woman—and she was alone. He guessed that she had arranged the fraud without her husband's knowledge, and had done it by way of revenge for the way in which she had been treated. But all this would be twisted and turned about at the trial, and she would not have a leg to stand upon. None of the real truth would come out.

So Ransome Wilmore thought.

Perhaps he would not have been so confident had he known that Mrs. Dixon was merely a lure to get the facts into the light of day! Perhaps the moneylender would have been considerably alarmed if he had known that Nelson Lee and Eileen Dare were working hard on the case!

But Wilmore did not know—and it was very improbable that he would ever know until it was too late.

He was well aware of Eileen Dare's activity in the past. He knew that she had brought about the downfall of Jonathan Bridger and Rudolph Stebbing—two of his greatest friends. But he never guessed that the girl was now confining her attention to him.

Eileen, in fact, would appear as a witness for the defence at Mrs. Dixon's trial, and then everything—every little detail—would come out. Eileen meant to relate the whole miserable story, from beginning to end!

In due course Mrs. Dixon was committed for trial, and it was reckoned that she had utterly no chance of being freed. She had obtained the money, and refused to state where it could be found. And it was proved that she had tendered the securities, knowing that they were faked. The case was black against her.

Nelson Lee privately bailed her out, and she went away to the seaside with a paid companion, and really enjoyed herself. She knew very well that Lee would not allow her to go to prison.

Eileen had told her that she would accept full responsibility for the fraud; it had been her suggestion, and, if necessary, she would pay the penalty. But Eileen knew very well that matters would not come to that. She had set out to ruin Ransome Wilmore—and she fully meant to do it!



The strange woman gave a clean leap, and alighted upon the low parapet of the bridge. She hovered there for one tense moment, and then deliberately hurled herself downwards, her arms outstretched wildly.—(See page 3.)

The weeks passed, and it seemed only a very short while before the trial of Mrs. Dixon came on for conspiracy and fraud. She had been having a lovely time during the interval, and was ever so much healthier and stronger. Wilmore fondly imagined that she had been awaiting her trial in prison. He did not know that bail had been allowed, and that she had been to the seaside.

With Nelson Lee's help Eileen had, during this time, been collecting her evidence, piece by piece. And now it was complete to the very last detail. In her evidence she would relate a story which would change the whole aspect of the case, and make it clear that Mrs. Dixon was absolutely guiltless. And it would, moreover, be a damning indictment against Ransome Wilmore.

The latter was under the impression that everything was in his favour—that there would be no witnesses for Mrs. Dixon's defence, and that she would be convicted straight off. And, further, Wilmore was hoping that the prisoner would be forced to reveal what she had done with the three thousand five hundred pounds. That was Wilmore's chief concern. He badly wanted to see his money back. If that was impossible, however, he meant to have his revenge by sending Mrs. Dixon to gaol.

But at the eleventh hour a hitch occurred.

It was too late for anything to be done—that is, anything connected with the trial. But it was not too late for fresh villainy.

It happened on the very evening before the case came on at the Central Criminal Court. Eileen was in London, at her flat, ready for the morrow's ordeal. And Nelson Lee had arranged to pay her a rather late call, with Nipper, in order to discuss the final details.

Mrs. Dixon was in custody, awaiting her trial. She was quite cheerful, and, indeed, light-hearted. The knowledge that Wilmore's roguery was to be exposed on the morrow caused her keen pleasure. She was not vindictive and revengeful, but an angel would have been delighted to know that retribution was to fall upon the head of such a scoundrel as Ransome Wilmore.

And on this last night, just when everything was beautifully prepared, the hitch occurred which was to make a very material difference in the whole series of after-events.

It was caused through a mere every-day chat between two men. It was seemingly nothing else but idle conversation, but, owing to that chat, a certain definite fact was revealed. Mr. Ford Abbercorn was at his club during the evening, and he had a little talk with a well-known barrister—also a club member.

They were lolling in easy-chairs, smoking cigars, and sipping wine. At first the talk was mostly confined to the war and other topical subjects. Then a chance remark led to legal matters, and the barrister happened to mention that a rather interesting case was to come on the following morning in the Central Criminal Court.

Ford Abbercorn, as is already known, was one of the highly placed members of the infamous combine which Eileen was fighting. He had already experienced the girl's cleverness, and knew how dangerous she could be. But he had not the slightest idea that she was in any way connected with the affairs of Mr. Ransome Wilmore.

And then the barrister mentioned that the case promised to be rather interesting. It was not to be the easy affair which had first been supposed. An important witness was to appear for the defence—a witness, the barrister declared, who was something of a dark horse.

Abbercorn was just a little startled, for he had, of course, heard all

the facts, and he knew how Wilmore had prepared for the trial. He had thought that it was to be a "walk-over" for the moneylender, and that Mrs. Dixon would be convicted after a very short trial.

And so Abbercorn casually inquired who the witness was to be, and received the reply that it was nobody but a mere girl—a certain Miss Eileen Dare, of whom the barrister had never heard before. He had learned that she was to appear as a witness only an hour before.

Abbercorn was absolutely alarmed. Eileen Dare was to appear against Wilmore! It was a totally unexpected bombshell. Abbercorn was under no false impression regarding Eileen, and it came to him, all in a flood, that the girl had been preparing a surprise.

Hastily excusing himself, he at once chartered a taxi and rushed round to Wilmore's residence. The moneylender was at home, and he was at once informed of the news. He fairly jumped, and turned pasty-white with alarm and consternation.

"Eileen Dare!" he grated harshly. "That girl is to appear as a witness for the defence! By thunder, Abbercorn, she is a formidable person, as we have good reason to know—although she is only a girl. She's not one of those helpless, wishy-washy sort; she's as dangerous as a live wire!"

"What on earth can you do, Wilmore?" asked the other anxiously.

"I don't know—I don't know!" was the moneylender's reply, as he paced the room and savagely bit the end off a cigar. "But one thing is certain, Abbercorn—if that infernal girl gives her evidence she will upset everything. The whole thing is nothing but a trap for me—I know it! By Heaven, what a fool I've been to let things go as far as this without making certain!"

Wilmore was more upset than he cared to admit. He had been thinking that he had only a helpless woman to deal with, and now, at the last moment, he found that Eileen Dare was mixed up in the affair. That very fact alone told him that the situation was desperate. If Eileen gave evidence he was sure that she would reveal the truth regarding his dastardly treatment of the Dixons.

"Why couldn't I realise it before?" he snapped, clenching his fists. "It was this girl, of course, who put the Dixon woman up to the dodge. Bah! I've been blind over the whole business. And now it's too late—it's too late, Abbercorn."

"Why?" asked the other man, with sinister meaning. "Supposing the girl is prevented from reaching the court? The case will go absolutely against Mrs. Dixon, and she will be convicted——"

Wilmore clutched Abbercorn's arm.

"If she can be prevented!" he repeated significantly. "By George, I have an idea. But we must discuss this affair thoroughly, my dear fellow. How many of us are in town? We will call a meeting at once, and come to a decision without delay."

And so, within the hour, a hastily called meeting of the combine was being held. A good many scoundrels were present—among them Sir Caleb Hurst, Melville J. Ross, Sydney Bradford, and Roger Haverfield. Quickly and concisely Wilmore described the situation.

A discussion resulted, and certain plans were made.

In a time of danger the combine always worked together, and each individual man was quite ready to make a special effort, and now, when Ransome Wilmore's position seemed to be desperate, the combine plotted cunningly.

And the result?

The result was not exactly the one which was anticipated; but it was dramatic enough, nevertheless.

CHAPTER V.

The 'Phone Call—The Houseboat on the Thames—On the Trail.

THE bell of Eileen Dare's telephone rang sharply.

The girl-detective was seated at her desk making a few notes, and she at once laid her pen down and picked up the receiver of the instrument. It was getting rather late, and Aunt Esther had just advised Eileen to get to bed, the old lady bearing in mind that her niece was to have a strenuous day on the morrow.

"Hallo!" called Eileen softly. "Who is that, please? Oh——"

"That you, Miss Eileen?" came a cheery voice over the wires.

"Oh, it's Mr. Lee!" exclaimed Eileen. "Where are you? Oh, at your rooms? No, it's not too late to come round——"

"Then, if you will, I should like you to pop over to Gray's Inn Road at once," said Nelson Lee over the wire. "I want you to meet a barrister who is with me at the present time."

"If it is really important——"

"It is very important indeed," came the interjection. "It is really essential that you should come at once, Miss Eileen. The hour is rather late, but you may be sure that either Nipper or I—or the pair of us—will see you safely home."

Eileen laughed, and promised to be at Gray's Inn Road at the earliest possible moment.

She explained to Aunt Esther where she was going, and then donned her hat and coat. She took care to provide herself with furs, for the night was somewhat chilly; then she slipped out and emerged upon the dark street. The night was gloomy, for there were thick clouds overhead—although they were high and gave no promise of rain.

As it happened, a taxi-cab was just coming up as Eileen reached the edge of the pavement, and deposited a gentleman in evening-dress almost within a couple of yards of her.

"Oh, how fortunate!" exclaimed the girl. "Are you disengaged, cab-man?"

"Yes, miss," said the chauffeur quickly. "Where to, miss?"

"Gray's Inn Road!"

The gentleman, in evening-dress was kind enough to open the door of the cab for Eileen, and she stepped in with a smile and a word of thanks. The next second, however, she received a surprise—a big surprise.

For the instant she was in the taxi the gentleman in evening-dress stepped in after her and slammed the door. The cab at once shot off with a jerk, but did not gather speed for some little time. It proceeded along the dark road at quite a moderate, sedate pace.

Eileen, within, was utterly dismayed, for she found that a second man was already within the cab! The other, who had followed her in, at once threw her upon the cushions and clapped a hand over her mouth. She had attempted to scream, but her cry was cut short almost before she had uttered a sound.

The two men worked quickly. They were strong, agile, and active. After all, she was only a girl, and although strong and plucky herself, she was no match for the two strangers. A thick muffler was tied round her mouth and nose, and drawn tight. Then her hands were bound, and she was forced to sit between the two men, each holding one of her arms. The taxi hummed along musically.

"I should advise you to keep quiet and attempt no tricks, my dear Miss Dare," said the man in evening-dress cheerfully. "Rather a neat trick,

wasn't it? We sha'n't hurt you if you keep quiet; but if you start any struggling games we shall resort to drastic measures."

Eileen could not reply for the simple reason that she was too smothered with the muffler to utter a sound, and she realised that the advice was really excellent. To struggle would be useless. It was far better to remain quiet and think over the situation.

The dramatic manner in which she had been captured was startling; yet it had been performed so extremely easily that it was really impossible for her to have been prepared. But it was obvious to her, in a second, that the whole thing had been planned beforehand.

Moreover, she was practically convinced that Ransome Wilmore was responsible for her present unfortunate position. It was terribly galling, but she did not think that she stood in any real danger.

"Oh, how ridiculous of me!" she thought, in distress. "I fell into the trap without a thought of danger. Yet how was I to know? This may mean all the difference in the world. Mr. Lee cannot trace me, for he will have no idea where I am or what has become of me."

Eileen shrewdly guessed that she had been captured by agents of the combine—perhaps two of the combine themselves—for the especial purpose of spiriting her away until after the trial of Mrs. Dixon.

Her enemies had become active at the very eleventh hour!

"I should have been more cautious!" she told herself, half angrily. "I had been fooling myself that they had no knowledge of my part in Mrs. Dixon's affairs. And my lack of caution has landed me into this predicament. Oh, they mean to keep me a prisoner, so that I shall be unable to give my evidence. What can I do?"

It was rather a futile question, for at present she was unable to do anything except sit tight. She was positively sure now that her abduction had been very carefully timed and planned. Of course, it had not been Nelson Lee at all who had rung her up—she was convinced of that.

The voice over the wire had been very similar to that of the great detective. But she now remembered that there had been a certain intonation which was different to Lee's. At the time she had scarcely noticed it; but now, when she thought carefully, she realised that there had been a difference. That 'phone call had been timed so that she should leave her flat in order to fall into the trap of the waiting taxi-cab, which was, of course, a fake one, with a false registration number, and probably a dummy taximeter.

The abduction had been arranged very cunningly, for it had all been so extremely simple. No doubt the cab had been waiting close handy, and the driver—who was as much a fake as his taxi—had glided up directly he saw her leaving the building. Consequently the vehicle pulled up at the right second, deposited its supposed fare, and she had chartered it.

Knowing where she was bound for, her enemies had rightly guessed that she would at once hire the cab. And a dozen people passing at the moment would have suspected nothing. What was there, indeed, to arouse suspicion? She had simply entered the cab, and a gentleman in evening-dress had followed her. On the face of it it seemed as though a gentleman had called to take her away.

Certainly, she must give the scoundrels credit for having engineered the affair very smartly. If she herself had suspected nothing, it was obvious that nobody else would do so. It had been no violent kidnapping business, for nothing whatever untoward had occurred until the cab was actually in motion.

Eileen was not alarmed for her own safety; but she was gravely concerned

about the trial the next day. She was being taken away, and would be kept a prisoner until Mrs. Dixon had been convicted!

"I must escape!" she thought determinedly. "Oh, an opportunity must come before long. How foolish of me to have been so easily deceived!"

Eileen, however, was rather unjust to herself. She was not to blame in any way, for to have guarded against this unexpected plot would have been impossible. But where was she being taken to? What was to be the end of the adventure?

She was not left in doubt for very long.

The pseudo taxi proceeded smoothly, and her two captors sat quite silent and easy. But they kept her arms tightly gripped, and she knew that any attempt to escape would have been futile.

At last the motor-car came to a stop, and the man in evening-dress turned to her.

"Now, Miss Dare, we have no wish to cause trouble," he said pleasantly. "All you have to do is to walk with us and keep calm. As I said before, you are safe as long as you attempt no tricks. If you do so, you'll regret it. That is all."

The door opened, and the other man alighted. Eileen was a sensible girl, and so she made no effort to break away. She knew quite well that the threat had been genuine, and that any attempt to escape would indeed have been doomed to failure. Her wrists were bound, and her mouth was muffled so that she could utter no sound. The two men, moreover, never left her side.

She stepped from the vehicle, and was able to see fairly distinctly; for, although the night was dark, it seemed to be almost bright after the blackness of the interior of the cab.

Trees and meadows went before her, and at first she thought she was in the open country; but the dark outlines of buildings loomed in the distance, and, turning, she saw the dull gleam of water. She was quite close to the river—obviously the Thames—and in an extremely deserted spot.

It was probably an up-river retreat of some sort, lively enough in the summer-time, but now deserted and dreary. Quite close, against the river bank, stood a low-built, somewhat dilapidated houseboat. It was in total darkness, and the water lapped softly against the rotten wooden sides.

The taxi-cab was standing against a grass-covered, rutty track, which ran parallel with the river. Eileen had noticed that the vehicle had been proceeding very slowly for some considerable distance before it had finally stopped.

"Now, Miss Dare, forward, please!"

The voice was smooth and soft, but very insistent. Two hands gripped her arms, and she was taken gently forward. Within a minute she found herself upon the houseboat, and she was forced into the interior, and found herself in total darkness. Then, without a word, her captors proceeded to bind her more securely. Her neat little ankles were cruelly secured with thick, coarse rope, and her wrists were similarly treated. The muffler was then removed from her mouth, and a more effective gag substituted—a gag which she could not possibly remove, and which prevented her from uttering a sound of any sort.

Eileen began to despair now. The opportunity to escape had gone—in fact, there had been no opportunity, although she had been on the alert the whole time. The position was grave and perilous.

But was it so bad as she imagined? Was she to be kept a prisoner until after the trial?

Fate had ordained otherwise, as a matter of fact. For even at that

moment Nelson Lee and Nipper were on Eileen's track. How had they managed it? It had all been as simple as the abduction itself.

Nelson Lee had previously decided to call upon Eileen with Nipper in order to discuss a few final plans. He and his young assistant, therefore, had journeyed to Chelsea with that object. They had completed the latter part of their journey on foot, taking a stroll along the Embankment.

As they emerged upon the street in which Eileen's flat was situated, they saw what appeared to be an ordinary taxi-cab standing against the kerb. There was nothing particularly significant in that. It was the incident which happened immediately afterwards that aroused Lee's suspicions.

He and Nipper were about to cross the road when they saw Eileen trip lightly down the three steps from the main entrance of the flats, and walk quickly towards the wide, open gateway. In spite of the gloom, there was no mistaking Eileen. Her dainty little figure and singularly graceful walk was very well known to Lee and Nipper, and they at once commenced to cross.

They were still a little distance up the road—perhaps two hundred yards from the gateway itself. Lee wondered where the girl could be going, for she had known that he was coming round.

The great detective then became aware that the taxi-cab had started forward, and it almost immediately stopped again. It did so just as Eileen reached the pavement, and Lee and Nipper saw the girl pause and speak to the driver.

"Better buck up, guv'nor!" remarked Nipper. "Miss Eileen's going to buzz off in that taxi."

They hastened their steps somewhat, Lee being rather surprised to see a man in evening dress emerge from the taxi, and then politely hold the door open for Eileen. He guessed at once that it was merely a gentlemanly action on the part of the stranger.

Just as Lee and Nipper were getting close, however, Eileen stepped into the taxi, and was instantly followed by the man in evening dress. The door slammed, and the taxi moved off—first of all with a quick jerk, but then easing down to a sedate pace.

"Well, I'm blowed!" ejaculated Nipper. "Who was that Johnny, guv'nor? I say, Miss Eileen's not thinking of becoming engaged——"

Lee snapped his fingers impatiently.

"Don't be absurd, Nipper!" he rapped out. "Don't talk nonsense! This looks to me very much like a trap, young 'un. By James, I believe it was a trap!"

"A—a trap, guv'nor?" gasped Nipper.

"What else? But where is a real taxi? There's not a second to lose, my boy. We want to follow that cab——"

Lee did not waste time in further words. He dashed down a side street, closely followed by Nipper, and in a few seconds emerged upon the Embankment. At first there was no vehicle of any description in sight. But then, after the first hasty glance, Nelson Lee beheld the gratifying sight of three taxi-cabs bowling along, one behind the other.

The first one was occupied, but the second showed its flag upright, and Lee at once shouted out for the cabby to stop. The man did so smartly, and in a few moments Lee and Nipper were aboard, and were hurrying back. The detective had given his instructions, but was doubtful if they could be carried out.

He had told the cabby to make all speed and do his best to catch up with another taxi, which was probably a faked vehicle altogether, and

which was enamelled green with black stripes, and had a long gash on the enamel-work on the right-hand portion of the rear. Lee had seen that as Eileen's taxi had driven off. And now it was going to prove very useful as a means of identification.

Scarcely more than a minute had passed since Eileen had been abducted. Nelson Lee's prompt search for a genuine taxi had been the means of getting on the track with scarcely any delay.

The detective knew that the road was perfectly straight for quite a considerable distance. Therefore it was on the cards that the pursuers would catch up with their quarry before it became lost in the maze of streets beyond. Eileen's taxi had not been travelling fast; but the one which carried Lee and Nipper was simply defying all speed limits.

"Shall we get the trail?" muttered Lee anxiously. "I hope so, Nipper."

"But what's wrong, sir?" demanded Nipper. "I didn't see anything particularly startling. Nothing to be alarmed at, anyhow. Only some gentleman taking Miss Eileen out somewhere——"

"Tut-tut! Your wits are blunt to-night, Nipper," interjected Lee curtly. "On the face of it there was nothing suspicious; but that merely proves how cleverly the kidnapping plot was arranged. Just consider the facts as we saw them. Miss Eileen came out of the flats, and found a taxi just depositing its fare. Possibly she had been decoyed out by a false note or a telephone call. Well, she naturally suspected nothing when a taxi swung up and a gentleman in evening dress alighted."

"My hat! Do you mean——"

"I mean that that cab was waiting there especially for one purpose," went on Lee anxiously. "We just happened to spot it, and so we know. As soon as Eileen appeared the cab moved forward. It had been quite stationary before that—waiting. The facts are very significant, and I am convinced that the girl has been carried away against her will."

Nipper was greatly worried.

"I remember now, gov'nor," he said. "That rotter in evening dress jumped into the taxi the very instant Miss Eileen entered. He slammed the door, and then the cab moved off. I wonder who the dickens planned the job——"

"Wilmore, of course—or, to be more exact, the combine," replied Lee. "It's as clear as daylight, young 'un. Wilmore has found that the girl is to appear as a witness to-morrow, and so he has decided, at the last moment, to spirit her away until——"

There was a tap on the glass, and the detective saw the driver looking round. The man pointed ahead, and grinned cheerfully.

And Lee and Nipper, gazing ahead too, saw that they were only twenty yards behind the taxi which had carried Eileen Dare off.

They had picked up the trail!

CHAPTER VI.

A Setback—The Glare in the Sky—Eileen's Peril—Helpless!

NELSON LEE was highly elated at having picked up the trail so promptly. But before long his satisfaction gave place to annoyance and exasperation, for, while passing through an outlying suburb, the famous detective experienced a setback.

It was really not the taxi-driver's fault.

The first cab, carrying Eileen, was only a short distance in front, and it was really child's play to keep on its trail. Lee was feeling assured and confident, and was planning, indeed, to bring about a climax.

And then misfortune came. It was merely a trivial incident, but one which was to make all the difference. The quarry passed smoothly across a broad thoroughfare, where a policeman was on point duty. The pursuing taxi was about to follow when a constable held up his arm as a signal to stop.

Nelson Lee's cabby muttered something very uncomplimentary in quite loud tones, and jammed his brake on. Under ordinary circumstances the stoppage would have meant nothing, but now every second was of importance.

The reason for the stop was that a lumbering steam-lorry, with a loaded van behind it, was coming along the side road. Misfortunes never come singly, and as soon as the lorry had cleared, five great military transport waggons thundered up from the opposite direction. Lee's taxi was, of course, obliged to wait. And even then it was impossible to proceed at once, for after the steam waggon had passed, the taxi-driver had jerked forward a yard. But in stopping again he stopped his engine too.

Now he was working at the handle frantically, and at last got the engine to go again. It was, as he explained afterwards, a beast to start. And in consequence of this prolonged delay when the cab started once more the quarry was beyond reach. It had passed into the night, and to follow it was impossible.

"What an infernal nuisance!" snapped Lee angrily. "Just as we were progressing so splendidly too. This may mean utter disaster for Eileen, Nipper. Hang it all, I don't often feel despondent, but I am certainly inclined that way now."

There was every reason for the famous criminologist to be exasperated to a degree. Eileen was completely lost, and it was problematical whether the trail could be picked up again. - But Nelson Lee persevered. He went on slowly, and very shortly they espied a policeman patrolling the badly illuminated road.

He was questioned, and he certainly remembered a taxi-cab passing him a few minutes before. He recollected also that it had turned down a broad roadway to the left. This was a considerable help, and the pursuers proceeded on their way for another mile. Then cross-roads were encountered. Here, by a lucky chance, stood a rather dingy coffee-stall.

Further inquiries elicited the information that a taxi had passed ten minutes beforehand, and had proceeded in the direction of Staines. From this point the real difficulties came, for there was no way of inquiring except from an occasional pedestrian, who, in almost every case, had taken no particular notice of any vehicles that had passed.

But, by dint of persevering work, Lee was practically sure that he was not far wrong. Much time, however, had been lost, and at last, near a deserted part of the river, it was really impossible to proceed further.

Here were marshes and fields, and where Lee's taxi had stopped the road dwindled away into a mere track. For some time past they had been proceeding down a narrow lane which seemed to lead to no particular place. The driver had been forced to go with extreme caution to avoid plunging into the river by mistake.

Lee and Nipper jumped out, and, walking forward, the detective flashed his electric torch close upon the ground. There had been rain the previous day, and the soft road was still very damp. Clearly outlined could be seen the tracks of a motor-car.

"That's the cab, sir!" exclaimed Nipper eagerly. "There's no mistaking the tracks of a taxi. We've only to go on a bit——"

"Wait, Nipper—wait!" interjected Lee. "You have missed a very important point. Just look down here!"

Lee kept his light steady upon the ground, and Nipper and the taxi-driver gazed down upon the half solidified mud.

"Them's taxi-cab tracks, boss," said the man.

"I am quite sure of that; but there are two sets of them. Cannot you see?" exclaimed the detective, frowning. "One set was made as the cab went, and another set as it came back."

"Oh, lor'!" exclaimed Nipper blankly. "Then we've missed it!"

"Undoubtedly. Some little way back, you remember, we lost the trail for a while, and went off in a wrong direction. Doubtless our friends passed during that time, and so we saw nothing of them. But these marks prove conclusively that we are too late."

"Well, that's cheerful," remarked the cabby. "It's none o' my business, boss, but it strikes me you can't do no good by 'angin' about 'ere. Best let me take you 'ome afore——"

Lee interrupted the man by paying his fare and a handsome tip into the bargain. The driver, in fact, knowing little or nothing of the project, was under the impression that his companions were just a little "touched." However, he was pleased with his tip, and at once departed homeward. If the "gents" liked to be left alone on the marshes in the dark, that was their look-out.

"What's the idea of this, sir?" asked Nipper, when the taxi's tail-light had disappeared in the distance. "How are we going to get home now?"

"I have no intention of getting home for some little time," was Lee's crisp reply. "We are going on, Nipper—we are going to make investigations. Cannot you realise the significance of these double tracks?"

Nipper scratched his head and cocked his cap on one side.

"I think I've got the hang of what you mean, guv'nor," he said after a moment. "This is what it looks like to me. The chap in the taxi overpowered Miss Eileen, brought her somewhere out here, and left her in some old bungalow, perhaps, in charge of some other rotter. Then the taxi came back so as to be out of the way as quickly as possible."

"Exactly!" agreed Lee. "That, in fact, has certainly happened. Our dainty little friend is somewhere ahead—presumably not far off—being held a prisoner for one particular purpose. That purpose is to detain her until after Mrs. Dixon's trial to-morrow. But it may be more than that."

"What do you mean, guv'nor?"

"Her enemies may have some sinister designs," was the detective's significant reply. "You must remember, Nipper, that Miss Eileen has already treated several members of the combine drastically. They know her at her true worth, and it is quite possible that they have decided to act drastically. At all events, I am positive that she is in grave peril, and——"

"Look, guv'nor!" interjected Nipper suddenly. "What's that?"

The lad had turned, and his voice had a note of alarm in it. Not so very far away, and obviously close to the river, a lurid glare flickered and danced against the dark sky.

"A fire of some sort," said Lee. "Quite close, too, by the look of it." He suddenly started. "By James, can it be possible that there is any connection between that fire and the business which has brought us here? Come, Nipper, I am beginning to have terrible fears!"

Nipper was too startled to make any comment, but he at once followed his master, who had commenced to run forward, parallel with the river. The fire, whatever it was, seemed to be just round a bend in the river.

Lee hardly liked to formulate the dread suspicion which had found a place

in his mind. Was the fire connected with Eileen Dare? The detective half expected to find a riverside bungalow blazing—or perhaps a boathouse. But a few minutes later he beheld a spectacle which he had certainly not anticipated seeing.

Everything was deserted. The fire ahead was just on the other side of some tall trees, and the branches were outlined clearly and distinctly, and formed a striking picture. On one side lay the silent river, and on the other marshes and meadows.

Lee and Nipper hurried along the rough track, which at this point left the riverside and cut across, in order to lessen the distance, for a sharp bend occurred in the river at that point.

When the pair emerged in full view of the water again they were practically opposite the fire, and within a short distance of it. Both Lee and Nipper paused on the river bank and stared before them in wonderment.

Right out in midstream, drifting with the current, lay a small houseboat. Fore and aft it was blazing furiously, and the flames were leaping up round about the super-structure and threatening to consume it.

“Great Scott!” ejaculated Nipper, finding his voice.

“I am worried, young ’un—I am terribly afraid!” exclaimed Nelson Lee tensely. “That fire could not have originated by accident. How, otherwise, would the houseboat be afire both forward and astern? It was deliberately set ablaze, that I am sure of.”

Nipper turned deathly pale.

“And—and you think Miss—Miss Eileen——” He paused, panting.

“Yes, Nipper, I suspect base villainy and diabolical——”

Before Lee could proceed further Nipper tore his coat off and dashed to the water’s edge. But Lee clutched the youngster’s arm and held him back. Nipper turned an excited, furious face towards Nelson Lee.

“Let me go!” he shouted hotly. “Let me go, gov’nor! I am going to swim out and rescue Miss Eileen if she’s on board. Take your hands off!” He added, his voice becoming shrill with excitement.

“Calm yourself, my boy,” said Lee kindly. “You’ll only go to your death. I have a much better plan if you will only listen.”

Nipper was almost wild with anxiety, but he pulled himself together. The situation was indeed ghastly; and Nelson Lee and his young assistant had guessed the actual truth.

Ransome Wilmore had decided to act drastically!

He knew very well that Eileen was a constant danger, and so he and the rest of the combine had decided to end matters once and for all. They had made quite certain that the girl would be completely consumed, and that no traces would be left.

Shortly after Eileen had been bound Wilmore himself had told her of the fate which was to be hers. Eileen had heard the dread sentence calmly, and with only a flash of her wonderful eyes. She was brave, and if death was to come she could face it without flinching.

She was within the houseboat, and it had been set alight at both ends. The woodwork was so rotten that the fire would spread rapidly, and the flames would reach her within fifteen minutes. Anybody seeing the fire would certainly assume that the boat was deserted, and no attempt at rescue would be made.

Besides, this spot was deserted and lonely.

Wilmore had intended the fire to take place right against the river bank; but five minutes after he and his confederate had departed—for Wilmore himself had been one of the girl’s captors—the mooring ropes burned through and the houseboat had swung adrift.

It had been carried out by the current into midstream, and was now quite a considerable distance from its original mooring-place. Now the burning vessel was floating along, the flames leaping high, far from either bank.

And as Nelson Lee and Nipper paused to look at the houseboat, a startling thing happened. The old river-craft seemed to shiver for a moment, and then topple from side to side. Then, with a dull crash and a muffled roar of flames and sparks, it turned over on its side and collapsed into wreckage.

"Ah, the weir!" cried Nelson Lee, running forward. "It has toppled over the weir, Nipper! Thank Heaven for that! The flames are practically extinguished already. But what of Eileen?"

The houseboat had, in truth, fallen over the weir which lay just at this point on the river, and the sudden shock had strained the rotten wood to the utmost, and it had been unable to bear the pressure. The whole structure burst open, and sank almost within a minute.

The fire was effectually extinguished, only a few blazing portions of wood-work floating on the surface; but, as Nelson Lee had frantically asked, what of Eileen? What had happened to the girl?

Her fate was not decided yet. The fire, being confined, so far, to the two ends of the boat, she had not been touched. The heat within the vessel had been almost overpowering, but Eileen had been able to stand it. Her gag, in fact, acted as a very efficient muffler, and prevented her being choked by the smoke and fumes. To free herself was impossible, and she had resigned herself to the seeming inevitable.

And then the houseboat had crumpled up. Eileen had been flung down violently, and the next moment she found herself in icy water, with portions of hissing, charred wood all around her. The collapse of the vessel had freed her—had thrown her into the river.

But death seemed to be just as certain. The adventure was surely a terrible one. First of all fire had threatened to kill her; but now her end was to be brought about by drowning!

She could swim magnificently, but she was bound hand and foot, and tightly gagged. She could not even cry for help. Within a few minutes she would sink, and Ransome Wilmore's object would be attained just the same.

But as she turned in the water, and tossed her head, she saw two dim figures on the bank. Instantly the girl recognised the figures. They were those of Nelson Lee and Nipper!

But had they seen her?

CHAPTER VII.

Congratulations—Anxious Hours—The Rush to the Court.

RANSOME WILMORE emptied a full glass of neat brandy, and took a big pull at his cigar. His nerves were somewhat raw, but the spirit steadied them, and he laughed harshly and cruelly.

"Well, we must congratulate ourselves, my dear fellows," he said huskily. "An infernally rotten business, but it had to be done. Best to get it over straight away. That girl's out of our road for good, anyway."

Ford Abbercorn nodded rather shakily.

"I suppose we're safe enough?" he asked. "If we were found out——"

"Don't be a fool, Abbercorn!" interjected Sir Caleb Hurst. "The precautions you took absolutely assured immunity from discovery. Why, it can never be proved that there was anybody in the houseboat. There will be a bit of a sensation, no doubt, but the girl's disappearance will never be connected with the houseboat business."

The combine were congratulating themselves upon the success of the plan. They were all at Wilmore's house, and the hour was very late. They were positively sure that Eileen Dare had been burned to death by this time, and that the truth could never be revealed.

It had been better to act drastically, and without compunction. She would never trouble them any more, at all events. Although only a girl—a dainty, winsome little creature—she had been a sharp thorn in their side for months.

On the morrow the trial would go through successfully, and Wilmore would have nothing to fear.

"It was rather unwise of you to reveal your identity to the girl," said Abbercorn, as he lit a cigar. "She hadn't the least idea who we were until you did that, Wilmore. We were both disguised, and you ought to have checked that impulse."

Wilmore laughed coarsely.

"Bah! She's dead now," he said brutally. "I wanted to let her know why she was dying. Supposing she's alive, you say? She will at once have me arrested for attempted murder, knowing that I took part in the plot. But she's not alive, my good chap. She's at the bottom of the Thames!"

"Yes, I know that," was Abbercorn's reply. "We are safe enough. Give me some more brandy, will you? My nerves are still a bit jumpy."

They would have been still more jumpy if Abbercorn could have known the actual facts! For the scoundrels were congratulating themselves too early. Eileen Dare was not at the bottom of the Thames by any means!

But it had been touch and go.

Nelson Lee and Nipper had seen the helpless girl, but not until they had plunged into the water, and had been swimming for some little time.

At last, in desperation, the detective had dived into the river, and Nipper had followed his master's example. For several minutes they swam about aimlessly, searching. And then a sudden cry from Lee had brought Nipper to his side.

The youngster found that Lee had got hold of Eileen. The girl was still and deathly pale. She was unconscious, and had been on the point of drowning. It was curious that she should again experience such an adventure. At her first meeting with Mrs. Dixon the latter had been almost drowned. Now Eileen herself, while working on Mrs. Dixon's behalf, nearly suffered the same fate.

Within fifteen minutes she was lying inside a riverside bungalow, the owner of which, an elderly artist, had been only too willing to place at Lee's disposal. The girl's bonds were removed, and artificial respiration was resorted to. As quickly as possible Eileen's clothes were removed completely by the artist's housekeeper. Then, after she was in bed, Nelson Lee made a brief examination, for the detective was something of a doctor.

He found that Eileen was not in any danger, but she had had a narrow escape. And Nipper presently arrived with a medical man, whom he had routed out of bed. The latter individual looked serious after he had examined the patient, and said that she would probably not recover until many hours had passed.

She was utterly exhausted, and the shock had been a great one to her system. It was more than probable, the doctor declared, that Eileen would be unable to move for at least twelve hours.

This was rather disquieting news, for it would thus be impossible for Eileen to attend the court. She lay in bed, closely wrapped up, and the

old housekeeper proved to be a very able nurse. She was a wizened old countrywoman, and was full of pity for the girl.

The artist, whose name was Greenwood, was only too willing to do all he could, and Lee was very grateful to him. The detective and Nipper were supplied with dry clothes, and they were practically none the worse for their immersion.

The hours that followed were anxious ones.

Would Eileen recover in time to give her evidence?

If necessary, Lee himself would appear at the court in her place. But he was sure his evidence would not be nearly so weighty as that of Eileen. She had spent weeks in preparing, and had the whole story in readiness to tell. Nelson Lee, on the other hand, only knew all the main points. He had left details to Eileen, knowing full well that she was capable of dealing with the whole case.

Eileen, too, was responsible for the fraudulent transaction, and it was necessary that she should tell the story herself. Clever as Lee was, he was sure that the judge and jury would not listen to him as they would to Eileen. And it might possibly result in the girl herself being involved in great trouble.

In short, it was essential that Eileen should attend.

And yet here she was, unconscious, lying still and pale!

The detective was more put out than he would admit. The whole case, which had gone smoothly until this night, now promised to end in disaster. But Lee was keenly satisfied upon one point. If Eileen could only appear as a witness—if she could only recover in time—Ransome Wilmore's downfall would be dramatic and complete.

His very villainy would be apparent by the fact that he had attempted to kill the one witness who could upset the case. And he would, moreover, be arrested for attempted murder.

There was certainly reason for satisfaction in that thought. But dawn came at last, and still Eileen lay insensible. Lee, Nipper, and the housekeeper watched over her anxiously, and the doctor had promised to call early.

At about seven o'clock, when Nipper was nodding in his chair, the girl moved slightly, and uttered a deep sigh. In a second the watchers were on the alert, and they gathered round the bed with serious, eager faces. In spite of her paleness, Eileen looked truly lovely with her glorious hair straying over the snowy white clothes.

But, except for that one movement, and that one sigh, she remained the same. It was a sign, however, that she was gradually recovering. Lee had anticipated a quick return to consciousness, but the contrary proved to be the case. Eileen had suffered a double shock, and human endurance could not stand such a terrible adventure without serious effects.

The girl was strong, however—strong physically and mentally. Nine girls out of ten would have been prostrated for the whole following day. But Eileen made rapid progress once she regained her senses.

This was not until well into the forenoon. Gradually she had gathered her wits. The hours had seemed to pass quickly, and some time after the doctor had arrived Eileen was able to understand what was being said to her.

And then, by sheer will power, she forced herself to remember all that had occurred, and to regain full control of her brain. The colour returned to her cheeks, and the sparkle to her eyes.

Lee had been about to hurry off to the Central Criminal Court himself, but he had delayed his departure, hoping against hope that Eileen would

be able to attend. She was brave, and knew how essential it was that she should give her evidence.

"I am going to get up," she said at last. "I don't suppose I shall be myself, but——"

"I absolutely forbid you!" interrupted the doctor sternly. "Get up, indeed! My dear young lady, my orders are that you should remain in bed until this evening at the very earliest!"

Those words were quite sufficient. Since the doctor had given those orders Eileen promptly determined to get up without delay. She would prove to the doctor that she was made of stronger stuff than he imagined!

And so, with the housekeeper's help, she dressed herself, and was with Nelson Lee and Nipper in the sitting-room within half an hour. The doctor was aghast, but he had been unable to enforce his order. Eileen was looking pale and wan, but she smiled pluckily.

"Oh, I feel so absurd, Mr. Lee!" she exclaimed. "Whatever made me remain unconscious for so long? But what is the time? I have really no idea——"

Nelson Lee glanced at his watch quickly.

"It is high time we were off," he replied. "Indeed, the trial has been proceeding for over an hour, and it will be more a matter of luck than anything else if we arrive in time. It is wonderfully brave of you to——"

"Oh, no! I hate being ill," replied Eileen with a smile. "And I haven't thanked you yet, Mr. Lee, for saving my life."

"There is really no time for such trivialities," said the great detective crisply. "We must be off at once. I only hope that you will be able to

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hear the strain of the journey and the ordeal to follow. I shall never forgive myself if you break down."

A big motor-car was waiting outside, and within two minutes Nelson Lee, Nipper, and Eileen were rushing Londonwards with all speed. Would they be in time?

CHAPTER VIII.

Grave Fears—The Arrival of Eileen—Just Retribution—Finis.

THE Central Criminal Court was fairly full. It was by no means crowded, for the case had not attracted the public to any great extent. And the trial of Mrs. Philip Dixon for fraud had been proceeding for some little time.

The poor woman was nearly hysterical.

She was worried and anxious. Her chief witness had not arrived, and she began to fear that Eileen and Nelson Lee had deserted her—had left her to her fate. And insistent cross-examination had confused her until she scarcely knew what was happening.

The trial promised to be a short, uninteresting one. The conclusive evidence against the prisoner left no doubts in the minds of the judge and jury. And Wilmore's preparations were making things run smoothly.

The Crown counsel was a sharp-tongued man, but he honestly thought that the prisoner was a guilty woman. All the facts were dead against her. She had deliberately obtained a loan of three thousand five hundred pounds on securities which were faked and worthless.

And when Mrs. Dixon was called into the witness-box she refused to say how she had obtained the securities. If Eileen Dare deserted her, she at least would not give the girl away.

Ransome Wilmore sat in court, smiling cruelly to himself. This case was quite separate and apart from the first loan affair, and none of those facts would be revealed. Mrs. Dixon herself attempted to explain, but she became confused, and only succeeded in condemning herself.

Moreover, she admitted that she had known the securities to be false.

"Ah!" exclaimed the prosecuting counsel, after the trial had been proceeding for well over an hour. "You acknowledge that the securities were faked?"

Mrs. Dixon breathed rapidly.

"It was all done for a special purpose——"

"That is not an answer to my question," interjected counsel sharply.

"Did you know, when you presented the securities to Mr. Wilmore, that they were fraudulent?"

"Yes, I knew."

"Then you admit that you——"

"Oh, I don't admit anything!" cried Mrs. Dixon distractedly.

"Did you fake those securities yourself?" pressed counsel.

"No."

"Who did?"

"I—I—— Oh, I won't answer you! I refuse to say anything else!" cried the witness. "You are only confusing me. I won't answer any more questions."

"Of course, you must be aware that by refusing to answer you are only condemning yourself?" went on the prosecuting counsel. "I submit that you were assisted in the fraud by a confederate, and that you are now striving to conceal the latter's complicity in the plot. You will be well advised to speak the truth and nothing but the truth."

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Mrs. Dixon was almost too overcome to answer. The counsel whom Nelson Lee had briefed for her defence did his utmost; but with the principal witness absent the case was going entirely against the accused woman. Eileen Dare was the only witness, in fact—except, perhaps, Nelson Lee, who would corroborate her statements. And the absence of the pair of them was absolutely disastrous.

The counsel for the prosecution was interrupted in a really splendid flow of eloquence by a certain slight commotion at the doors of the court. He looked round, frowning, and saw three figures—a man, a youth, and a pale-faced girl. The man was engaged in a short argument with the door-keeper, who was obviously endeavouring to keep the newcomers out. And then there came a cry from the prisoner.

“Miss Dare—Mr. Lee!” she exclaimed huskily. “Thank Heaven, you have come!”

“What is this unseemly commotion?” began the judge. “I must insist——”

But then another interruption occurred.

Ransome Wilmore was standing upon his feet, as though turned into a statue. His coarse lips were apart, and his eyes bulged hideously from his head. There was an expression of abject fear and horror upon his face, which had turned to the colour of putty.

“Eileen Dare!” he croaked. “Am I mad? Am I dreaming——”

And then, in a moment, he knew that it was actual reality. He knew that the plot had failed, and that he himself would very soon find himself in the criminal dock. In one second he became converted into a raging madman, and he broke away and dashed for the exit. Escape! To remain would be fatal! He must escape!

“Stop that man!” roared Nelson Lee urgently.

“Collar him!” added Nipper, in shrill excitement.

Such proceedings in a criminal court were practically unheard of, and there was tremendous commotion and excitement. But the very fact that Ransome Wilmore had adopted such an attitude proved that there was something gravely wrong.

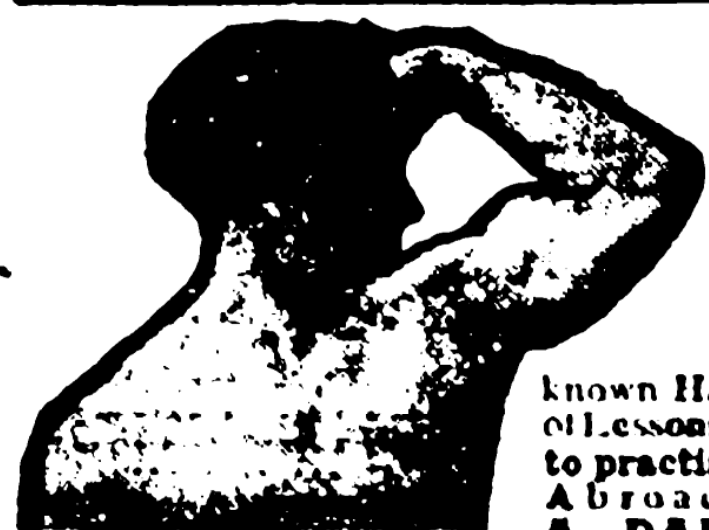
He was soon caught and held by two constables, and for a moment he raved with passionate fury. But it all seemed to consume itself, and he collapsed limply into a chair and sat shivering and shaking from head to foot.

And Eileen Dare took her position in the witness-box.

The court listened in enthralled silence as Eileen told her story. She was examined by Mrs. Dixon's counsel, but he put very few questions.

She was allowed to give her evidence in her own words and in her own way.

She told everything from the very start. At first the judge interrupted, and told Eileen that she must confine her evidence to the crime with which Mrs. Dixon was charged. But Eileen replied that it was essential for her to go back several months—to tell of a transac-



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tion with Ransome Wilmore which was absolutely connected with the affair of the fraudulent securities.

The girl detective was slightly pale from the effects of her terrible ordeal. But as she proceeded her cheeks gained colour, and her voice grew stronger. Contrary to Nelson Lee's expectations, Eileen's speech was restoring her, and not weakening her.

She told the court of the first loan of a thousand pounds, and then described how Mr. Dixon's brother had died, and how it had been impossible to repay the loan at the appointed time. During the past weeks Eileen had gathered all the intricate details of Wilmore's villainy.

She told how Mr. and Mrs. Dixon had been barely victimised, and how the blood-sucking moneylender had robbed them of their entire property. He had seen that they were simple folk, and he had prayed upon their fears and upon their ignorance of legal matters.

And then Eileen went on to state in round figures the precise amount which Wilmore had defrauded his victims of. As near as possible that amount was three thousand five hundred pounds.

"And so I helped Mrs. Dixon to regain the money," went on Eileen defiantly. "It was unlawful, I know; but the sum was rightfully the property of the Dixons, and the law could do nothing for them. I wanted every fact to be made public, and that is why the fraud was perpetrated. Mrs. Dixon is absolutely innocent. It was I who induced her to commit the crime, and I am ready and willing to pay the penalty."

But Eileen passionately declared that only justice had been done. Mrs. Dixon was to be pitied all through; she was innocent of conspiracy and deception, and had been treated cruelly and harshly by an infamous scoundrel who had treated hundreds of others in a similar manner.

Everybody in the court listened tensely and with great interest. Now and again angry glances were cast at the shrinking moneylender. And he himself sat as though dazed.

At last Eileen told how she had been kidnapped the previous night, and how Wilmore had deliberately attempted to murder her in a fiendishly cold-blooded manner. The moneylender uttered a hoarse cry, and fell back almost insensible. There were angry murmurs from the public gallery, and it was with difficulty that a stampede was avoided. Men and women wanted to clutch Wilmore and treat him as he deserved to be treated.

Eileen's evidence was startling and dramatic, and changed the aspect of the whole case—as Nelson Lee had known it would. The great detective himself entered the witness-box after Eileen had been cross-examined, and he bore out every one of her statements—acknowledging also that he had taken an active part in the conspiracy.

"It was a conspiracy to assist the ends of justice," Nelson Lee declared quietly. "The money is intact, and will be returned if the jury decides

against the prisoner. But if there is such a thing as justice, Mrs. Dixon will be allowed to keep that money, and will be set free this very day. It has been proved that Wilmore is a heartless scoundrel and a would-be murderer, and his very attitude at this present moment is ample proof that he is guilty."

Lee continued for some time, and then Nipper also gave evidence. This



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was very brief, and was mainly concerned with the events of the previous night. Almost immediately after Nipper had left the witness-box the foreman of the jury rose in his place.

"My lord, it would be a farce to continue this trial," he exclaimed. "The gentlemen of the jury are all of the same mind. The prisoner is not guilty!"

Ransome Wilmore staggered to his feet.

"They are all lies!" he snarled, livid with fury. "Hang you all, I say! I care not a snap of the fingers what you do to me! The evidence which has been given——"

He suddenly seemed to choke, for his passion was so great that the words would not come. And his face became absolutely purple—a striking contrast to the lividity of the moment before. It seemed as though all the blood in his body had rushed to his head, and he suddenly uttered a wild cry.

The next moment he fell writhing to the floor, and lay still and silent, with foam upon his lips.

.

But the moneylender was not dead. Retribution had descended upon him with striking fittingness. Upon being examined by a physician, it was found that Wilmore would be a hopeless paralytic for the rest of his life.

The sudden stroke, brought on by the great shock and from the effects of years of evil living, had dire results. The moneylender was paralysed from head to foot, and unable to move a limb. He would never recover, but would probably linger in misery for years.

It was just retribution; he had paid the penalty for his sins. And Mrs. Dixon was ultimately allowed to leave the court without a stain on her character. The judge, although sympathetic, made a few caustic remarks regarding the manner in which Mrs. Dixon's troubles had been made public.

"There were other ways in which the poor woman could have obtained justice," said the judge gravely. "The British law does not allow a man to obtain such huge interest as Wilmore seems to have wrung from his victims. Whether he had safeguarded himself or not makes no difference; he could have been proceeded against for unlawful practices, and Mr. Nelson Lee made a serious mistake in lending himself to a conspiracy which was nothing less than a criminal fraud. He did so, I am well aware, from excellent motives, and I appreciate the difficulties of the situation. Nevertheless, I simply cannot countenance such a proceeding, and Mr. Lee will be well advised to act more cautiously in future. Under the exceptional circumstances the matter will be overlooked, and I am more than

(Continued on page iv. of cover.)

HAVE YOU HAD YOUR COPY OF

ANSWERS

The Popular Penny Weekly?

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minus the title lettering, and signed by Mr. Arthur Jones himself; suitable for framing, will be presented to the reader who sends in, not later than November 29, the largest number of New Readers enlisted by himself. Each of these new recruits must sign the form below and give it to the prospective competitor.

Thus, for instance, if one reader enlisted a certain number of new recruits, he would be required to send in the corresponding number of signed coupons, not later than the given date, to: The Editor, "The Nelson Lee Library," Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.

Everyone will, I am sure, make an attempt to win such a prize. As to the picture itself, it suffices to give the measurements—15 in. by 11 in.

No matter how many readers you get, send their names and addresses in, accompanied, of course, by your own. No one boy or girl stands any better chance than another.

<p>I (Name)</p> <p>Of (Address)</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Have read No. of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY," introduced to me by my fellow reader, whose name and address are written below:</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>No. 75 — November 11th, 1916.</p>
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The Editor's Decision is Final.

pleased to see the downfall of a scoundrel who was a disgrace to his country."

Nelson Lee accepted the "drubbing" in good part. He knew well enough that the learned judge was quite correct in his observations. Lee had acted absolutely in defiance of the law, and he had really expected to be severely lectured.

But, as everything had turned out well, it was of little consequence. Nelson Lee himself was quite surprised that the judge had not been even more severe. As the detective had anticipated, Mrs. Dixon was forced to surrender the money she had obtained, and the whole affair was closely investigated.

Finally the Dixons obtained the whole of the money which had been unlawfully wrested from them by Ransome Wilmore. He was only allowed to keep the original loan and the rightful interest. Every other farthing which the moneylender had obtained from the sale of the property was returned.

And so, on the whole, Nelson Lee and Eileen Dare were greatly elated at the satisfactory result. The girl, especially, was pleased. For on this occasion she had not only dealt with another of her enemies, but she had been instrumental in righting a grave and terrible wrong. The combine was suffering on every hand owing to Eileen's great campaign.

They had brought her father to disgrace and death—but she was exacting the price!

THE END.

Your Editor regrets that, owing to lack of space, the usual instalment of the serial, "The Island of Gold," must unavoidably be held over until next week.

NEXT WEEK!

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