

# NELSON LEE

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## THE HOUSE OF HAZARD.

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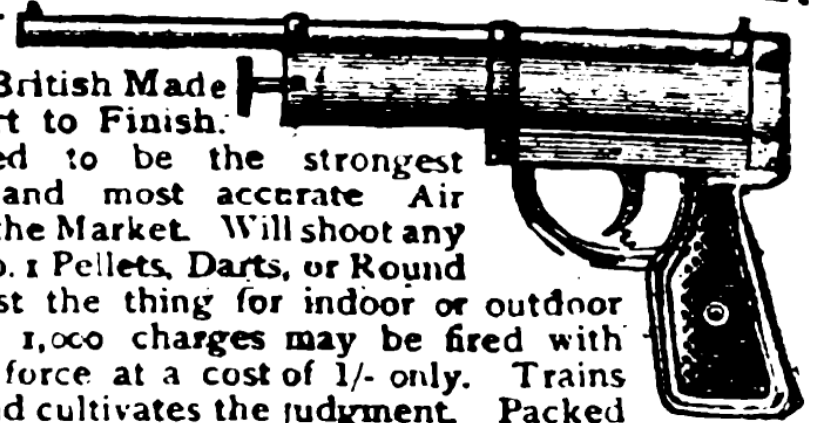
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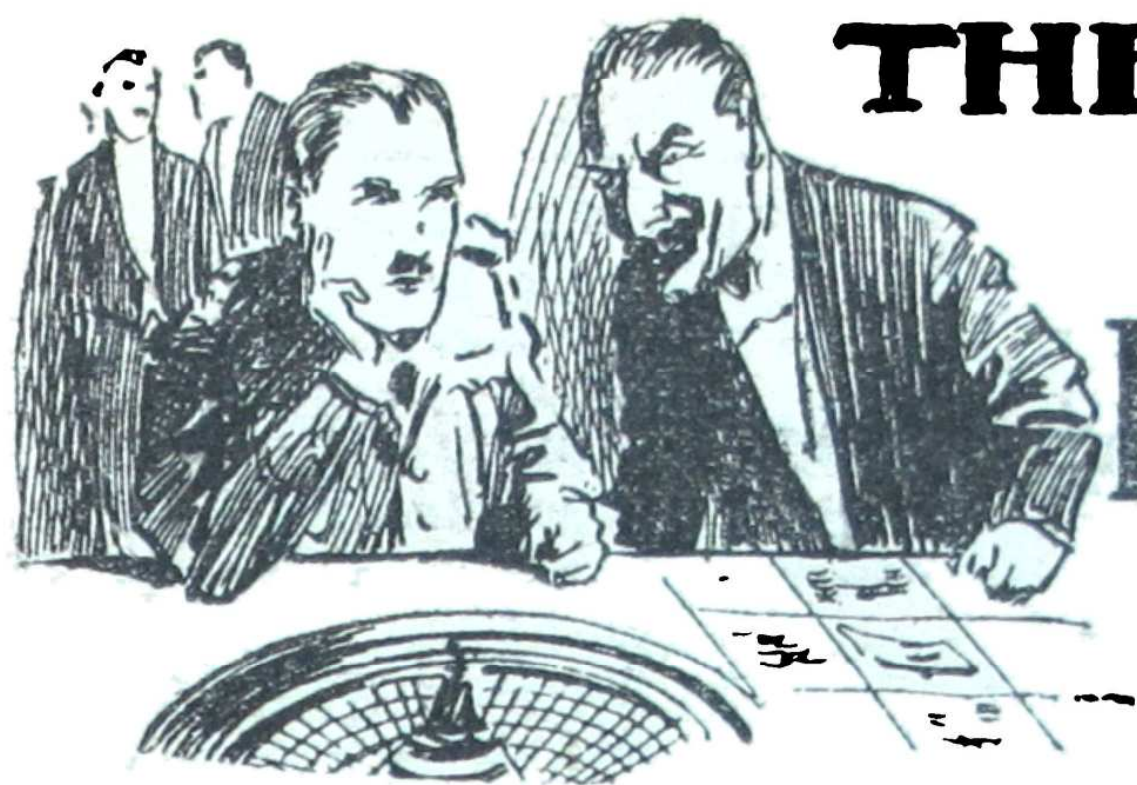
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## THE PROLOGUE.

### I.

#### In the Trenches—A Letter to Scotland Yard.

LIEUTENANT HAROLD PAGETT thoughtfully bit the end of his pen, pursed his lips, and then went on writing.

It was a stylographic pen, and the lieutenant was writing his letter upon his knee, using an old box as a rest. The apartment in which he sat was not exactly palatial, neither was it of large dimensions. The sole furniture consisted of two empty cartridge boxes, and a rough table made of old pieces of wood. This was situated in the centre, but as dusk was coming on, the lieutenant was sitting near the doorway writing his letter.

To tell the truth, he was in a dug-out, a short distance behind the front line trenches, somewhere on the Somme front. The evening was cold, and just a little frosty, but Lieutenant Pagett was well clothed and quite comfortable.

The guns were roaring tremendously—guns of every description. Trench mortars, howitzers, field guns—all contributed to the din; and every now and again the heavy, deep boom of "Grandmother" signified that another tremendous fifteen-inch projectile was being hurled on to the Germans. "Grandmother" is the pet name of the huge British fifteen-inch guns; and, judging from her voice, she was exceedingly hale and hearty.

It was not an exceptionally heavy bombardment, but just the usual cannonade, which went on as a matter of course. The Germans were replying rather vigorously this evening, but their fire was absolutely inefficient when compared to that of the British guns.

Aeroplanes of the Royal Flying Corps were continually directing the fire of the batteries. The German aircraft scarcely ever dared show their noses over the British lines, and, consequently, their gunfire was not nearly so effective as our own.

But Lieutenant Pagett, sitting calmly at the door of his dug-out, scarcely noticed the constant booming. He was not inconvenienced in the least, for he was well accustomed to the incessant hammering.

He finished the letter, placed it in an envelope, and stuck it up. It was just a cheery note to his parents, telling them the news, and advising them not to worry. But he did not put his pen and paper away; he sat there very thoughtful, trying to make up his mind upon a certain point.

Pagett was a tall, well-built young fellow, with dark hair and a clean-cut face. For some reason, however, his eyes were rather hollow and his expression almost haggard. Yet he had only returned, a couple of days before, from six days' leave in England. And his dull, despairing expression was not the outcome of fear or nervousness. For Lieutenant Pagett had already proved himself on the battlefield, and was an officer of undoubted courage and sterling worth.

As he sat thinking, amid the roar of the guns, he lit a cigarette, and rested his elbows upon the box which lay on his knees. He was moody and troubled and undecided. He was debating whether or not he should take a certain course.

Lieutenant Pagett knew that a general order had been issued for a big assault on the German positions at dawn. It was to be quite an extensive affair, and the guns would soon commence a terrific bombardment in earnest.

In just over ten hours at most the assault would take place. Pagett was quite sure that great success would be attained. There was a general confidence amongst the troops, in fact, that the British line would be advanced by a couple of thousand yards or so in this particular sector.

This would deprive the enemy of a certain strategic position, and would lead to other successes later on. Every Tommy in the trenches was calmly awaiting the signal for the dash, and although many of them would be wounded—and some, indeed, killed—they were perfectly cheerful.

Although the assault was to be somewhat extensive, it was, after all, only a local affair, and the commanding officer was as full of confidence as his men. Pagett was to take part in the attack, and he was certain of one thing.

He was certain that he would go to his death.

He had no particular reason for being so positive on that grim point. But there was a premonition within him that when he led his men into the fray he would fall. The thought did not unnerve him. He was quite calm, and prepared to accept whatever might come. He was a soldier, and to die for his country would be an honourable and a glorious death.

He would die—he would never see old England again.

That was the thought which continually throbbed through his brain. In some strange, unaccountable way he was convinced of his fate—and was not afraid.

But as he sat smoking he was certainly troubled and worried. And the matter which was concerning him so gravely was one connected, not with his own affairs, but with the well-being of others—total strangers to him.

He had been led into a piece of criminal folly, and his sense of right and wrong told him to prevent the same thing occurring to others. There was not much time left for him to decide, for he would presently be on duty; and then, after that, the assault would take place.

He tossed his cigarette down impatiently.

"Hang it all!" he muttered, "I'll write the letter. That confounded brute shall not be allowed to ensnare other poor fools; What does it matter? I may be dead long before the letter reaches Scotland Yard; and I shall die knowing that I have done some good, at all events!"

And, without further hesitation, he commenced writing. Now that he

had made up his mind definitely, the puckered frown vanished from his brow, and he seemed altogether more easy in mind.

The truth of the thing was very simple. Just recently Lieutenant Pagett had been home to England on leave. He had spent most of his time in London, and had been a mad fool. He knew that quite well; he admitted it freely.

At the actual time he had not realised what he was doing; but he realised it fully enough now. It was a grim, pitiful story—and there was nothing new in it. Other men had acted in the same way scores and hundreds of times before.

When Pagett had left the front in order to take his six days' leave he had been a comparatively rich man. Now he was penniless; now he was ruined, and disgraced in the eyes of his own family.

It could all be summed up in one word—gambling.

Yet, as a matter of fact, Pagett was quite a level-headed young fellow, and had hitherto risked no more than a few pounds on an occasional game of bridge or solo whist. He really disliked gambling, and that made him all the more enraged with himself for having fallen.

In short, on the second day of his leave, he had made friends with a well-known man about town named Singleton. Singleton was a middle-aged man, and was known in every fashionable resort—in Biarritz, in Nice, in Monte Carlo—in fact, in every place where rich men of the world gather.

And Singleton had taken the young officer to the house of Sir Caleb Hurst, the well-known sporting baronet. Singleton had told the lieutenant that he was going to have a bit of excitement—that he was, in short, to have a taste of Monte Carlo on a small scale.

Pagett had laughed at the time, and had not taken things very seriously. But Singleton had sworn him to secrecy, saying that it would be against his own interests to breathe a word of what he saw in Hurst's house. And Pagett, having sworn, was taken into the building and introduced to Sir Caleb himself.

The lieutenant thought it rather a good joke, and enjoyed himself immensely to begin with. What he found out did not strike him at the time as being at all shady or underhand.

For Sir Caleb Hurst's palatial residence was really nothing less than a high-class gambling den—a kind of miniature replica of the notorious casino at Monte Carlo. It was a complete gamblers' paradise, and the men who gathered there were all hardened gamblers—that is, with the exception of the young fools who were fleeced of all they possessed, who deliberately and madly gambled their fortunes away.

Lieutenant Pagett had been one of those young fools. For the time being he had been completely lifted out of himself; he had been caught in a mad swirl, and had been carried along against his own better judgment. It was only after the dreadful harm had been wrought that he fully realised what he had done.

On three successive nights Pagett had visited Sir Caleb Hurst's residence. On the first night he had lost heavily; on the second night he hoped to make good his losses; and on the third night he left the place penniless. It was a swift downfall, and it was then that the lieutenant's eyes were opened.

Within the gambling house everything was gay, cheerful, and lively. Roulette, trente-et-quarante, baccarat, faro, and all manner of gambling games went on throughout the whole of every night.

Yet, so effective were Sir Caleb's precautions, that the police had not the

slightest suspicion against him. Hurst was a rich man—and his great fortune was nothing but the accumulation of his victims' losses. Within that gay casino scores of men had been broken and ruined.

Pagett had possessed a considerable income, but those three visits to Sir Caleb's house had left him absolutely penniless. He had gambled every farthing of his fortune away—mainly at the roulette table. The gambling spirit took possession of Pagett for the time being, and he was blind to his losses, and to the utter insanity of his actions, until it was too late.

His friend Singleton had not come near him the day following—for the lieutenant's blood was sucked. He was squeezed dry, and of no further use. All that he had possessed was now helping to inflate Sir Caleb Hurst's banking account.

Those three nights of madness were like some ghastly dream. On the next day Pagett could scarcely realise that he had been such a pitiful fool. But yet the harm was done, and there was no way in which he could be avenged. Indeed, it was now impossible for him to re-enter Sir Caleb's house. He had been fleeced, and was of no further use.

Pagett had spent the most miserable day of his life. He could see now to what a base use he had put his leave. When he had left the trenches he had intended staying with his parents in Warwickshire; but he had met Singleton, and the latter had secured him, body and soul.

The lieutenant was furious at the time. He had thought of facing Sir Caleb Hurst and demanding reparation. But then the young officer realised that Sir Caleb was not to blame; it was his business to fleece the fools who came to him. Pagett was to blame himself, and he knew it only too well.

But he was positively sure that his supposed friend Singleton was really an outside confederate, whose business it was to lure rich men into the gambling den. Singleton had deceived him all along.

For Pagett was convinced that cheating was rife in Sir Caleb Hurst's precious club. But what could the lieutenant do? He had actually met Singleton later on, and the man had not recognised him.

Pagett went down to his father's country seat, and told the whole miserable story. His father, a rich, aristocratic old gentleman, had been shocked and disgusted. He had always been proud of his son; he had always looked upon him as the very model of a young British officer.

And the old gentleman was furious. Then and there he ordered Pagett from the house, and told him to go his own way. The young fellow went quietly enough, and in a dazed state. His brain seemed dull and listless; he could not grasp the fact that he was disowned by his own father, and sent forth.

This blow was a far greater shock than the previous one. The loss of his fortune had been terrible enough in all conscience, but to be disgraced and dishonoured—oh, it was appalling! His mother was inclined to be merciful, but the old gentleman sternly refused to allow Harold Pagett to remain. He had acted disgracefully, and he should be made to suffer.

And so the lieutenant had returned to the battle-front miserable, dejected, and with his brain crowded with bitter thoughts. His fellow-officers could not help noticing the hollow appearance of his eyes, and his drawn, haggard expression.

Truth to tell, Pagett cared little what became of him.

What had he to live for now? He did not possess a penny-piece, and his parents had cast him out. When he learned that a big attack on the

German positions was to be made, he was glad—very glad. Probably he would be killed, and that would end it all. He would wipe out the disgrace by dying an honourable death.

And then, strangely, insistently, the thought took possession of him that he was doomed. There would be no "if" about it. When he led his men forward he would fall. The premonition was strong, and Lieutenant Pagett knew that it would actually occur when the time came.

But the knowledge that he was to die did not unnerve him. On the contrary, he almost felt glad. Death would be the best and easiest way out of his miserable troubles. He was no coward, as his calm thoughts proved; but he felt that it would be far better to have everything brought to an abrupt finish straight away.

Pagett did not actually intend to throw his life away—that, indeed, would be cowardly. But, somehow, the impression was firmly fixed in his brain that he would not live through the attack. And as he moodily pondered over his recent foolishness—as he sat in his dug-out, taking a well-earned rest—he decided to take the opportunity and write to his parents.

He had done so, and had expressed in simple, plain words how disgusted he was with himself, and confessed that he had acted like a fool and a blackguard. He hinted at the impending assault, and hinted also that he would probably fall. His parents would thus be better prepared for the official communication when it arrived. The lieutenant could even picture his name appearing in the casualty list; he could picture his dear mother gazing at it through a haze of tears.

After he had written that letter his thoughts travelled back to those three mad, whirling nights at Sir Caleb Hurst's house. It was monstrous—it was ghastly! He knew that he was going to die, and he felt that it was his duty to bring Sir Caleb's vile gambling hell to an end.

And, after much thought, Pagett decided to write to Scotland Yard—to inform the Chief Commissioner of that celebrated police institution of the precise nature of the scoundrelly baronet's establishment. At the outset Pagett had hesitated, fearing that the act of turning informer would be betraying a trust, for he had sworn to Singleton to reveal nothing.

But, upon due consideration, the young lieutenant decided that the oath he had taken was not valid—that it counted for nothing. And Pagett was quite right. Singleton had deliberately lured him into that house of crime, for it was not a "straight" gambling house. Indeed, no gambling house could be honest, and it was certainly against the law.

But Pagett knew that he had been tricked. He knew that his money had been taken from him by cheating. The roulette table was not genuine—that it to say, the wheel was capable of being controlled by the croupier. It had not even been a fair gamble. In short, Pagett's fortune had been stolen from him—and he knew that the same thing was going on night after night—week after week.

Other innocent fools were being caught in the meshes, and Pagett felt that, before he died, it was up to him to put a stop to the villainy.

And there was only one way in which to set to work. That way was to write to Scotland Yard and tell the authorities exactly what was going on. Others at least should not share the cruel fate which had overtaken him. Pagett himself would never return to England—he was convinced of that—or he would have waited. He would have laid the information himself, openly and boldly. He was, indeed, doing so now—but by letter.

The lieutenant had not the slightest compunction about taking such a course. He knew that there was nothing whatever dishonourable in the act. He had been tricked and robbed, and it was only just that the

scoundrels should be brought to book. Moreover, Sir Caleb Hurst would be prevented from continuing his questionable means of livelihood.

Pagett finished the letter, placed it in an envelope, and then stuck it up. After that he lit another cigarette, and rose to his feet. There was a fixed look of quiet determination in his eyes.

"I'm ready now!" he told himself calmly. "At dawn I go to my death, and I hope I shall die like an honourable soldier. At all events, the stain will be wiped out!"

## II.

### The Attack—How Lieutenant Harold Pagett Fell.

**B**OOM! Bcom! Boom!  
The guns were roaring stupendously. It was just dawn, and the great preliminary bombardment which preceded the assault had commenced.

For hours grim preparations had been going on. But at last all was ready—all had been ready for some little time before dawn. Lieutenant Pagett was at his post, and he was anxious for the first light to come—he was anxious to have everything ended.

He had waited in the darkness, and had realised what a really amazing thing this assault was. If he lived through the attack—and he was sure he would not—he knew that that last hour before the battle would leave an unforgettable impression upon his mind.

Quiet, cheery infantry lined the forward trenches, busily rehearsing their final orders, and making every preparation—locking home their bayonets, seeing that bombs had been given out, and all the rest of the grim business. These men knew well enough that terrible danger lay ahead, but they were cheerful and even eager.

The gunners, too, waited idly before silent batteries. They were anxious to get to work, and were only awaiting the order. And there were dressing-stations, with skilful doctors at hand, ready for the merciful work of bandaging the wounds of the many men who would fall. And everything was silent.

It was the same behind the front lines—everybody was waiting. Columns of foot soldiers were stationed beside the dark roads—guns and waggons, too. Scarcely anything moved, and a dull silence oppressed the whole scene. The men were wearing their broad-brimmed steel helmets, and they were weighed down with packs and cartridges. There were rows and rows of these shadowy forms; limbers, with dim figures seated upon them. And beyond, another battalion of infantry were stationed beside a hedge. And then there was another battalion, and infantry was waiting everywhere. It seemed as though there was nothing but troops everywhere, and on all sides.

One of the many ammunition parks was getting ready for the strenuous work to come. There were motor-lorries loaded up, and trains—all ready to commence a continuous flow of shells to the countless batteries when the signal came.

Near the front-line trenches, too, there were numbers of great armoured motor-cars—motor-forts, as they are called. The general name for them among Tommies is "tanks." But these tanks, with their armour-plated sides, caterpillar wheels, and deadly guns, are formidable weapons of warfare. In previous attacks to this one the Germans had learned to fear them; the Huns had found that the great armoured cars were grim factors to be reckoned with. And these, too, were merely waiting to precede the infantry in the great assault.



And in the dawn curiously shaped observation balloons ascended easily into the heavens. And the sky became lighter and lighter; it was a dull, leaden sky, but no rain was falling, and the air was, indeed, a trifle frosty.

And then, all in a second, it seemed, the guns commenced their tumult. It was like something from another world. The bombardment was absolutely appalling. And yet, if Lieutenant Pagett had been in a position to view the whole scene from a high point of ground, there would have been very little to see.

The countryside ahead was barren and treeless. Right in front lay the ruins of a once peaceful village. Now it was nothing but torn and wrecked masonry. No living thing was to be seen; but everywhere the explosions of the British shells was apparent. The destruction they caused amongst the German trenches must have been appalling.

Gigantic howitzers roared and spat flames. These were the chief cause of the awful din. The other guns, powerful enough, seemed almost insignificant by comparison.

And overhead shrieked the shells. The whole countryside along the entire line was pierced by deadly flashes of fire—thousands of them. But each of those flashes meant that a shell had been flung upon the Germans—there to wreak destruction.

And the destination of these shells was clearly within view—it was nothing but a mass of dense smoke.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The bombardment went on furiously, and overhead the British aeroplanes flew beneath the high clouds. There were great numbers of them, directing the fire of the British batteries. Almost continually shrapnel burst around the aircraft. One was hit, and swooped down, to fall a mass of wreckage in the German lines. Another was hit, but the pilot managed to bring the machine to earth in safety behind the British trenches.

For the most part, however, the aircraft soared overhead regardless of the German fire. White puffs of smoke burst on every side of them; but the machines paid no heed to the enemy's futile efforts.

The German aircraft, on the other hand, took care to remain behind their own lines. And the enemy's batteries, in consequence, were unable to direct their fire accurately.

It was all a wonderful picture—a grim, terrible scene. But not a single British Tommy had the slightest doubt as to the ultimate result. A certain number of German positions were to be captured, and captured they must be!

And the eager infantry swarmed over the trench parapets and started off on their perilous journey across "no man's land" to the German lines. It was not a headlong dash—a glorious, sweeping charge. That was impossible, for the ground which separated British and Germans was nothing but a mass of shell-pitted waste land. Craters were everywhere, and it was almost impossible to run.

The infantry advanced slowly, methodically, but with grim purpose. And ahead of them went the lumbering, crawling, armoured cars. It was almost a weird spectacle. Now and again a man would fall; a group would suddenly become thinned; and sometimes men simply disappeared. They had been picking their way onwards one moment, and the next they were at the bottom of a shell crater, either wounded or dead.

And, right in the forefront, Lieutenant Harold Pagett was leading his men—encouraging them and keeping them cheerful. Several around him had already fallen, but up to the present he was unscathed. In a way, Pagett was surprised, for he had expected to fall before this.

But he went on, and at last the first of the enemy trenches was reached. It was simply levelled by gunfire, and scarcely a living thing was in it. German dead lie everywhere, but the living had fled.

Just ahead, however, beyond the battered ground that had once been a trench a small hillock arose, surmounted by a pile of ruins.

And all in a moment a harsh, coughing rattle made itself heard, and three men by Pagett's side fell—wounded. And he himself felt a sudden, burning pain in his left arm.

He knew well enough that a German machine gun was at work, and that a bullet had pierced his arm. But he scarcely noticed it, and was only filled with wonderment that he was still alive. But the battle had only just commenced—his premonition of death would yet be fulfilled.

All thoughts of death were soon banished, however, and the fire of the battle entered the lieutenant's soul; he was excited, eager, and anxious to push on ahead. There was a ridge here, behind which the British Tommies crouched.

And as Pagett peered over he suddenly uttered a sharp exclamation. Away to the left a party of infantrymen had appeared, led by a man who was one of Pagett's greatest friends. Captain Royce was the officer's name—a splendid fellow in every way. He went on fearlessly, and Pagett's exclamation was caused by that which was imminently expected. Captain Royce threw up his arms and fell to the ground. Others fell, too, and the rest took refuge behind the friendly ridge. And, meanwhile, the German machine gun kept up its savage cough.

"Poor old chap!" muttered Pagett between his teeth. "By Heaven! What an infernal shame! And Royce was one of the best fellows——"

Pagett lifted his head above the ridge, careless of hissing bullets. He had seen a movement, and a moment later he knew that Captain Royce was not dead. He was, in fact, merely wounded in the right leg. But the wound was severe, and he could not even crawl. And he lay there, under the direct fire of the enemy's machine gun.

"Poor old Royce!" muttered Lieutenant Pagett tensely. "By Jove, I'll not let him lay there to be riddled!"

And the lieutenant leapt up and dashed across the rough ground to his superior officer's side. In that moment he never thought of the danger; he thought of nothing whatever except that a splendid man was in imminent peril of being killed. And so he had rushed to the rescue—rushed into the face of a deadly, ghastly fire.

It was one of the bravest acts ever attempted.

The Tommies behind the ridge sent up a rousing, hearty cheer. But every man knew that it was a hopeless task. Lieutenant Pagett had merely flung his own life away.

The lieutenant's act was not one of self destruction; he had not deliberately thrown himself forward for the purpose of being killed. All his former thoughts were banished in the heat of battle.

His only idea was one of fury—fury that a good man like Royce should have fallen, and should be in instant danger of death. Pagett was thrilled through and through with the excitement of it all, and he dashed forward impulsively, never thinking of the danger.

The guns were still roaring terrifically from behind the British lines, and on every side our troops were hotly engaging the enemy. Over a thousand yards of German trenches had already been captured; but here, at this particular point, the Huns were secure in their little stronghold; their deadly machine guns made it impossible for the British Tommies to capture the hillock without serious loss. To the right one of the huge

armoured motor-forts was lumbering its way across the shell-pitted ground, and when the tank got to close quarters the hillock would soon be captured.

But long before then Captain Royce would be dead, for the German bullets spattered down in a continuous fusillade. Every man who saw Pagett dash out shook his head solemnly, and expected the lieutenant to fall.

But, strangely enough, Pagett did not fall.

He scrambled over the shell craters, and at last was bending over the helpless form of Captain Royce. He was quite conscious, and amazed to see Pagett there.

"Scott! You young idiot!" gasped Royce. "What the thunder made you come out here? You'll never get back, man! You'll never——"

"Rot, sir!" interjected Pagett cheerfully. "I saw you lying here, so I thought I'd just give you a hand. Left leg, isn't it?"

Captain Royce nodded painfully.

"That's right," he replied. "Can't move it a confounded inch. But clear off without me, Pagett. No need for us both to go under. Likely as not you'll get potted as it is. That infernal machine gun——"

A bullet struck the captain on the head, and he fell back limply. Pagett himself was not touched, although he was in the midst of a most deadly fire. A furious oath rose to his lips as he saw Royce drop back; but a moment's examination showed that the bullet had merely grazed the scalp, and had stunned the captain. He was still very much alive.

Lieutenant Pagett uttered a short, contemptuous laugh. He shook his fist defiantly at the hidden German gunners. Then he bent down, and with great difficulty hoisted the fallen officer upon his back. Another cheer went up from behind the ridge as Pagett came across the torn ground with his heavy burden.

"By gosh!" ejaculated a burly corporal, scratching his head under his steel helmet. "I reckon that's about the coolest thing I've ever seen. Nothing less than the good old V.C. for that——"

"Don't you talk afore your time, mate!" growled another Tommy. "He'll never get over this 'ere ridge—— You mark my words—— Lummy, why he ain't been potted already fair knocks me!"

It was, indeed, amazing.

Slowly, staggeringly, the lieutenant came nearer and nearer to safety. And all the while bullets from the hidden machine gun hissed about his ears and over his head. He seemed to bear a charmed life, and was not touched.

And yet he had actually wanted to die! Before the battle he had been positive that he would die. And yet he was coming on as though there were no such things as German machine guns in existence. Not that this particular instance was unprecedented. On many an occasion men have passed through the most appalling fire unscathed—and only Heaven above knows why it was so.

According to every law of chance Lieutenant Pagett should have been riddled long since. But, there it was—he was only grazed! Two bullets had already relieved him of a couple of inches of skin; but the wounds were trivial. As he came on, panting and determined, he heard the bullets hissing past him; he heard one glance off his helmet. But he was not touched in a vital point. And, amazingly enough, Captain Royce was also untouched.

And then another cheer arose. Pagett's extraordinary act of conspicuous bravery had not been in vain. He reached the summit of the ridge, and at once two ordinary soldiers dashed up and relieved him of his burden.

Royce was conscious again by this time, and he lay back behind the shelter and gave a plucky smile.

"By Jingo, I never expected to get back here again!" he muttered thickly. "You're a stunning chap, Pagett— Good heavens!"

The exclamation came out in a gasp of alarm and anger, for even as Lieutenant Harold Pagett was about to leap down into the shelter, one of the smaller German shells burst quite close by with a deafening report. The Tommies behind the ridge were protected from the flying death; but Pagett was in the open!

Untouched by the machine gun bullets, he now fell a victim to the bursting shell. It was a piece of ghastly luck, indeed. The lieutenant did not utter a sound, but merely toppled over, rolled down the slope, and came to a stop practically at the feet of Captain Royce—a mere crumpled-up mass of humanity.

Lieutenant Harold Pagett had performed one of the bravest deeds of the war—but he had paid the price.

The price, however, was not an exorbitant one, for the brave young officer had not been killed. At first it had been thought that he was shattered to pieces. But when he had been conveyed to the dressing-station the surgeons soon discovered that Pagett was not even seriously injured.

A piece of shell had struck him slantingly across the shoulder, causing an ugly wound. His arm was broken, and he was suffering from a serious scalp wound, which had bled profusely.

But not one of the injuries was vital, and it was certain that he would recover in due course.

And the hillock was wrested from the Germans within twenty minutes of Pagett's courageous act. One of our tanks lumbered up, butted its way through the defences, and instantly captured over one hundred and fifty prisoners!

The advance along the whole sector of front was a glorious success, and the Germans lost several valuable strategical positions.

And Lieutenant Pagett, in spite of his premonition—in spite of the fact that he had almost wanted death—was still alive. And he had wiped out the stain!

He had proved himself to be a hero.

And instead of death being his reward, it was certain that he would be given the Victoria Cross!

END OF THE PROLOGUE.

## CHAPTER I.

### Nelson Lee is Doubtful—Eileen Dare—Lieutenant Pagett Calls.

"**S**IT down, Fuller. Make yourself at home; those cigars at your elbow are fairly decent, I think. Try one."

"Thanks," said Detective-Inspector Fuller. "I will."

Nelson Lee leaned back in his chair easily.

"Anything doing at present?" he asked. "Is this merely a friendly call, or have you come for advice? I'm always ready——"

"No, I don't want advice, Lee," interjected the inspector. "And this call isn't exactly a 'drop-in' visit, either. I thought you might like to hear of a police-raid which is to take place to-night."

Fuller helped himself to one of Nelson Lee's matches, and lit the very excellent cigar which he had just clipped. Then he turned in his chair a little, and faced the great criminologist.

It was just before noon, and Gray's Inn Road was murky and slushy. The day, according to Nipper, was a regular beast. It was, indeed, decidedly unpleasant—a fine drizzle was falling from leaden skies, and everybody and everything was damp. The roads and pavements were coated with miserable slush.

Detective-Inspector Fuller happened to be passing down Holborn, and he remembered that Nelson Lee's consulting-room was rather comfortable. Moreover, he had an odd half-hour to spare. And so he had turned up Gray's Inn Road, and had found both Nelson Lee and Nipper doing "office work," as the latter called it.

Lee had nothing particular on hand, and he saw no reason why he should not remain cosily at home. The consulting-room was certainly cheery, and Detective-Inspector Fuller stretched his legs, and placed his feet upon the fender.

The fire was blazing with a grateful warmth, and the cigar was soothing. The inspector was rather glad that he had found an excuse to justify his visit. He was a very capable member of the Criminal Investigation Department, Scotland Yard, and he knew Nelson Lee rather intimately.

"Yes, a police raid, Lee," he went on. "Rather a big affair, I believe. Thought you might like to know."

"I can't say that I am particularly interested in police raids, my dear Fuller," was Nelson Lee's reply. "But what kind of a raid is it to be? Are you after some crooks down in the East End——"

Fuller shook his head.

"Precisely the opposite," he interjected. "I won't explain how the Yard received its information, for that isn't allowed—and, as a matter of absolute fact, I don't positively know. But it's not an East End job at all. The scene is Jermyn Street, West."

"Dear me! And who are you going to raid in Jermyn Street?"

"A baronet," said Fuller easily.

Nelson Lee raised his eyebrows.

"A baronet, eh?" he repeated. "Really, my dear fellow, you are aiming high. And who is this titled gentleman who has been getting into bad odour with the police? Baronets are not often raided."

"Thought you'd be interested," was the inspector's smiling comment. "You know, Lee, I rather enjoy surprising you. You're such a beggar for surprising the Yard that it's a real pleasure to retaliate now and again."

Lee chuckled.

"Well, go ahead, old man," he said. "What's the surprise?"

"Hang it all! I've sprung that already!" protested Fuller. "That's the surprise—that we are going to raid a baronet's house in Jermyn Street!"

"Really?" murmured Lee. "I'm sorry, Fuller. I thought you had something else up your sleeve. However, Jermyn Street is not often honoured by a police raid. I suppose that is a considerable surprise. But who's the evildoer?"

Detective-Inspector Fuller tapped the ash from his cigar.

"A man well known in all sporting circles," he replied grimly. "A man who hasn't had a breath of suspicion against him hitherto. In short, Lee, the house that we are to raid belongs to Sir Caleb Hurst!"

"Sir Caleb Hurst!" repeated Nelson Lee quickly.

"Ye gods!" muttered Nipper, speaking for the first time.

"Ah! There you are—there you are!" ejaculated the inspector. "You both seem a bit bowled over. Yes, Sir Caleb Hurst! Between twelve and

one to-night a strong force of police are to raid his house—raid it inside and out!"

"But what the thunder for?" demanded Nipper.

"Because we have an idea that gambling goes on there—that's what for!" said Fuller. "Gambling on a large scale, you know. Not merely a friendly game of bridge or billiards. But the real thing—roulette, baccarat, faro, and all the rest of it. It sounds a bit tall, I'll admit, but the Chief has had positive information to the effect that Hurst's residence is a kind of miniature Monte Carlo. Young officers—officers in the Services, mostly—are lured there, and fleeced of all they possess."

"H'm! It's rather steep, Fuller," commented Nelson Lee quietly. "And, even supposing such a place really exists, surely the habitués of the gambling den are as much to blame as the man who runs it?"

But the inspector shook his head.

"Not at all," he replied. "From what I can gather they are enticed there innocently—sworn to secrecy before they know what the real game is. And afterwards they can't 'blow the gaff' without being dishonourable—at least, they think so. For myself, if I were lured into such a place under false pretences I should feel under no obligation to keep the thing secret."

"There is another aspect," Nelson Lee said. "If one of these victims informed he would be roped in by the police, and that is quite enough to deter a man from giving any information."

"Nonsense! The police wouldn't touch him——"

"I'm not so sure," said Lee. "And, anyhow, the fear of being implicated would prevent any 'blowing the gaff,' as you call it. But, really, Fuller, Sir Caleb Hurst is absolutely above suspicion."

As the great detective spoke he glanced at Nipper, and the lad lifted his eyebrows a little; for both he and his master knew very well that the inspector's story was true in every detail.

Lee knew that Sir Caleb Hurst was a thorough scoundrel. He knew, too, that the gambling-den had been in existence for months past. Probably the great detective knew a great deal more than Detective-inspector Fuller, but he did not think it necessary to enlighten the latter on that point. Fuller had come to "surprise" his unofficial colleague, and it would be unkind to tell him that his news was stale—or, as Nipper expressed it, "decidedly mouldy with age!"

The inspector bent forward at Lee's words.

"Above suspicion!" he repeated. "That's just it, Lee—that's just it. Sir Caleb thinks he is safe. But the chief is positive that his information is reliable, and to-night a great raid is to take place. We want to nab the whole shoot red-handed—and, by George, we'll do it!"

"Don't be too sure, my dear chap," was Lee's quiet comment.

"What d'you mean? We shall take 'em by surprise——"

"Exactly. But if Sir Caleb is actually running a gaming-house, you may be sure he has made adequate arrangements to guard against a possible police raid," said Nelson Lee. "Anyhow, I shouldn't count too much on success, Fuller. You are liable to be disappointed."

Soon after the inspector took his departure, rather thoughtful at the great detective's words, and as soon as he had gone Nipper turned to his master and uttered a soft whistle.

"Sir Caleb Hurst!" he exclaimed. "My hat! This is rather unexpected, gov'nor. Who can have given the information?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. A victim, probably."

"What about Miss Eileen?" Nipper went on eagerly. "She'll be jolly interested to hear——"

"Quite so," interrupted Nelson Lee. "I am, in fact, about to ring her up." And he drew the telephone towards him and lifted the receiver.

"Chelsea, double-nine double-eight, please," said Lee, in answer to the exchange girl's query. And in two minutes he received an answer from Chelsea 9988. A sweet, girlish voice came over the wires.

"Hallo! Who is that?"

"I—Nelson Lee," replied the detective. "How are you this morning, Miss Eileen?"

"Oh, it's Mr. Lee!" cried the girlish voice. "I'm feeling splendid this morning, Mr. Lee. I was thinking, in fact, of taking a stroll round——"

"Then alter your mind, and take a taxi," said Lee pleasantly. "I want you to come here as soon as possible, Miss Eileen. There's something of interest to tell you. Oh, no, nothing definite—not exactly a case. But I am sure you will be glad to hear a certain item of news."

The sweet-toned voice promised to waste no time, and in less than half an hour Mrs. Jones, the landlady, entered Lee's consulting-room and announced that Miss Eileen Dare was below.

Eileen herself appeared the next moment, and she was warmly welcomed. The girl was a frequent visitor at Nelson Lee's apartments, for she was the great detective's assistant in many important cases.

"Jolly pleased to see you, miss," said Nipper heartily. "You're looking ripping this morning—absolutely top-hole!"

Eileen was, indeed, looking as fresh as a flower.

The girl-detective was about the last person on earth whom one would associate with such dangerous work as the tracking of criminals. She was dainty from head to foot. Rather small, her figure was beautifully proportioned and slim, and she was wondrously graceful in all her movements and actions.

Her face was delightfully pretty, her rosy cheeks and clear complexion being evidence of a splendid health. Her eyes, too, were sparkling and merry. They were big eyes, of a deep brown hue, and were singularly keen and expressive. At the present moment they were dancing happily, and her rich red lips were slightly parted in a smile of pleasure.

"I'm not quite sure of the meaning of 'top-hole,' Nipper." She laughed. "But I suppose you mean it for something nice. But I am, oh, so anxious to hear the news, Mr. Lee. Is it something about—about the combine?"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Yes, it directly concerns the combine," he replied quietly.

Eileen sat down expectantly and pulled her gloves off. Then she removed her furs and looked at Nelson Lee. For a few moments the detective was silent. He was thinking, in fact, of the great campaign Eileen Dare had embarked upon, and the success which had rewarded her efforts.

The "combine" they had referred to was a body of rich City business men and other well-known personages. Months before these men had plotted against Eileen's father, a clever engineer. They had done so for the purpose of robbing him of a wonderful invention.

Their schemes had succeeded, and Mr. Lawrence Dare suffered the cruel injustice of being sentenced to be shot as a traitor to his country. But he died suddenly from the great shock, for he was absolutely innocent of the foul, trumped-up charge. And his fair daughter, Eileen, had sworn to him that she would bring to justice the scoundrels who had disgraced and murdered him.

They were safe from the law, and they had appropriated Dare's invention. But Eileen had been in earnest, and already several members of the combine had suffered for their sins. Mr. Roger Haverfield, head of the famous

Haverfield Steel Works, at Birmingham, had been the prime mover in the original plot; but he was no worse than the others. They were all equally involved, and Eileen was slowly but surely dealing with every individual rogue.

Sir Ambrose Shore, Basil Illingford, Jonathan Bridger, Rudolph Stebbing -- they and others had already paid the penalty. But there were still more to be accounted for. Haverfield himself, and Melville J. Ross, and Sydney Bradford, and Ford Abbercorn, and several others were continuing their evil work. They formed the combine, and it was still powerful and dangerous.

This combine was not an organised body of men. They each worked separately as a rule, but combined together when anything big was in the air. They all stuck to one another, and shared many ill-gotten profits. There was no particular leader and no particular meeting-place. They were just high-class criminals, unscrupulous and scoundrelly.

And they had been beaten by a girl!

Every man who had suffered had been brought to ruin by Eileen Dare. Nelson Lee had been largely to the fore in every case, it was true, but the girl had performed invaluable service. She possessed the true detective instinct, and Lee had often acknowledged that she was the most accomplished girl he had ever met. She was shrewd, quick-witted, and always ready for any daring escapade. She simply loved taking risks, and her powers of deduction and her detective abilities were little short of amazing.

Only recently she had utterly ruined a villainous moneylender, named Ransome Wilmore, and had passed through breathless adventures in accomplishing her object. Yet now Eileen was eager enough to get on the track of her next victim. They had murdered her father, and so they must be made to suffer. Eileen was not vindictive; she was not revengeful. But she was determined that justice should be done.

"I have said that the matter on which I have brought you here concerns the combine," went on Nelson Lee smoothly. "That is the truth, Miss Eileen. But I don't quite see how we can get to work--yet. To tell the truth, the police are to take action to-night."

Eileen looked surprised.

"The police!" she echoed. "But surely a member of the combine has not laid himself open to suspicion? Those wicked men have always been so careful to keep on the right side of the law, Mr. Lee."

"Exactly!" That is why I am doubtful if the police will effect any result," was Nelson Lee's reply. "In short, they are going to raid the Jermyn Street house of Sir Caleb Hurst."

"Oh!"

There was a world of expression in that little exclamation. Eileen Dare knew--as, indeed, Nelson Lee and Nipper knew, too--that Sir Caleb Hurst was one of the most influential members of the combine. He had been a principal mover in the plot against Eileen's father. He had had his finger in every shady transaction which the combine had engineered.

And Eileen and Nelson Lee knew, also, that Hurst's chief source of income was his gambling-house. They had been aware of the "casino" at Jermyn Street for a long time past, but they had had no opportunity of striking a blow. Indeed, Eileen had been too busy with other members of the criminal band.

It was impossible for Eileen to know every detail, but she suspected much. That Sir Caleb ran an illegal gaming-house was certain; but there was not a shred of evidence to support a direct accusation.

Outwardly, Hurst was a wealthy sporting gentleman of rather refined



tastes. He had never been known to gamble—indeed, he always protested that he did not believe in gambling. He was keen on every kind of sport, but as for gambling—that was a fool's game.

Of course, Lee and his girl assistant saw through the bluff easily enough. It was all a bluff in order to divert possible suspicion. While Sir Caleb made out that he never gambled he actually conducted a stupendous gaming-house.

The detective told Eileen of Detective-inspector Fuller's visit, and of the latter's information. The girl listened thoughtfully, and then shook her head.

"I am afraid Sir Caleb will be too clever for the police, Mr. Lee," she said. "I don't know for certain, but I believe he has certain mechanical contrivances which can be put to instant use. When this police raid takes place there will not be a scrap of evidence."

"What, disappearing roulette tables and that sort of thing, miss?" asked Nipper interestedly.

"Yes, something of that sort," replied Eileen. "But I am ever so glad you have told me, Mr. Lee. I shall be interested to know how the raid turns out. I hope it will be successful, but if not I mean to get to work right away. It is curious, but I had been thinking of planning out a scheme to bring about the exposure of Sir Caleb Hurst."

"Dear me! You are always busy with that keen brain of yours, my dear young lady," smiled Nelson Lee. "Have you already decided on any special move?"

Eileen Dare nodded.

"Yes, I've thought out certain details," she replied calmly. "But I sha'n't tell you of them now, Mr. Lee. We'll wait and see what the outcome of this raid is. I hope any action on my part won't be necessary."

But it was necessary, for the police raid was an absolute failure!

In the early hours of the following morning Nelson Lee heard the report. He had waited up especially, and between two and three o'clock he rang up Scotland Yard, and got hold of Inspector Fuller.

The latter was dejected and gloomy.

"Don't ask me about that infernal raid, Mr. Lee," he growled over the wires.

"Why, wasn't it a success——"

"Success!" echoed Fuller, as Lee smiled grimly to himself. "It was an utter failure. A strong force of police surrounded the house, and everybody was trapped as neatly as you like."

"Sir Caleb Hurst included?"

"Yes, of course. He seemed absolutely thunderstruck," said the inspector. "Then he got angry, and politely said that the police were a lot of confounded busybodies and a general nuisance to the community!"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"But what of the roulette and the baccarat and the faro——"

"Oh, don't reel 'em all off, Lee," protested Fuller dismally. "There wasn't so much as a game of bridge going on! Sir Caleb had a good few visitors, a fair sprinkling of Army officers amongst them, but they were all innocently engaged."

"What do you call 'innocently engaged?'" asked the detective.

"Well, there were a good few—Hurst himself included—in the big billiard-room," was the Yard official's reply. "The rest were in the library, reading and chatting before the fire, and some of the others were feeding themselves——"

"But not a sign of that Monte Carlo casino?"

"That yarn was all bunkum!" growled Fuller. "Of course, the chief will have to make a public apology to Hurst, and it's only right that he should. Sir Caleb is innocent of anything shady; we've proved that. All that rot about gaming-rooms was a faked-up yarn."

"Who faked it up?"

"I can't tell you that," replied the inspector; "but he's an Army officer, and the chief is going to investigate the matter thoroughly to-morrow. But there it is, Lee—the raid was a failure, and Sir Caleb Hurst is vindicated."

"Perhaps there will be more——"

"Not likely!" interjected Detective-inspector Fuller. "The police won't touch Sir Caleb again. We shall look foolish enough, as it is!"

A moment later Fuller rang off, and Nelson Lee thoughtfully replaced the receiver and picked up his half-smoked cigar. There was an expression of grim amusement in his eyes.

"I half expected it," he told himself. "Sir Caleb doesn't fear the police—he knows he's safe in that direction. Safer than ever now, in fact, for the police won't undertake a second raid. But the gambling den is there right enough, and the only way to expose Hurst is to set to work quietly and methodically."

It was too late, of course, to inform Eileen Dare of the result of the raid; but she would know in the morning, for the newspapers would certainly contain an account of the affair.

So Nelson Lee turned out the lights in the consulting-room and retired, and in the morning, between ten and eleven o'clock, a visitor was announced. It was Lieutenant Harold Pagett.

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## CHAPTER II.

### Nelson Lee's Commission—Eileen's Ruse—The Gambling House.

**T**HE visitor bore a decidedly war-worn aspect.

One arm was in a sling, and the upper part of his head was swathed in bandages. But he was looking cheerful enough, and was evidently not seriously injured.

"I am delighted to meet you, Lieutenant Pagett," said Nelson Lee cordially. "It is only comparatively recently that you returned from the Front, I believe? The report of your wonderful bravery has already reached——"

Pagett waved his hand protestingly.

"Oh, give it a rest! For goodness sake, give it a rest, Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed. "I am simply fed up with that kind of talk. Everybody seems to have got an idea that I did something extraordinary."

"Well, so you did," said Lee, with a smile. "At least, I know for a fact that your valour is to be rewarded with the Victoria Cross."

"There are scores of chaps out there who deserve the V.C. far more than I do," said the lieutenant quietly. "Not officers, but just ordinary Tommies. I've seen acts of wonderful bravery that will never receive recognition, and just because I happened to—— But, hang it all, let's get off that subject. I came here to consult you in a professional capacity, Mr. Lee."

"I shall be glad to place my services at your disposal," was the detective's reply. "That is, of course, if your business is of sufficient interest to warrant my——"

"Well, I like getting to the point straight away," broke in Pagett bluntly. "I've come to you about that infernal hound, Sir Caleb Hurst! That may sound strong, Mr. Lee, but he's nothing less!"

Nelson Lee nodded quietly.

"I agree with that remark," he exclaimed. "Sir Caleb Hurst is a very clever man, Lieutenant Pagett, but he is crooked right through. But it is rather curious that you should come to me with regard to Hurst. Only last night a raid took place at his residence in Jermyn Street."

"That's just it!" exclaimed the visitor quickly. "That's why I'm here, Mr. Lee. That raid was a failure, and the police seem inclined to jump on me for laying false information. Yes, it was I who put Scotland Yard on to the job, and I did so because I wanted to put an end to base roguery!"

Nelson Lee pursed his lips.

"But the raid was a failure," he said. "The police found no evidence of roguery, lieutenant. I presume you did not lay the information without excellent cause?"

Pagett's reply was to tell the detective exactly what had transpired. He concealed nothing; he explained that he had been an arrant fool, and that he had been fleeced of all he possessed.

He explained, also, that even the gaming tables themselves were run by cheating and fraud. It was not even a fair gamble—if such a thing could be. Pagett went on to say how he had been disowned by his father in consequence of his madness, and how he had returned to the Front careless whether he lived or died.

He frankly told Nelson Lee that he had not acted bravely on the battlefield, for he had half intended to get himself killed. That he was alive was purely a matter of luck. But Lee would not accept that explanation.

"You cannot make me believe that, my dear fellow," he said quietly. "If you had wished to get yourself killed, you would have gone the shortest way to work. You would not have faced a deadly fire to bring in a wounded comrade. But I understand perfectly. You wrote to Scotland Yard thinking that you would be killed, and because you wanted Sir Caleb's villainy to be stopped. Unfortunately, the police raid was a failure."

"But why? Why, in Heaven's name, was it a failure?" demanded the lieutenant. "I'm home on sick leave, Mr. Lee, and I knew that the raid was to take place last night. I even waited up to hear the result, and was simply thunderstruck when I heard that nothing had been found in Hurst's house. I thought, for a moment, that I was dreaming."

He bent closer to Nelson Lee.

"I've been in Sir Caleb's den in Jermyn Street!" he went on grimly. "I've seen the whole rotten shoot. No gambling! Why, great Scott, the place was like Monte Carlo when I was there, and it's inconceivable that Hurst has had everything shifted since my visit. There's trickery somewhere, Mr. Lee!"

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders.

"That is fairly obvious," he replied; "and, if you will think clearly, lieutenant, you will not be so amazed. A man who runs a gambling-house in England is breaking the law, and a police raid is always likely to happen—and when it does happen it comes unexpectedly and abruptly. In consequence, the owner of a gambling-house takes due precautions."

"But, man alive, Sir Caleb Hurst is not a magician!" protested the other. "How in wonder can he have made all the gaming tables vanish? When the police got inside there was nothing to see—nothing of a suspicious nature whatever."

"How do Messrs. Maskelyne and Devant cause solid things to disappear?"

smiled the detective. "After all, they are merely modern magicians. The things disappear by clever mechanical trickery—controlled, probably, by electricity. Well, Sir Caleb has done nothing original. He has simply fitted up a number of mechanical contrivances, regardless of expense, which convert his gaming-rooms into innocent apartments in less than thirty seconds. That can be the only explanation. When the police entered, therefore, they saw nothing. But just because they saw nothing, it doesn't mean to say that the gaming tables were not there. They were there, but cleverly concealed."

Pagett thoughtfully lit a cigarette.

"Jove, I never thought of any wizard business!" he observed. "But you're probably right, Mr. Lee. And Sir Caleb is making such a pile of money there that he can well afford to fit up precautionary contrivances. But I've been made to look a hopeless fool, you know. The police think I made a false charge, and it's not exactly a pleasant situation. By trying to do good I seem to have landed myself in an ugly hole."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Never mind, I'll get you out of it," he exclaimed cheerfully. "To tell you the truth, lieutenant, I was interested in this affair before you came. But now that you have commissioned me to look into it I am all the more eager to do so."

"Good business!" said Pagett promptly. "Do you know, it'll give me real pleasure to see Hurst exposed for the rotter he is! Apart from that, I'm as happy as a sandboy again."

"But your parents——"

Lieutenant Pagett laughed boyishly.

"The pater's turned up trumps, Mr. Lee," he replied. "I've been several kinds of a fool, but it seems that my little performance on the battlefield has wiped it all out. The pater has taken me back to the fold, so to speak. And now the only thing that worries me is this Jermyn Street business. I hope you'll get busy right away, Mr. Lee."

"I will do my best, and more than that I cannot say," replied the great detective. "As soon as I have anything definite to report you shall hear of it."

Pagett took his departure in a much more cheerful frame of mind. As he had said, his position was an unpleasant one. It was up to him to prove that his accusation of Sir Caleb Hurst was justified. Nelson Lee knew that it was, but Scotland Yard was of the opposite opinion.

To Lee satisfaction Eileen presented herself very shortly after Paget's departure. The detective had been about to run over to Chelsea to see Eileen himself, but her visit obviated that necessity.

"I am so glad that you have been commissioned from an outside source to expose Sir Caleb," said Eileen, after she had learned of Paget's visit. "But I want you to let me do most of the work, Mr. Lee, because, after all, it is my concern, isn't it? Hurst is one of my enemies, and I have a personal interest in bringing him to justice."

"I darsay we shall both have our hands full," said Lee drily. "At all events, Miss Eileen, there is plenty of work ahead. What we have to do is to find a weak spot in the baronet's armour. It is a very good opportunity to settle with another member of the infamous combine."

And that very night there was distinct evidence that Eileen Dare, at least, was getting busy. She considered that this was one of her own "special" cases; therefore, it was up to her to do most of the work.

At about ten o'clock two men strolled out of one of the most select

West End clubs. One was rather stout and middle-aged, and the other a slim, well-dressed young fellow of about twenty—little more than a boy.

The elder man was Mr. Bertram Singleton. He was, in fact, the man who had introduced Lieutenant Pagett into Sir Caleb Hurst's gambling house. He was well known and well liked in most clubs, and he was known to be a man of wealth and influence. Yet in reality he was as great a scoundrel as Hurst himself. He was not a member of the combine, but he was a confederate of Hurst's.

And his companion was another victim. He was a well-connected young fellow named Aubrey Fortescue—at least, he had told Singleton that he was a member of a well-known Norfolk family.

And he had approached Singleton that night, saying that he had been advised by a friend to seek Singleton's aid in entering Sir Caleb's house. Young Fortescue explained that he was anxious to have a little "flutter."

Singleton jumped quickly at the bait, for he knew that the Fortescues were tremendously rich. Consequently, this young fellow must have plenty of money to throw away. That being so, it would be quite convenient to have it thrown into Sir Caleb's coffers.

Fortescue had come well armed, for he had a letter of introduction to Singleton from a man who was a frequent habitue of the gaming club. It was necessary to be very cautious, but there was no reason for Singleton to suspect any trickery.

Yet, as a matter of fact, young Aubrey Fortescue was not such a fool as he looked.

For "his" real name was Eileen Dare!

The girl had resolved to adopt an extraordinarily daring ruse. To strike at Sir Caleb effectively it was necessary for her to obtain inside information. And so she determined to get into the house, and to witness everything with her own eyes. Ladies were never admitted to the gambling tables, and so Eileen was forced to disguise herself.

She had done so with amazing cleverness. A born actress, she played the part of a youth to the very life. She was small, but that was no disadvantage. And she wore a very close-fitting wig, which completely concealed her own hair and added considerably to the effect. In every other detail of her disguise she had displayed remarkable ingenuity.

She was a young fellow to the very life—in figure, in manner, in speech. And as she was being driven in a taxi to Jermyn Street with Mr. Bertram Singleton she was inwardly singing a song of triumph. The principal difficulty had been overcome, and she was to have free access to the gambling club.

Meanwhile, as she and Singleton were chatting in the taxi, Sir Caleb Hurst and two others were in a private room at No. 208B, Jermyn Street—the baronet's house—discussing the raid of the night before.

"My dear fellows, everything is going on to-night as usual," Sir Caleb was saying. "There is nothing to fear. We are, indeed, safer than we were before. The police will never trouble us again—you may be sure of that."

Mr. Ford Abbercorn frowned.

"All the same, it is rather like flying in the face of Providence," he exclaimed. "I am not nervous, Hurst, but I really think you ought to be a little cautious until the affair has entirely blown over. What do you say, Ross?"

"I'm rather inclined to agree with Hurst," said Melville J. Ross—who had originally hailed from Chicago. "I guess we're safe now, Abbercorn. I was rather scared last night, I'll admit, but Sir Caleb's contraptions had

never been tested before that. They're great! The police simply didn't get a smell of anything in the gambling line."

Hurst rubbed his fat hands together.

"I knew my arrangements would not fail when it came to a pinch!" he exclaimed, with great satisfaction. "Just think of it, you fellows. When we received the first warning last night we only had two minutes—just two minutes. And by the time the police entered the rooms everybody was harmlessly employed. Why, this will mean greater popularity than ever."

"How do you make that out?" demanded Ross.

"My dear chap, a certain number of fellows—young officers mostly—were rather uncertain about coming here," replied Sir Caleb. "They knew that if they were exposed they would be simply disgraced. And they always had an idea that, sooner or later, they would be dropped on. They liked coming here, you know, but they were somewhat sceptical. Now, however, they will have no such fears."

Abbercorn tapped the ash from his cigar.

"I daresay you are right, Hurst," he said. "It's amazing how many young fools there are in the world. I don't think there are many officers in the Services who care for gambling, but those who do—well, you may as well rake in their fortunes as anybody else's!"

"Nothing can ever be proved against this establishment," went on Hurst, comfortably. "The police have apologised handsomely to me for last night's affair, and I am rather glad the raid occurred. Any other confounded informer will be laughed at. I wonder who in thunder gave the Yard the tip?"

"We shall never learn his identity," said Abbercorn. "But what does it matter? As you say, Hurst, the raid has really done more good than harm. I am beginning to see that now. Well, suppose we go in?"

And the three precious members of the combine left the little private apartment, and went into the gaming-rooms to watch their victims being robbed.

### CHAPTER III.

#### At the Roulette Table—Eileen's Mishap—Recognition!

**M**R. AUBREY FORTESCUE was standing in Sir Caleb's library when the baronet and his two companions entered. He—or, rather, she—saw them at once, although she took no notice of them.

And they, for their part, did not take any interest in the well-dressed young fellow who stood idly watching the roulette players. Mr. Bertram Singleton, as soon as he had escorted Eileen into the house, had left her to take care of herself. He would not have felt so easy in mind if he had known the true identity of the "young fellow"!

Outwardly Hurst's residence was merely an ordinary gentleman's house. Upon entering, Eileen's coat had been taken by a well-trained manservant, and she had been conducted by Singleton down a wide hall and passed a massive baize-covered door. Here was situated the library, the reception hall, and other apartments. The billiard-room was just beyond.

Ordinarily, each of these apartments was just what one would expect to find in a rich gentleman's house. But now they wore a very different aspect. In the library *trente-et-quarante* was in progress, and also *faro*. Every man present was in evening dress, and there was considerable good-natured excitement. They were mostly young men with plenty of money to throw about. Not many were in uniform—for, after all, officers of the Services were only a minor portion of Sir Caleb's visitors.



The "driver" brought down a heavy spanner on the top of Abbercorn's head.—(See page 34.)

They all appeared to be enjoying themselves, but on most faces there was an unhealthy flush, and in most eyes a feverish, unnatural light gleamed. At the best, gambling of this nature was not a very pleasant pastime. But once the spirit took possession of a man, he was lost to all sense or reason; he just went on and on until he was either broken or rich—almost invariably the former.

Eileen in her disguise had wandered from room to room without being questioned or spoken to. She was just one of the many; and, once she had gained admittance, there was no one to question her right to be there. And her impersonation was so completely perfect that not a soul had a suspicion that "Mr. Aubrey Fortescue" was any other than he seemed.

The girl took stock of everything. Her keen eyes took in every detail, and she memorised it all. She had soon reached the library, and this apartment struck her as being strangely incongruous. The walls were lined with bookcases, but in place of the ordinary desk in the centre of the room there was situated a roulette table, with its croupier and "punters," as the players are termed.

Hurst and Abbercorn and Ross separated, and Eileen did not trouble to heed them. She was watching the roulette table, and it was easy for her to understand why the "punters" risked their money. The game—if game it could be called—was a sheer gamble, and with luck a player stood to gain immense sums. But the chances were all in favour of the bank. That fact is a widely known one. After all, roulette bankers do not run the tables for their own pleasure. They do it for the especial purpose of gaining money. Even if the game is played fairly, the "punter" stands to lose all along the line.

But, as a matter of fact, a fair game of roulette has never been discovered. But even those who have been constantly cheated go on playing, never realising that they are cheated. The fascination of the game is great, and there is always the hope that one may beat the croupier at his own business.

Sir Caleb Hurst relied mainly upon his roulette tables—there were three altogether in the house—for his income. And he did not rely in vain. By the losses of the roulette players alone his bank balance was swelled enormously every week of the year.

Eileen was not particularly interested. She was level-headed enough to see that the whole game was nothing less than a swindle. The fact that one could win great sums did not blind her eyes to the fact that such a chance was rare. And there are few "punters" who, after making a fair pile, stop at that. In nearly every instance they continue the game, hoping to increase their winnings, and generally end by losing all.

There were rows of chairs round the table, and they were all occupied. And behind them stood others, playing over the shoulders of the sitters.

"Make your game, gentlemen!" droned out the croupier.

He picked up the ivory ball, and gently turned the roulette wheel. This was divided into thirty-seven compartments. One compartment was for zero, and one for each of thirty-six numbers. The game was really very simple, for the wheel was turned in one direction and the ball within it spun in the opposite. And as they spun they both slowed down until the little ball clicked into one of the divisions, and whichever number that division was marked was the winner. If any "punter" had staked on that number of the green cloth he received thirty-five times the amount of his stake. For example, if he had placed a pound upon 18, and 18 turned up, he would rake in thirty-five pounds, in addition to his original stake.



There were thirty-seven spaces on the wheel, however, including zero, so the player had only one chance in thirty-five. The banker, on the other hand, had thirty-seven chances to one against him. So it was obvious that the banker always stood to gain.

As the croupier requested the gentlemen to make their game, the "punters" placed their coins upon the table. Some played cautiously, and some took risks. A winning number, provided it came up, brought in thirty-five times the amount of the stake. A stake placed on the line between two numbers covered both, and if either number turned up, the particular player received seventeen times the amount of his stake. This was a "cheval." And a coin could be placed on a row of three numbers, making a "transversal." This brought in eleven times the amount of the stake if one of the three numbers came up.

Columns of numbers could be backed, too, or the dozens. In this case the winning number resulted in twice the amount staked. But the more cautious players simply backed red or black. This was merely an even chance. And then, again, there was "pair and impair," and "passe and manque." The latter were numbered above and below 18—also even chances.

Eileen saw that the minimum stake was half a crown. At Monte Carlo the lowest stake allowed was five francs—roughly, four shillings and two-pence.

There was a great amount of money upon the table—red and black currency notes, a few fivers, and a good deal of silver.

The wheel spun and the croupier tossed in the ball. The wheel was bowl-shaped, and revolved quickly, the ball travelling in the opposite direction. All eyes were upon it, but Eileen could not help noticing that the croupier's pile was a considerable one. Indeed, it increased with every turn of the wheel, for the bank generally won all along.

Such are the profits from roulette and trente-et-quarante tables at Monte Carlo that they practically pay for everything. They not only support the magnificent orchestra of the Casino—one of the finest in Europe—and pay the wages of over a thousand employees, but they have made the principality of Monaco practically a paradise. The people pay no taxes, and the road-making, the public works, police, schools, churches, are all paid for out of the losses of the players at the tables. And even then there still remains a large dividend for the shareholders in the company.

So it can be easily seen that Sir Caleb Hurst, even on the small scale on which he ran the miniature casino, gained enormous profits from his rascally tables. All said and done, it was nothing but a swindle from start to finish. At Monte Carlo the tables are principally run for the benefit of foreign tourists; but Sir Caleb Hurst was robbing his own countrymen.

Eileen did not trouble to see exactly how the game was going. Indeed, it all confused her somewhat, for she took no interest in it. The fever was on several of the players, and they were throwing their money away recklessly. The wheel had just been spun, and the ivory ball went clicking round the shallow basin, in the slides of which were little metal studs. At last it slowed down, and the croupier droned out:

"Twenty-five, black, impair and manque."

"Ye gods! Twenty-five!" gasped out a young fellow with a flushed face.

He had placed a five-pound note—the maximum—upon that particular number, and without hesitation the croupier pushed across a thick wad of banknotes. The young fellow had won the sum of £175! There were many envious eyes cast upon him, but he seemed to notice nothing. He was

absolutely engrossed in the game. He had been winning for some little time, but not at this same rate. But, even with that, the bank did not lose, for the croupier's assistant raked in a huge pile of money.

From a few whispered words near by Eileen learned that the young man was Sir Horace Rivers, a young baronet who had recently inherited the title. He should certainly have known better than to waste his money in a questionable establishment such as this.

He was emboldened by his success, and again staked the maximum. But this time the croupier saw that he lost; the croupier, moreover, meant to make up for the loss of the last spin, for zero came up. And in that event everything goes to the bank, excepting any stake which had been placed on zero itself. Everything was raked away—numbers, transversals, chevals, carrees, columns, dozens, red and black, pair and impair, passe and manque—all went to the bank.

Eileen smiled quietly to herself. She was absolutely certain that by some secret means the croupier could control the wheel. Nearly all experienced croupiers can practically control the wheel without trickery; they get to know exactly how to spin it to bring about the desired result. But the girl detective knew quite well that there was something more certain, for, after all, a croupier may make a mistake. And to make a mistake with large sums on the table may be serious for the bank. Roulette tables are run for the especial purpose of swindling the "punters." This one was, at all events!

The young Sir Horace Rivers played rashly and foolishly. Like many roulette players, he had got the idea that his "luck" had set in, and that he could not make a mistake. He was soon to be undeceived!

At each spin of the wheel he lost more heavily; he got into a panic, and played more rashly still. And his pile of winnings diminished until he had lost every penny, until, indeed, he had been cheated of his winnings and his own money too. He was pale now—pale and haggard.

"Oh, you foolish fellow!" thought Eileen Dare gravely.

She was almost sorry for Sir Horace. Yet she knew that he deserved to lose. He ought to have known that his winning of £175 in one swoop was nothing but a matter of exceptional luck.

He felt in his pockets frenziedly, but he had not a penny left. For a second the young fool seemed dazed, then he staggered to his feet, sending the chair crashing over behind him.

"Hang you!" he shouted thickly. "It's a swindle—a rotten swindle! You've been tricking me—you've rabbed me!"

"Steady, old man!" muttered a friend, taking his arm. "You'd better come away—"

Sir Horace jerked his arm free savagely.

"I've not done yet!" he exclaimed, with glittering, feverish eyes. "I've no more money, but there's my watch! Take it, you thief!" he went on, glaring at the immobile croupier. "And take this—and this!"

As he spoke his voice rose, and he jerked out his gold watch and flung it upon the table. His empty pocket-book followed, and then a heavy gold cigarette-case. And it was the latter which caused an utterly unlooked-for accident—an accident, moreover, which was to have far-reaching results.

The frenzied young fellow flung the cigarette-case upon the table with tremendous force. It was made of heavy gold, and was of considerable weight. It struck the table, rebounded—and struck Eileen Dare full upon the forehead!

As ill luck would have it, she was at that moment bending right over

the table, and she had no time to dodge. The corner of the cigarette-case struck her a violent blow, and she fell back, stunned.

There was instant commotion.

Nobody guessed that the victim was really a girl. Several men bent over "him," and then Sir Caleb Hurst and Ford Abbercorn hurried up. In a moment they saw what had happened.

"Nothing much!" said Hurst quickly. "Drop of brandy will bring him round. Confound it! Who struck the fellow down?"

The culprit had been dragged away by his friend, and Sir Caleb did not stop to listen to the many explaining voices. He and Abbercorn lifted the unconscious "Mr. Aubrey Fortescue," and carried him swiftly to a small, well-furnished apartment, which adjoined the library.

Heavy curtains covered the doorway, and Eileen was placed on a soft lounge. In here, behind the curtains, the confused noise of the roulette-room was cut off. Soft electric lights gleamed down, and Hurst and Abbercorn were alone with their stunned companion.

"Get the brandy, man!" rapped out Hurst. "It's only a bruise, I think. Jove, what a soft skin the fellow's got!"

Abbercorn poured out some brandy from a decanter on the sideboard.

"Look here, Hurst, you'll have to tell that croupier to ease off a bit!" he protested warmly. "He won't have to cheat so consistently! Such a scene as that isn't good for the place, and you know it. We don't want to have fellows stunned in this way by the mad frenzies of a loser. Better let the players keep a certain proportion of their money——"

"After we've got this boy on his feet I'll talk!" snapped Sir Caleb. "Give me the brandy. No, you pour some down his throat while I hold his head back."

Hurst grasped Eileen's head and held it back. But the baronet took a firm hold of the hair—and, as it happened to be a wig, something happened! The wig slipped, and came off in his hand!

Instantly the girl's own beautiful hair coiled down over her face! It was an amazing stroke of ill-fortune.

"Why, what—— Good heavens!" gasped Hurst, open-mouthed. "Do—do you see, Abbercorn? Look at this hair, man! This is a girl—a girl!"

"A—a girl!" echoed Ford Abbercorn blankly, and with staring eyes.

Sir Caleb Hurst recovered him with an effort, for the shock was a stupendous one. And he pushed Eileen's hair back, and gazed searchingly into her face. Then suddenly the colour fled from his cheeks, and he uttered an oath of amazement and startled fear.

"See!" he choked. "See! Don't you recognise her, Abbercorn? Don't you see who she is? Great powers! This girl is none other than Eileen Dare herself!"

## CHAPTER IV.

### Evil Plans—The Sudden Alarm—Nelson Lee on the Scene.

IT was an astounding discovery.

Both Sir Caleb Hurst and Ford Abbercorn could hardly believe their eyes for a moment. The well-dressed young fellow whom they had carried into the private apartment was a girl—in disguise!

A girl, moreover, whom they feared with a real, live fear.

Eileen Dare!

Only too well did Hurst and Abbercorn know that name. Only too well did they know that Eileen Dare had been the cause of several of their companions' downfalls. She was only a girl, it is true, but they had

learned to fear her; they had learned that she was a power to be reckoned with.

The ruin and disgrace of Ransome Wilmore, the moneylender, had been brought about chiefly through Eileen's efforts—and the combine knew it. They did not throw dust in their own eyes. After Wilmore's collapse the combine gathered together, and all agreed that Eileen Dare was at the bottom of their troubles.

These men were utterly unscrupulous. They were not above committing murder, if it suited their own ends. And on several occasions Eileen had been very near to death's door through the machinations of Hurst and his accomplices.

The combine had at first laughed at the possibility that Eileen Dare was the cause of all the trouble. But then they had realised that, girl though she was, she was clever, resourceful, and a most dangerous enemy.

And now she was here! By a pure piece of chance Hurst and Abbercorn had learned her identity, although she was so cleverly disguised that their suspicions would never have been aroused but for the incident of the gold cigarette case, and the resultant slipping off of Eileen's wig.

"Great Heaven!" panted Ford Abbercorn, pale and shaking. "What does it mean, Hurst? Eileen Dare! And here, disguised as a man! I tell you, that girl is as dangerous as the whole of Scotland Yard put together!"

"Far more so!" snapped Sir Caleb hoarsely. "We know what Scotland Yard can do—last night's affair proved that. Scotland Yard can do nothing. But this girl—this little bit of a thing— Pah! It's amazing, Abbercorn!"

It was surprising to see how both men were completely unstrung by the discovery. It went to prove how much they feared Eileen. She was absolutely at their mercy, but yet they had been almost afraid.

Sir Caleb Hurst soon pulled himself together, however.

But while he was doing so, and while the two men were getting over the shock, Eileen Dare herself had heard much.

For the girl detective was not unconscious! The blow had stunned her, true enough, but by the time she reached the lounge she had recovered her wits sufficiently to know that she was in the hands of the enemy.

In a half-conscious way she recognised the voices of Hurst and Abbercorn, and she knew, instinctively, that it would be her best course to remain insensible. It had been difficult to control herself when the wig fell off, but she had done so by a sheer effort of will.

For, in a flash, Eileen realised much. Her brain worked with lightning-like rapidity. No action of hers could prevent recognition, and to show that she was conscious would probably mean drastic action. She could guess that she would be gagged and bound, in all probability.

Therefore, with rare shrewdness, Eileen controlled herself and lay as she was—pretending to be insensible. Her head was throbbing painfully, but in her excitement she did not pay much heed to the discomfort.

And what she had heard already was sufficient reward.

For she knew, from Abbercorn's words, that the croupier at the roulette table consistently cheated. That was point number one. She knew that Sir Caleb's gaming tables were not even run squarely.

Moreover, it was quite on the cards that by remaining "insensible" she would hear more vital talk between the two men. Eileen was never slow to grasp an opportunity, and this time she was exceedingly quick.

Without a doubt Hurst and his companion were staggered. But presently the baronet went to the curtains, pulled them closer together, and then faced Abbercorn. There was an expression of evil purpose in his eyes.

"It was foolish of me to get into a panic," he exclaimed softly. "Don't you realise what this means, Abbercorn? By a sheer stroke of luck this girl—the combine's greatest enemy—has been thrust into our hands. She is at our mercy, and we can do just as we like with her. She must be rendered quiet, you understand? Since she has chosen to come here——"

"Do you mean to kill——"

"Don't be absurd!" interjected Hurst sharply. "There is no necessity to speak in that blunt fashion here. But as soon as ever the house is cleared we must make plans. A scheme is already formulating itself in my mind."

Abbercorn was rather nervous.

"What scheme can you have thought of?" he asked, in an unsteady voice.

"Never mind that now. But I think you will guess the rest when I tell you that a certain friend of ours lives in a very lonely house on Hampstead Heath," said Hurst significantly. "We have often remarked how isolated that particular house is, and what a lot of things could go on there unknown to the world at large. Well, this young gentleman here," he added, with a glance at Eileen's disguised form, "will be conveyed to the Heath secretly——"

"We shall be seen, and then inquiries will be made!" growled the other.

"Upon my soul, what a nervous fellow you are, Abbercorn!" protested Sir Caleb. "Do you think I shall advertise the fact that we are conveying a prisoner away? You seem to have forgotten that there is a secret emergency exit leading from this very room to an alley at the back of my house."

"By Jove, I had forgotten it!" exclaimed Abbercorn. "I am beginning to see your scheme, Hurst. But what shall we do in the meantime? It wants several hours yet to closing time, and the girl will certainly recover her senses——"

"I don't think she will recover yet awhile," put in Hurst. "Anyhow, we will be prepared for that contingency when it arises. For the present you remain here while I return to the gaming-rooms and make it clear that the young fellow who was injured has recovered and that he has left. It will be better to spread such a report."

Sir Caleb pushed the curtains aside, and re-entered the principal gambling-room—the library. Here roulette was proceeding as though nothing had happened, and other victims were being rapidly fleeced. Now and again a man would win large sums—would really win them—and his luck encouraged the others to risk more and more.

And then, quite suddenly, a hidden bell tinkled.

Every man seemed turned to stone for a second, and Sir Caleb Hurst himself grated out a harsh oath.

That bell was a secret signal from a man stationed close to the front door. It had rung the previous night when the police raid had taken place. It was, in short, an alarm bell.

"A raid—a raid!" somebody cried loudly and frantically.

There was instant commotion.

"Keep quiet, please, gentlemen!" cried Sir Caleb quickly. "There is no danger at all if you will only keep your heads. Remain just as you are; I will attend to the rest."

Hurst's voice seemed to calm the excited and alarmed gamblers. Money was stuffed away hastily, and the croupier at the roulette table jumped up and stood ready for the next incident.

And in three rapid strides Sir Caleb reached the curtains which covered the doorway of the room in which Eileen was lying. He glanced swiftly at Ford Abbercorn.

"Raid!" he said curtly.

"Good heavens! What——"

"Keep calm, man!" snapped Hurst. "It's all right if you keep calm!"

Scarcely ten seconds had elapsed since the alarm had been given. Sir Caleb touched a small ornamental knob in the lower portion of the gilt frame of a large oil-painting. Instantly the canvas slid silently upwards, and what seemed to be an electrical switchboard was revealed.

Eileen was lying unconscious on the big lounge near by. At least, Hurst and Abbercorn thought that she was unconscious, and they paid no attention to her. But the girl detective was, by this time, almost herself again.

She had been thinking very quickly, and her brain was clear and keen. She knew that she was in a tight corner—that she was a prisoner. But by pretending to be insensible she had really gained the upper hand, for her captors were unconsciously revealing things to her which they would not have done otherwise.

And from beneath her lowered eyelids Eileen saw the painted canvas slide up. She had heard the alarm, and she could not help congratulating herself upon this amazing stroke of luck. She was actually seeing how the rascally baronet controlled the intricate "transformation" appliances.

That knowledge might mean much to her later on, and she watched carefully. Sir Caleb swiftly pulled a switch, and then he performed the same operation with four other switches. A curious kind of rumbling noise came from the library, and Eileen could feel the couch quivering slightly.

Meanwhile, in the gaming-rooms an extraordinary change came about. Those in the library saw the roulette table sink swiftly into the floor, folding up ingeniously as it did so, and at the same time a leather top desk arose, covered with papers, books, inkstands, etc. In three seconds it was all over. The croupier, who was in evening-dress, coolly seated himself at the desk and commenced writing. The other men in the apartment gathered round the fireplace, chatting and smoking.

No detectives, however keen, would have been able to find anything of a suspicious nature in the room. It was, frankly and openly, merely a well-appointed library. And the same transformation occurred in the other apartments. The gaming tables disappeared, and billiard tables and other innocent articles of furniture appeared in their stead. A game of billiards was in progress within one minute of the alarm; in another room a party were innocently engaged in a friendly game of solo whist. There was not a single evidence of gambling anywhere.

It was all amazingly clever, but, after all, only a matter of clever arrangement and mechanical control. Sir Caleb Hurst had known well enough that to conduct a gambling-house openly would be fatal, and so, before opening his establishment, he had fitted it up with the most astonishing mechanical contrivances.

And Eileen had seen exactly how the trick was worked!

After pressing the switches down Sir Caleb made the picture resume its normal aspect, and then he strolled out of the room, bidding Abbercorn remain to guard the prisoner.

The baronet found everything satisfactory, and he was ready to face any number of police. But no police came! The alarm, in fact, had been a false one. The man at the door had seen six uniformed policemen approach the house, and he had taken it for granted that trouble was to follow. But the police had walked right past without even looking at the big house.

Hurst was rather pleased, for it proved to him that his watchman was to be trusted, and it also gave him an excuse for getting rid of his visitors. There was other work to be done to-night—the work of dealing with Eileen

Dare—and it could be done all the better in private. And the sooner the guests could be got rid of the better.

Accordingly, Sir Caleb went round and quietly informed the men that it would be wise not to continue to-night. The gamblers themselves were rather unnerved, and they practically all agreed that it would be safer to take their departure.

In the library, however, a bent, elderly gentleman—who certainly should have known better than to be gambling at his time of life—remained behind until all had left the apartment. Hurst, as it happened, had just gone out with two of his guests.

The elderly gentleman looked round swiftly, saw that he was unobserved, and then dived quickly beneath a luxurious couch which stood against one wall. A fringe hung down over the edge, so that when he was beneath the couch he was completely concealed. And he could clearly see the curtains which covered the doorway of the small apartment in which Eileen Dare was a prisoner.

“She is there,” he murmured grimly to himself. “Something has happened to her, and I intend to remain here and see that she comes to no harm.”

For, to tell the truth, the “elderly gentleman” was none other than Nelson Lee!

The great detective had been within the gambling den even before Eileen had entered. He had known of her scheme, and had approved of it. But he did not intend to allow her to enter that place unguarded, and so, quite unknown to her, he had disguised himself and had been within the building for some little time. It had been easy enough for Nelson Lee to gain admittance.

And it was Lee, in fact, who had arranged for the police to pass the doorway. It was Lee who had started a cry that a raid was taking place. And he had done so in order to see with his own eyes exactly what occurred.

Thus both his reasons for entering the gambling den were justified.

He had learned what occurred when an alarm was given; he knew that some astounding electrical contrivances had been fitted up, and he had also found out that Eileen Dare was in peril.

The incident of the cigarette-case was, he felt sure, a pure mishap. But Hurst and Abbercorn had conveyed Eileen into a private room, and Nelson Lee was practically sure that the scoundrels had learned the truth.

But they were unaware of his presence. Nelson Lee was in concealment, and he had no intention of leaving until he had rescued Eileen Dare from her perilous position.

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## CHAPTER V.

### In Darkness—Lee Comes to a Decision—A Mishap.

**N**ELSON LEE, from his place of concealment, could distinctly hear Sir Caleb Hurst bidding his guests good-night. He cleared them all out—or thought he had done so, at least. He was quite unaware that one guest—the most dangerous of all—had remained behind.

Everybody left with the exception of Hurst, Abbercorn, and Melville J. Ross. There were servants, of course, in the rear quarters, but Hurst arranged his house so cunningly that the servants were completely and entirely cut off from the main building. They occupied a small wing quite to themselves.

All the lights were extinguished, and Nelson Lee found the library in total

darkness, and in a few minutes the three rogues passed through the library and entered the small apartment. Abbercorn had only left Eileen to herself for a bare minute, and the girl had had no opportunity of slipping away.

Lee, from his hiding-place, saw the curtains part, and saw the three men enter. The great detective did not hide from himself the fact that his position was a perilous one.

He was quite alone, with the exception of Eileen, and he was sure that she was already a prisoner. He had no idea how the scoundrels intended dealing with her, and he had formed no plan of rescue himself.

"It's a grim business," he muttered. "By James, and all because of that young fool with the cigarette-case. Well, perhaps things will work out for the best. At all events, I mean to get Eileen out of this infernal place!"

He lay there quite still, listening.

But only a dull murmur of voices came to his ears. He could guess that the door of the apartment itself was open, but the curtains were thick and heavy, and shut out nearly all sound and every ray of light.

"This won't do!" he told himself anxiously. "Hurst may be formulating his plans even at this moment. This is a time for action, not for indecision. It will be best to act boldly.

And without hesitation he silently wormed his way out and rose to his feet. Then he crept towards the curtains, and stood there, quite still. He found that at one particular point the curtains did not quite meet; there was a tiny slit about four or five inches long, by about a quarter of an inch wide. He was thus able to see through, without being seen himself. And the voices were now distinct and clear.

One glance told him that he had nothing to fear at the present moment. Hurst, Abbercorn, and Ross were seated, and not one of them actually faced the curtains. And Nelson Lee could see Eileen laying on the couch, pale and still.

Upon her forehead was an ugly bruise, swollen considerably. Lee was quite sure that the girl was unconscious; he had not the slightest inkling that she was very wide awake.

And he set his teeth grimly as he looked upon her, for that one glance told him that her true identity was known. Her own delightful hair was straying over her face and upon the cushion. She was dressed in man's clothing, but it was perfectly obvious that she was a girl.

And the very first words which Lee overheard proved that the truth was known.

"This girl is a positive menace to us," Sir Caleb Hurst was saying. "It's no good blinding ourselves to the truth, my dear fellows. This Dare girl lives up to her name. She seems daring enough for almost anything."

"One can't help admiring her, in a way," exclaimed Ross. "She's been up against the combine for a long while now, and she's done us a whole lot of harm. But I guess she's only a girl, after all. I'll wager there's not another girl in this country who possesses her pluck and ingenuity. All the same, we've roped her in at last, and we shall be wise to act drastically."

"That is my argument precisely," replied Hurst. "Her identity was made known to me only by a mere fluke. But for that little accident she would have left this house unchallenged, and would certainly have planned to bring about my downfall. It's either she or I, gentlemen!"

"She or the lot of us!" corrected Ford Abbercorn. "We'd better make no mistake this time, Hurst. She escaped from us that time we tried to finish her in the house-boat, and so we must be extra cautious."

Sir Caleb passed his cigar-case round.



"Well, there's no violent hurry," he said easily. "We've got the whole night before us—and I have already given certain instructions. At this very moment there is a closed motor-car waiting in the small alley which runs parallel with the rear of this house."

"Why is the car waiting there?" asked Melville J. Ross.

"I will tell you. The girl is to be taken down the secret emergency passage which leads from this room to the alley I mentioned. The driver of the car is a trusted man—one of ourselves—and you, Abbercorn, will accompany the girl to Hampstead Heath. You know where I mean?"

"Of course," replied Abbercorn at once.

"Well, once the girl is inside that house she will have disappeared from the outside world for all time," said Sir Caleb significantly. "And I venture to say it will be impossible for anybody to trace her. In short, she will vanish, and will never cause us any more trouble."

Nelson Lee, listening to those words, clenched his fists fiercely. He knew only too well what the scoundrelly baronet implied. Eileen Dare was to be taken to Hampstead, and there the combine would effect their deadly purpose. They had got hold of Eileen now, and they intended silencing her for all time. The great detective did some very quick thinking.

He had learned the combine's plans, true enough, but what could he do? He was one against three, and to show his hand would be to invite disaster. He might, by a surprise attack, effect Eileen's rescue, but it would be doubtful. In all probability his enterprise would end in another manner—he would be captured himself, and that would render the position a thousand-fold more perilous.

No, the only way was to act strategically.

He had learned that the villains did not intend harming Eileen at the present time. She was simply to be conveyed to Hampstead. Lee would not be leaving her in any peril, therefore, if he took his departure.

And so he quickly came to a decision.

One course was clearly open to him, and that was to get out of the house and have a second motor-car in readiness near by. Then, when Eileen was taken to Hampstead, he would be able to follow the combine's car and effect Eileen's rescue before Hampstead was reached.

"It is the only way!" Lee told himself grimly. "Every moment I remain here renders the peril more acute. To show my hand would be fatal, and I may be caught red-handed if I stay. Yes, I will go at once and have a second car in readiness."

It was, after all, the only course which the detective could adopt. He quickly and silently slipped across the library, entered the main hall, and approached the front door. A quick examination, however, showed him that the lock was a patent one, and could not be unfastened without the aid of the key. And to pick it would be a long job.

Nelson Lee was baffled for the moment, for he knew that the windows of the library and the other apartments were closely shuttered. He could, of course open one of the shutters, but he would almost certainly make a considerable amount of noise, and probably set off an alarm, and that would bring Hurst and Co. upon him in a moment.

The big staircase, dark and gloomy, loomed before the detective, and he quickly mounted them. He was beginning to feel a little desperate by now. He was caged in—a prisoner!

At the top of the stairs, however, a wide passage led off at an angle. A door stood half-open, and, entering, he found himself in a well-appointed bath-room. The window was slightly open at the bottom, and he quickly stepped across to it and pushed it up.

The night was very dark, but there was still a certain gloomy reflection from the sky. Some stars were out, and the heavens showed distinctly against the dark bulk of the buildings.

"I'll risk it," Lee muttered. "It's the only way, at all events."

He had seen that a large water-pipe ran down the wall to the ground. He could easily reach it from the window-ledge, and by slipping down the pipe he knew that he would find himself on the pavement of a side-street. And there was little chance of his being spotted, for the street was quite deserted and devoid of lights.

Nelson Lee was not a man to hesitate once he had come to a decision. He clambered on to the window-sill, softly closed the window, and then firmly gripped the large pipe with his hands, knees, and feet.

Then cautiously he commenced worming his way downwards. Before he had descended five feet, however, disaster overtook him.

There was a certain ominous crack, a sound of rending metal, and then Nelson Lee crashed to the ground, still clinging to a portion of the piping. The latter had given way!

And Lee sprawled upon the pavement, stunned and unconscious. He was helpless—helpless to go to the assistance of the brave girl who was a prisoner within the house. Eileen Dare was now entirely at the mercy of her enemies, and there was not a soul to go to her aid!

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## CHAPTER VI.

### Eileen Decides to Act—Lee's Ruse—The Police Raid—Conclusion.

**M**EANWHILE, Eileen was not quite so helpless as Nelson Lee had supposed. She had heard, in fact, the whole plan exactly as Lee had heard it. She knew what her fate was to be, and was in no way alarmed. For she knew that as long as she kept up the deception that she was unconscious she would hold the upper hand, for she would be able to act when the right opportunity presented itself.

The girl, in fact, was displaying the most remarkable shrewdness and coolness under grim circumstances. She knew that she could act at once if she so desired. But, like Lee, she thought that the risks would be too heavy.

Decidedly, she had better wait until later on. She carried her tiny revolver in a hidden pocket, and she mentally resolved to use the weapon without hesitation if her captors attempted to bind her—for, bound and helpless, she would indeed be at their mercy.

Eileen had no idea that Nelson Lee was near at hand. She was quite determined to get out of her difficulties unaided. Sir Caleb Hurst and his companions thought that she was still stunned. After all, comparatively little time had passed since the blow had been delivered, and—she was a girl.

Sir Caleb made the mistake of thinking that a girl could not recover from such a blow quickly. But Eileen possessed a magnificent constitution, and by sheer will-power she had gathered her wits together quickly. Moreover, the blow had not been so severe as it appeared to be.

Hurst glanced at his watch.

"I don't think we had better waste time," he exclaimed, after a further discussion had taken place. "Ross and myself will remain here, Abbercorn, while you take the girl away. And I think it would be better if you

took the precaution of disguising yourself slightly. When you have got rid of the prisoner, come straight back to me and report."

"I understand," said Ford Abbercorn. "It will be better, perhaps, for you to remain here, Hurst. We must take every precaution. And I shall certainly disguise myself as you suggested."

Eileen remained still and silent. But she saw Abbercorn open a strong cashbox and take from it a false wig and beard. These he donned, and they were so cleverly made that they appeared to be absolutely real—and, after all, Abbercorn did not intend to show himself in any strong light.

What happened next was merely what Eileen anticipated.

She saw a panel slide back in one portion of the wall, and a narrow flight of stone steps was revealed. Abbercorn grasped her feet, and Hurst her shoulders; then she was carried down the stairs, along a damp passage until more stairs were reached. At the top of these stood a stout door, which was bolted and locked. Sir Caleb pushed the bolts back, turned the key in the lock, and the door creaked open. One glance outside told him that the alley was deserted except for a motor-car which stood exactly opposite the door.

"Now, then," he muttered, "quickly, Abbercorn!"

It was the work of a moment to carry the limp girl across the strip of pavement and place her in the closed car. It was so dark that nobody could possibly have seen the brief incident.

Ford Abbercorn entered the car at once, closed the door, and the car immediately started off. The driver evidently knew exactly where to make for, for he headed through the West End for Hampstead without being instructed.

It was an uneventful ride until the Heath was reached.

Eileen lay back, silent and still. She had no intention of showing her hand until the right moment came. Abbercorn sat beside her, smoking rather jerkily, and undoubtedly uneasy. He disliked this task, but he knew that his own safety was at stake, and that thought gave him courage.

From where Eileen lay she could just see out of the window, and she kept a sharp look-out, and at last the blackness all round her, and the absence of other traffic, told her that the automobile was crossing Hampstead Heath.

And then the girl-detective acted.

For a full minute past she had been quietly and steadily working her hand round so that she could grasp her revolver, and now she sat up abruptly, tore the weapon out of her pocket, and pointed the muzzle straight at Ford Abbercorn.

"Stop the car!" she ordered crisply.

Abbercorn's cigar fell out of his mouth, and he fell back.

"Good heavens! What—how——"

"If you do not stop the car at once I shall shoot!" said Eileen steadily.

Abbercorn choked back an oath. In one second he saw that the scheme was wrecked. Eileen Dare was very much on the alert, and she would escape. The thought maddened the man, and he acted desperately.

"Hang you!" he snarled harshly.

And at the same second he brought the back of his hand up and knocked the revolver flying out of Eileen's grasp. She had certainly not been prepared for such prompt activity on Abbercorn's part.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Oh, you——"

She was unable to say more, for Abbercorn's hands were at her throat, and she fell back, utterly unable to protect herself. After all, she was only a girl, and her strength was not like that of her captor.

Her attempt had failed!

But then something else happened—something which was totally unexpected, both by Abbercorn and by Eileen.

The car jerked to a standstill, so suddenly, in fact, that Abbercorn was forced to relinquish his hold. Eileen scrambled up, and her attention was diverted to the door, which had just been flung open. The driver was coming to his master's assistance! Eileen hastily gripped the handle of the opposite door.

"No, you don't!" snarled Abbercorn, now livid with fury. "Stop her, you fool—stop her—— Oh, what the thunder——"

He was unable to get out another word, for the driver simply brought down a heavy spanner on the top of his head with considerable force. It was a drastic measure, but decidedly effective. And Abbercorn was only dazed.

By the time he saw everything clearly again he was partly pulled out of the car, his wrists were handcuffed, and a scarf had been tightly secured round his ankles. Eileen watched with bated breath, and with wide-open eyes.

"And now, my dear young lady, I think we have settled the brute!" exclaimed a well-known voice, rather breathlessly, but with perfect coolness. "But you have surprised me tremendously. I had no idea you were in possession of your senses!"

"Mr. Lee!" gasped Eileen blankly.

"Exactly. I thought it better to keep you in ignorance of the fact that I was driving the car," said Nelson Lee evenly. "Curiously enough, I had intended acting myself at about this time. Your brief struggle with the excellent Mr. Abbercorn has brought matters to a head."

Eileen breathed quickly, and her eyes danced with excitement.

"But—but—— Oh, Mr. Lee, you have given me a surprise!" she exclaimed. "How did you know? Why are you here? And how did you take the driver's place——"

"Dear me! I can't answer every question at once," interjected Nelson Lee smilingly. "Hallo, our friend is getting his wits back! Wait one moment, Miss Eileen; I will very soon deal with Mr. Abbercorn."

The rogue was recovering rapidly, but he was quite helpless, and he was rendered even more so a moment later, for Lee gagged him roughly, but securely. Then the detective stepped out on to the quiet road, and stood beside Eileen. He closed the door and then removed a false beard.

"We are both in the same boat." He smiled. "That is a nasty bruise on your head, Miss Eileen. And I, too, have been in the wars. But my bruise is at the back of my skull, and it is by no means comfortable."

"Oh, you must tell me what you have been doing, Mr. Lee," said the girl anxiously, and with a flushed face as she remembered her attire. "Don't I look a perfect fright?" she added, with true feminine inconsequence.

"Unfortunately it is rather too gloomy for me to see properly," was Nelson Lee's reply. "But I am sure you do not look a fright, my dear young lady. The way you sustained your impersonation in Hurst's house was simply splendid. But although affairs have gone wrong during the evening I think that absolute success will reward our efforts at the finish."

"Oh, do tell me!" implored Eileen. "You are cruel to keep me——"

Nelson Lee interrupted, and at once told the girl what had transpired during the earlier part of the adventure. He explained that he had been in the gambling-house even before Eileen, and that he had watched over her all the time.

He then explained that he had started the alarm that a police raid was

being attempted, and told Eileen what had happened to the roulette-table, and how the transformation had come about.

"Obviously the change was effected by some electrical apparatus," said the detective. "Hurst has some secret switchboard, and if I knew——"

Eileen gripped Lee's arm.

"I know!" she murmured tensely. "I saw it all, Mr. Lee!"

"You saw——"

"Yes, yes! I saw Hurst open a secret cavity, and press down a lot of electrical switches!" said Eileen, with eager eyes. "The switchboard is in that little room, concealed behind a big oil-painting."

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"Dear me! Better and better!" he said softly. "We are getting along famously!"

And after he had heard all that Eileen had to tell there was a fixed look in his eyes—a look of determination and set purpose. He then explained how he had remained behind, and how he had decided to escape from the house.

"Of course, I had no idea that you were really conscious," he said. "Upon my word, Miss Eileen, you acted superbly! And the shrewdness of your plan! To bluff the scoundrels, hear all they had to say, and then make your attempt to escape when you had only Abbercorn to deal with!"

"But he would have overpowered me——"

"I don't think so," was Lee's quiet interruption. "I am sure you would have beaten him. However, I came to the rescue and settled matters. Well, I foolishly decided to escape from Hurst's house by sliding down a rain-pipe. The pipe was obviously unsuited to the purpose, for it broke away, and I was thrown to the pavement below."

"Oh! Were you hurt——"

"As I said, the back of my head was by no means improved," replied Lee. "I have been told that I am hard-headed, but when it comes to a contest between my skull and a paving stone, I give the paving stone best without hesitation. I was quite stunned for the moment, and lay there helpless."

"And then, Mr. Lee?" asked Eileen anxiously.

"And then Nipper came along," said the detective calmly. "Oh, no, it was not a lucky stroke of chance. Nipper had been stationed outside the house all the evening. He knew that we two were inside, and he was simply to be there in case of necessity. As it proved, I was well-advised in placing him on the watch. He saw me fall, rushed across, and quickly poured some brandy down my throat—half of it down my neck, to tell the truth. However, the spirit revived me, and then Nipper and I concocted a plan."

"Oh, you overpowered the driver of the motor-car——"

"Precisely. It was a very simple matter. I handed the fellow over to a police-inspector I am well acquainted with, and he will be dealt with tomorrow—set free, probably, for lack of evidence. But we got rid of him, and I donned his overcoat, cap, and false beard. Hurst and Abbercorn had no suspicion that the chauffeur had been changed. And I drove to this spot—and that's all!"

But it was a very good "all."

Eileen Dare's plans were running beautifully. True, they had gone wrong badly at the beginning, but Nelson Lee could see that absolute success was within reach. He had already formed a daring plan, and there was nothing to stop its being carried out.

Sir Caleb Hurst would suffer the penalty within twenty-four hours!

The incidents which followed next were dramatic, but not exciting. Nelson

Lee opened the door of the motor-car, and while Eileen held a light the detective removed the prisoner's false wig and beard.

Then Lee donned himself, and by a few deft touches he transformed himself into a very presentable double of Abbercorn—the disguised Abbercorn, that is. After that Nelson Lee placed the captive's soft hat on his own head. Lee's overcoat was very similar to Abbercorn's, so there was no necessity for an exchange.

The car then started off again, Eileen inside, guarding the prisoner. Abbercorn was simply shivering with fright, and utterly unable to do anything. He was taken to a big police-station and lodged in the cells. Nelson Lee had a short interview with the superintendent.

The next thing was to see Eileen home. The car, therefore, headed for Chelsea, and Nelson Lee saw that the girl was safely admitted to her luxurious flat. Her aunt, Miss Esther Gilbey, was anxiously awaiting Eileen, and was relieved when Lee told her that everything was all right.

And then Nelson Lee hastened back to Jermyn Street. He lodged the motor-car in a garage, and walked to Sir Caleb's house. The door was answered by Hurst himself and Melville J. Ross. Both were ready to go out, and rather anxious.

Nelson Lee stepped into the dark hall.

"Well, Abbercorn," asked Sir Caleb, "everything all right?"

"Everything," replied Lee, in an exact reproduction of Ford Abbercorn's voice. "The girl's safely put away, and there's nothing for us to fear. She'll be kept there until the small hours of to-morrow night. I have arranged that we shall go there then—but not before."

"Excellent!" said Hurst brutally. "We will settle her hash all right. Where's the car?"

"I left it at a garage," replied Lee. "One of the tyres wants seeing to."

Neither Hurst nor Ross had the slightest suspicion. They could only dimly see their companion, and he certainly looked exactly like the disguised Abbercorn in the gloom. And the voice was identical. Moreover, the two scoundrels had no reason to suspect that anything was wrong.

"Take my advice, Hurst, and go home with Ross to-night," said Lee earnestly. "We can't be too cautious. And if that car was seen——"

"Don't worry," said Sir Caleb. "I have already decided to sleep with Ross. We were only waiting for you, in fact. 'If you're ready we'll go.'"

And two minutes later, after a further conversation, the three men parted, "Abbercorn" taking a different direction to the others. He did not go far, however, for within ten minutes he was back in Jermyn Street, and he there met a slight individual who seemed somewhat bored.

"At last, gov'nor!" murmured this person. "I thought——"

"Never mind what you thought, Nipper," said Nelson Lee crisply. "There's plenty of work ahead—for the pair of us. We've got to start this very instant, and if we finish by dawn we shall be lucky!"

What was the nature of Nelson Lee's scheme?

. . . . .

The following night the climax came—sudden, dramatic, and stunning.

At the very moment when the combine thought that Hurst was safe, disaster overtook him. It was so totally unexpected that every member of the infamous circle of highly-placed criminals was dazed by the shock.

The gambling-house was not so full as usual that night, but there were, nevertheless, a goodly proportion of gamblers. But there was not a single officer of either Services.

And when the gaming-tables were at their busiest there came the sudden tinkle of the alarm-bell.

Another police raid!

And this time it was no bluff affair; it was a raid by a strong force of police and Scotland Yard detectives. Those connected with the gambling-house were getting quite used to raids by now, and they merely smiled at one another, and knew that this affair would be no more serious than the last.

Sir Caleb dashed to the switchboard which was concealed behind the oil-painting, and there he pressed the switches over as he had done the night before; then, with a confident smile, he strolled back into the library.

A startling sight met his gaze. The roulette-table was still in position! Nothing had happened—for some mysterious reason the electrical apparatus had failed to act. Sir Caleb Hurst was absolutely frantic.

And at the same moment men came rushing in from the other gaming-rooms, huskily exclaiming that the trick tables had failed to act. Sir Caleb choked back a curse and hastened to the switchboard again.

Frantically he attempted to see what was wrong. But everything appeared to be in perfect order—everything was as it always had been.

But the contrivances had failed to act!

The result was appalling from Hurst's point of view. Before either he or his confederates or the habitués could even think of escaping every door was blocked by police-officers.

And the whole "shoot" was captured red-handed. There was evidence in full—the roulette-tables, the trente-et-quarante tables—ample proof, in

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fact, to show that Sir Caleb Hurst's residence was nothing less than an extensive gambling club.

Hurst himself was captured as he attempted to escape. He dashed down the secret passage, only to find a couple of burly policemen at the other end. He was caught in the act of fleeing, and every other man there—the habitués of the place—would be heavily fined.

Wholesale arrests were made, and the consternation and confusion was tremendous. But one fact was certain—Sir Caleb Hurst would be sentenced to a term of imprisonment, and his precious gaming-house closed for all time.

He was ruined and disgraced. He had paid the penalty!

Nelson Lee and Nipper, in fact, had entered Hurst's house the previous night, after the detective had bade Sir Caleb and Ross good-night. The pair had worked hard and had achieved much.

Lee had, in short, tampered with the electrical apparatus, and had rendered it utterly unworkable. Therefore, when Sir Caleb had pressed the switches down nothing had resulted.

It had been a long job locating the correct wires, etc., but by dint of hard work the great detective, assisted by Nipper, had succeeded in his enterprise. And Hurst had known nothing about it whatever. The marauders had left no traces.

As for Ford Abbercorn, the charge against him was not pressed, for Lee did not want Eileen's adventures to be made public property. There was no reason why they should be, and she could easily deal with Abbercorn later.

So the rogue was released. He knew, however, that Eileen was still at liberty, and he realised that she had been successful again. Hurst was utterly finished; he was a disgraced man—an exposed criminal.

Lieutenant Harold Pagett was delighted, for his story was now proved to be true, and the Yard apologised to him for having doubted his word. And Pagett badly wanted to pay Nelson Lee a large fee, for he recovered a large proportion of his lost fortune.

But the detective, knowing that the case was really Eileen's, refused. And Pagett was more than satisfied, for the gambling-den was exposed, and the shark who had run it would never fleece any more victims.

Much good had been done, in fact, and Eileen Dare was all the more keenly determined to press on with her campaign until she had finally stamped out the whole combine.

THE END.

I wish to draw the attention of my readers to the  
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**“A CHRISTMAS OF PERIL.”**

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

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

They fall in with a party of blacks led by a stalwart native and an Irishman—one **PETE STORBIN**. They appear friendly, and Storbin tells Clive and Alec that **Pedro Diego**, a rascally "blackbirder," has got an eye on the chums' expedition, for what reason he does not know. The warning comes only just in time. That same day the enemy makes an attack; a desperate fight ensues, and Alec is taken prisoner. (Now read this week's thrilling instalment.)

## Victory!

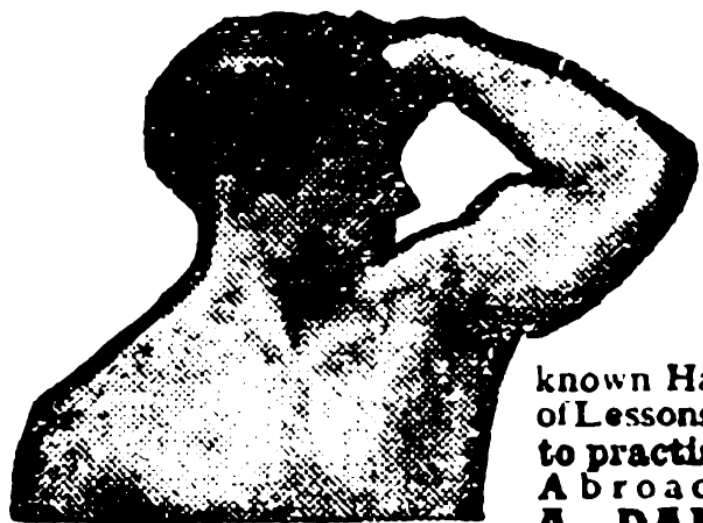
**CLIVE**, in the brief moment when he had caught sight of the fellow's face, had recognised him for the man Alec had tied up beside the fire in the filibuster's camp. This man must have sighted Alec, and resolved to be revenged for the indignity then thrust upon him.

Another of his pals came to aid him, and between the two they were dragging Alec down the hill when Clive rushed at them like a wild cat.

Without firing a shot, and using the butt-end of his revolver only, he sprang first at one man and then at the other, and, in his passion, dealt such vigorous blows that both Alec's assailants went down one after the other like logs.

They must, however, have struck Alec before that, for he, too, lay like a log, and, catching him up with one arm, Clive began to carry him back up the hill.

Two or three figures closed round him. He could not see who or what they were, but, though vaguely aware that he was outmatched, he fought on with a blind despair, dealing blows to right and to left with one hand, whilst he continued to support his chum with the other.



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Things became more and more confused, till it all ended in nothingness, and he seemed to sink down into forgetfulness as does a tired-out sleeper.

When he again came to his senses he was lying on the ground, his head and shoulders supported by Alec, while Storbin was bathing his forehead with a wet cloth.

"The saints be praised! The bhoys is comin' to!" exclaimed Storbin. "Faith, but it's a near squake he's had. I belave as he must have noine loives, fur he's lost two or three av thim this day, an', be the powers, he's aloive still!"

Clive heard the words, and spite of the fact that his head ached horribly, laughed at the Irishman's quaint way of expressing himself.

"What about yourself, my friend?" he asked, in a weak voice. "I fancy you must have had more than one narrow squeak! It's a marvel to me to see you alive. But how is the fight going?"

"The foight, sorr, is over an' done with. The inemy is in floight. We've got some pris'ners, an' pretty soights they be; somebody's knocked 'em about, Oi can tell ye! The rest av the spalpeens is dead or runnin' fur their lives as hard as their fate can take thim, the cursed sons av perdition! Ay, even Pedro Diego himself is racin' away wi' some av our bhoys behind him, loike a hare wi' the hounds afther him! So it's victory we've won, sorr—a grand, glorious victory! If we haven't killed Diego, we've clipped his claws fur him an' taught him a lesson t' kape shy av Irishmen an' Kanakas in future—ay, an' av treasure-hunters," he added slyly.

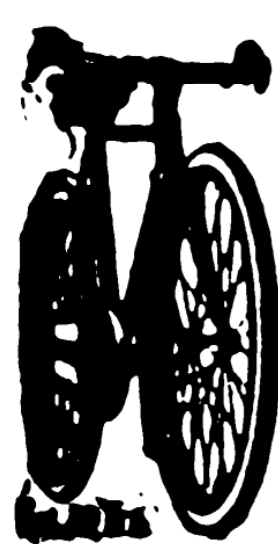
The irrepressible Irishman's high spirits and good humour were infectious, and, spite of his aching head, Clive roused up and insisted on knowing what had happened to everybody, beginning with his chum.

Alec, like Clive himself, had several injuries to show; but though they would have thought a good deal of them at ordinary times, they seemed to be of small account beside what had happened to others. Two of the blacks who had fought so gallantly were dead, several others had serious wounds, and not one had escaped scot-free.

Oltra and Storbin had each more than one wound, but they made light of them. As to Clive and Alec, their chief concern now was for those who were the most badly hurt.

"What are you going to do?" he asked Storbin. "You can't drag these poor fellows over the country to your canoes. You'd best bring them to our camp, and send one or two of your chaps with a message to the canoes to come round the coast and meet you at the camp. There we've got plenty of proper appliances—bandages, and all that, and the doctor is there, you know, too."

"Huh! These chaps doan't want much dotherin'. They know how to dother themselves betther than anybody else can. An' it's wonderful, it is,



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how soon the gossoons recover from very bad wounds. So doan't ye throuble about thim; but, all the same, we'll do as ye say, and come to yez camp fur some food, if ye'll give us some. An' Oi'll sind a bhoys afther the canoes. The saints be praised! The country is safe for him to travel in it just now. The divils have had their lesson, an' they won't be ready for more foightin' jist yet."

And thus it came about that in the early morning, just as dawn was breaking, one of the doctor's scouts outside the camp descried a considerable party, seemingly all natives, or nearly so, approaching from the interior. He sent word to the doctor, who despatched Ben Grove and three or four other men to see who the people were.

And then, to Ben's joy, he found that the supposed strangers were their young leaders, in company with what proved to be to a large extent a crowd of the halt, maimed, and crippled.

Honest Ben had been up all night in his anxiety. Scouting parties had been out searching in all directions—all directions, that is, but the right one, for, as Alec had foreseen, knowing the way they had started in the boat, no one at the camp had guessed they would be likely to return by a route so exactly opposite, as it seemed, to the direction in which they had set out.

"The doctor'll be main glad t' see ye returned safe," Ben declared heartily, as he relieved the two young leaders of their rifles and other small articles they were carrying. "But—whales and little fishes!—who be all this lot ye've brought with ye?"

"They're some poor natives we've rescued from some 'blackbirders,' Ben," Alec exclaimed. "And," he added, with a laugh, "a lot more who rescued us. By the way, tell one of your chaps to take possession of that case you see over there, and tell 'em to handle it carefully. It's a case of ammunition, cartridges—the residue of a capture we made."

Ben whistled.

"Oho!" he cried, in admiring tones. "So ye've bin spoilin' the enemy? For I guess this must be somethin' in the shape o' spoils?"

"It is, Ben; you're quite right," said Alec. "You see, we've not come back with empty hands."

"No; but by the look of ye I fancy ye've brought back empty stomachs, sir. Well, I've thought of that, an' ye'll find somethin' waitin' for ye in the canteen tent."

"Ben, you deserve a medal for that! You're a treasure!" exclaimed Clive. "I'm as hungry as a hunter can well be—in fact, as several hunters, and a half-starved lion or two thrown in. We'll be jolly glad to pitch into some victuals after speaking to the doctor; we must see him first to assure him we're all right. But you must find some food for all these chaps we have brought with us, too. They're worse off than we are, I fear, so don't keep them waitin' and don't stint them."

"Right you are, sir. I'll see to 'em," Ben declared cheerily. "You go to the doctor, an' leave them t' me!"

A few minutes later Alec and Clive were in the doctor's tent, giving him a brief account of their adventures.

He looked grave when he heard about the filibusters and the fighters.

(Continued overleaf.)

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"This is a bad business," he said. "I don't mean that I blame you in any way. I do not see that you could well have acted otherwise than you have. But it is bad that circumstances should have conspired, as it were, to bring us in collision in this way with such men as these slave-hunters evidently are."

"According to what this eccentric Irishman says—who is a great man in his—Oltra's—country, it seems—head scrag and bottle-washer—it may be rather a good thing," Alec pointed out. "He declares he knows that they had intended to attack us, and would probably have done so suddenly and treacherously. Their cupidity has evidently been roused by statements made by that rascal Miguel about what he overheard here that first night. And they've made up their minds, I suspect, to oust us and take up the treasure hunt themselves."

"Well," the doctor returned calmly, "they'll find I am prepared if they attack us here. It is not my first voyage in this part of the world, you know. I have had former experience of gentlemen of their kidney, and it's taught me the wisdom of being well armed. If they think that the yacht and we ourselves will fall an easy prey, they'll find they reckoned without their host," he finished grimly.

"But now, about these people you have made friends with—the chief you call Oltra and his odd factotum, the Irishman. They seem to be decent sort of fellows. They appear to have behaved very well."

"Well? Splendid!" Clive declared.

"Nobody could have shown themselves more reliable and more loyal," Alec agreed.

"I must see them, and thank them for what they have done. I shall be glad of the opportunity of making friends with such people. And their men all seem trustworthy, too, eh?"

"Oh, dear, yes. And they are so grateful, poor fellows."

"Perhaps, now they're here, they might like to take service with me for a time—some of them. I can see we shall want more men—we have not enough, as things are shaping—and we shall have to weed out some of those we've got."

The doctor examined the young fellows' hurts, and, finding that they were doing well, sent them off to get some food, a bath, and a change of clothes and other little luxuries.

A couple of hours later they were back in his tent, this time with the native chief and his henchman.

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