

No. 82.—DETECTIVE TALES FOR EVERYONE.—1^D. *Week ending Dec. 30, 1916.*

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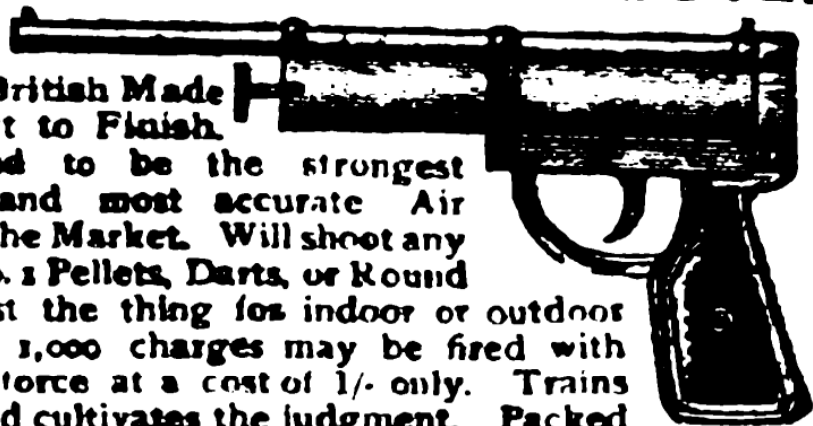
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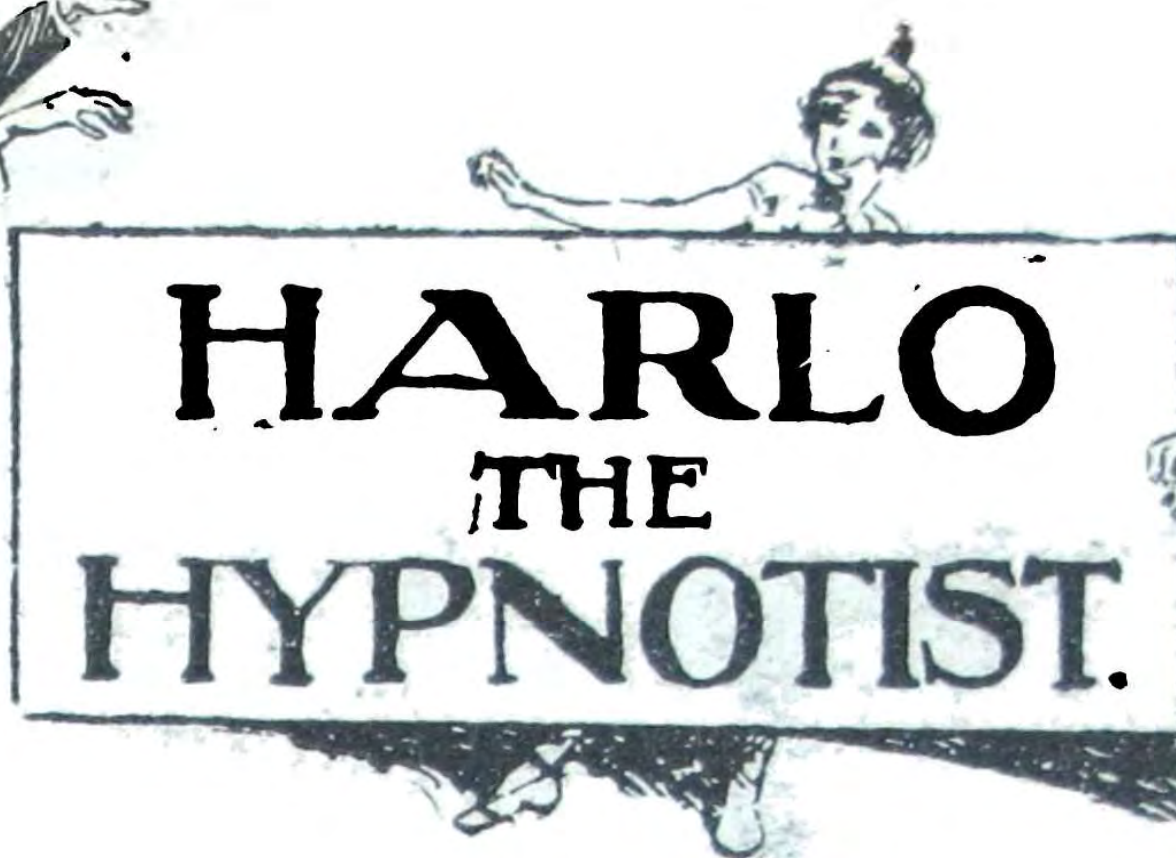
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THE PROLOGUE.

I.

The Sentence—Violet Elsmore's Trust.

"GUILTY!"

There was a deep hush in the court as the foreman of the jury pronounced that one, single, expected word. For there was not a man present who had anticipated any other verdict.

The prisoner in the dock merely gripped the rail a little more tightly, but otherwise showed no sign of emotion. He was a tall, well-set-up man of perhaps forty years of age. All eyes were turned upon him, but he did not seem to notice any of them.

After the usual procedure the judge passed sentence. He did so with a grave expression upon his lined, kindly old face.

"John Elsmore, I have listened to all the evidence which this case has brought forth, and I can only heartily agree with the verdict which the jury has brought in," exclaimed the judge, in even, well-modulated tones. "Your crime was most unwarranted and brutal. I do not say that you are brutal by nature, but I judge that you are unfortunate enough to possess an ungovernable temper. For that you will now have to pay. You quarrelled with Rupert Crosfield over a simple affair of business, and you attacked him in a manner which can only be described as ruffianly. In that attack you killed him, for he had a weak heart and was unable to stand the shock."

The judge paused for a moment, and clasped his fingers before him.

"I am satisfied by the evidence that you had no intention of murder in your heart," he proceeded. "In some ways I can sympathise with you, for I believe that what you did was done when you were in such a fury that you were scarcely responsible for your actions. But you brutally killed Rupert Crosfield, and for that crime you must be punished according to your deserts. You will be sent into penal servitude for the period of ten years!"

For one tense second a pin could have been heard to drop in the hushed court. Then the prisoner swayed slightly and turned deathly pale.

"Ten years!" he echoed hoarsely. "What have I done? What have I done to deserve such a terrible punishment? It was an accident; I hardly touched him——"

And then John Elsmore collapsed upon the seat in the dock, and a low murmur at once broke out from the body of the court. The verdict was not much of a surprise to most people, but to the prisoner himself it was a terrible shock.

He knew that he was guilty of manslaughter. But it had been a pure accident, and John Elsmore had confidently expected that he would receive no more than three years at the very utmost.

But ten! Ten years of living death in a convict prison! It was too much for the man, and he had no strength to bear himself. He was gently assisted from the dock and taken away.

The trial had been a short one altogether. Elsmore had pleaded guilty from the first, knowing that he had committed the deed, and realising that it would be better to be frank and open.

His life was wrecked—shattered and ruined—and all because of one short fit of temper, all because Rupert Crosfield had had a weak heart. Elsmore's assault had not been so exceptionally brutal. Crosfield had died more of sudden shock than anything else. And for that John Elsmore was to go into penal servitude for ten years!

It was terribly cruel, but it was justice. The prisoner was guilty of manslaughter, and he would accordingly have to suffer the penalty.

The whole affair had been so unexpected—so dramatic. Elsmore had been a struggling mining engineer, and one afternoon had visited a business acquaintance in the latter's office. During the conversation which ensued a heated argument had arisen. Elsmore was cursed with a fierce, violent temper, and he had become absolutely infuriated by a bitter taunt which his companion had uttered.

Scarcely without knowing it Elsmore had sprung forward, and had crashed his fist into Crosfield's face. The latter fell back and lay still, and when a doctor had arrived upon the scene he had pronounced life extinct.

Undoubtedly Elsmore had killed the man. But it was not murder, and when the mining engineer had been arrested he had confidently hoped—although fully realising the seriousness of the situation—that he would be let off lightly.

And now the terrible blow had fallen.

After a while John Elsmore recovered somewhat. He had been inclined to give way to a terrible fit of temper; but he checked himself, knowing that it was his temper which had landed him in the present position. And he was told that his daughter was waiting to see him, to bid him good-bye.

Elsmore was a widower; his wife had died many years before, and now he was glad of it. He was glad that she was at rest and in peace. She, at all events, would know nothing of this sordid tragedy.

"Father!"

Elsmore turned, a lump rising in his throat.

"Oh, father, I—I can't believe it!" sobbed Violet Elsmore, coming towards him with outstretched arms and streaming cheeks. "They sha'n't take you from me—they sha'n't, they sha'n't!"

"My poor little Vi!" muttered the man brokenly. "God knows I deserve punishment for what I did; but this—— Ten years! Oh, my child, you must be brave! You must harden your heart and make it as easy for me as possible!"

The girl clung to him pitifully.

"They sha'n't take you, dad!" she whimpered. "Oh, it's cruel—— But I am wicked to give way like this. It is all the harder for you, isn't it? I can come and see you sometimes, can't I?"

He didn't answer. At that moment speech was impossible for him. He could only press the girl to him and furtively wipe with his sleeve the tears which sprang unbidden to his heavy eyes.

Poor little girl! She was only fifteen—a mere child. Great as the shock was to him, it must have been immeasurably more severe to her. She was a slim, active girl, dark and pretty, with glorious deep brown eyes.

"You can come and see me, of course!" he muttered at last. "Yes, my darling, they will let you visit me sometimes. And you must live with your aunt. She will make you happy and comfortable. And the years will soon pass, Vi dear. The years will roll away——"

"It will seem an eternity, dad!" she sobbed pitifully.

"No, no! I shall still be as hale and hearty as I am now," Elsmore exclaimed, trying to soothe her. And you—why, you will be a girl of twenty—twenty——" He hesitated, fearful to name the year. "Not twenty-five," he added huskily. "I shall get some of my time remitted, of course. Years perhaps."

"Oh, dad, will you really?" she asked eagerly.

"Of course!" he replied, quick to see that she was somewhat comforted. "I shall behave well, and they release well-behaved men long before their time is up. Heaven, how strange it sounds! But I was forgetting, Violet. I have something for you—something you must treasure."

The girl looked at him wonderingly.

"What do you mean, father?" she asked.

He drew from one of his pockets an old-fashioned gold locket—a heavy affair, with a richly engraved surface. He opened it, and revealed the face of a sweet woman. It was a photograph of Violet's mother.

"Now, little girl, you must listen to me carefully," Elsmore said quietly. "Take this locket and keep it with you always—always. Do you understand? It is priceless to me and to you. Never for one moment let it go out of your possession."

"Is—is it valuable, dad?" she asked in a whisper.

"Not in itself, perhaps," he replied. "But remember my words, Vi. Keep this locket as though it were holy. Keep it until I come out of—of prison. You will promise me that, won't you, child?"

"Yes, father, I—I promise," she murmured, taking the locket. "I swear that I will keep the locket always, and prize it above all else."

"May God give you strength and will to carry out that resolve!" he said, with strange emotion. "You do not realise what that locket means to me, Violet—to us. For when I return to you we shall soon be rich."

"Rich, dad?"

"Ay, wealthy," was Elsmore's reply. "I trust the locket to your keeping, my child, and feel comfortable and safe in doing so. Much depends upon it—very much. And now, Violet dear, they are coming to take you from me. Good-bye, girlie! God guard you in the years to come!"

And after a pitiful little scene, John Elsmore was led away. And Violet, after the first flood of tears had expended itself, again swore that she would keep her solemn promise, and never part with the locket.

Exactly how much depended upon her oath the girl had not the faintest conception.

II.

A Bid for Liberty—Bannister's Promise—Base Treachery!

THE mist lay dull and heavy upon the grey, sullen landscape. A drab and dismal scene even in full sunlight, it was now gloomy and depressing in the extreme. Portmoor Prison was situated on one of the most desolate spots of land in the west of England, and the scene of the quarries was one of the barest of all the bare places.

To-day, especially, the quarries were looking sombre and cheerless. The gangs of convicts were working in sullen silence, with the watchful eyes of warders upon them from every quarter.

Now and again one or more of the convicts would glance up furtively at the landscape, for there are always some reckless spirits ready to make a bid for liberty at the slightest opportunity. But the prison authorities were usually on their guard against sudden drifting banks of fog, and it was very seldom any of the poor wretches under their care had the chance they longed for.

In one of the gangs a tall man was working industriously and quietly. He was Convict 152—in private life, John Elsmore. But he had had no use for his name for a period of five years. During those weary years he had been known merely by a number.

Beside him a short, stumpy convict worked with equal industry. His name was Bannister, and he and Elsmore were friendly—as far as it was possible to be friendly in a convict settlement. Both were “good-behaviour” men, and the warders knew that they could be trusted to do their work well without attention.

Elsmore had changed a lot during his five years of convict life. His hair was now iron grey, and his face lined and troubled. Every day of the week and every week of every year his chief thoughts were for his daughter—the little girl he had parted with at the criminal court on that now far-distant day.

Often enough he had pictured to himself just how she would look now. She would be twenty, of course, and greatly changed. He had no necessity to wonder whether she had forgotten, or whether she still cared for him, for, as regularly as it was permissible, he received letters which were full of kindness and love. Never once had she failed during the whole term of his confinement.

And the knowledge that his little girl—he always chose to think of her as little—was thinking and waiting for him made Elsmore contented with his lot. He was spurred to be on his best behaviour always, and to do everything possible to earn a shortening of his sentence.

To-day he was as quiet as ever, and the prospect of a sudden fog did not trouble him at all. He had often vowed to himself that he would never make any attempt to escape, however favourable the opportunity seemed.

But, somehow, on this particular day a wild desire seemed to come over him to be free—free! He wanted to see his daughter again; he wanted to be out in the open world, among decent men and women. But as he worked he shook his head sadly and told himself that he must be patient. Heaven above knew that he had learned how to be patient during those five dragged-out years.

And then, all in a moment, a thick impenetrable bank of dense fog swept over the quarries and blotted everything out. The sounds of the picks quite near to Elsmore were silenced as though by a magical hand.

It was seldom that the warders were surprised, but they were surprised on

this occasion. In a moment the air was ringing with muffled shouts and orders; and suddenly Convict 152 felt his arm gripped fiercely.

"It's a chance!" exclaimed a hoarse, tense voice. "Let's make a dash for it, Elsmore—let's try while we've got the chance!"

The voice was Bannister's, and it seemed to send a thrill through Elsmore's whole frame. In a moment all his good resolutions were cast to the wind. A sudden madness seized him, and he felt ready, at that moment, to go to any insane lengths.

"I'm ready!" he muttered fiercely. "But which way shall we go, Bannister?"

"Follow me, man—follow me!"

And, almost before Elsmore realised it, he and his companion were stumbling through the fog, careless of the consequences. They did not think of the risks, or consider the difficulties which would beset their path later on. Like the majority of the poor brutes who sometimes made a dash for liberty, they thought only of the moment.

But luck favoured them—or seemed to at first.

They dashed across the rough ground, and were not accosted from any quarter. They could dimly hear the shouts of the warders, seeming to come from the vague distance. And then a couple of sharp reports rang out, echoing strangely in the fog. They were at the edge of the quarries now, and a short uphill climb would lead them upon the open moor.

It was a difficult task, scrambling up the rough, jagged path. Their hands were torn and bleeding by the time they reached the top. Bannister arrived first, and he held out his hand to assist Elsmore on the last yard.

The two stood upon the moor at last, and they breathed with unwonted freedom. It was something strange and novel to be somewhere beyond the reach of the warders' eyes. But they did not linger; side by side they hastened forward, blindly, and at random. They could not see a yard in any direction, and all sounds were cut off.

Freedom was theirs!

But a cruel fate stepped in at that very moment. Probably an armed warder heard their stumbling footsteps, and fired at random. At all events, two dull reports rang out, one following the other sharply. And with a low gasping cry John Elsmore stumbled and fell headlong.

"Pick yourself up!" grated Bannister harshly.

"I am hit!" came the husky reply. "Don't wait, old man! You get clear while there's time. Leave me where I am. I am done for!"

But Bannister, convict and felon though he was, possessed some nobler instinct. He did not obey the fallen man's injunction, but fell to his knees beside him.

"You must come, Elsmore," he exclaimed fiercely. "Where are you hit? I may be able to support you——"

"No, no! I tell you I am done!" choked the other. "It's in my chest—my lungs! I am dying, man. The brutes have got me in a vital spot. What a fool I was to——"

"Curse them!" snarled Bannister, in an accent of fury. "They are murderers—that's what they are! Poor old chap, can't I do anything for you?"

Elsmore panted with difficulty for a moment.

"My daughter—my little Violet!" he muttered. "You may escape, Bannister; you may get clear. Yes, there is something you can do for me. Before I came to this accursed place I gave my daughter a gold locket. It contains—it contains——"

"Well?" asked the other, as Elsmore hesitated.

"I'll trust you, Bannister. You've been good to me; you're standing by me like a true friend. I'm dying—I know it!"

And then, in short, broken sentences, John Elsmore told the other convict his secret—the secret which even his own daughter was in ignorance of.

"I've told you where to find her," finished Elsmore chokingly. "Go to her and tell her to open the locket and follow my instructions with regard to its contents. May Heaven grant you gain your liberty. You'll promise to do what I ask, won't you?"

The two men gripped hands.

"Yes, I promise!" exclaimed Bannister, in a dull voice. "I'll act straight—you needn't fear. Heaven, what a cruel shame it is that you should have been potted! But I'll go—I'll try my luck, anyhow."

It was impossible for Bannister to see his companion with any distinctness, for the fog was thicker than ever. But Elsmore was certain that he was dying. And the other convict, mad with the tragedy of it all, staggered off without another word. He carried with him a secret which would never have been his under any other circumstances.

For hours he stumbled on blindly and hopelessly. When darkness came the fog lifted somewhat, but he was undiscovered. How he went through that night he never knew. But at last he staggered into a dense wood, and there collapsed through sheer fatigue. He went straight to sleep, and when he awoke it was broad daylight.

The rain was pelting down in torrents, and his first thought was to wash his parched mouth. In spite of the dreadful hunger which assailed him he knew that it would be fatal to venture from cover. And so, during the whole day, he crouched beneath an overhanging bank, gaining what little shelter was possible under the circumstances.

And when night came once more the sheer necessity for food made Bannister venture out. He cared little what became of him now, and almost longed for recapture. In spite of his exhaustion, however, he plodded on mile after mile. It mattered little to him which direction he took, for he had not the slightest idea where he was.

It was still raining hard, and the night was as black as pitch. Bannister's only thought was to find a house or a cottage. At the risk of recapture he would break in and find food.

After he had been going for several hours, drunkenly and blindly, he saw faint lights ahead. It was the first sign of habitation he had seen, and it cheered him up to such an extent that he was given fresh strength. But when he had shortened the distance he found that it was no house which contained the light, but a solitary signal cabin on the railway. But it was something. The signalman probably had some food of sorts in the cabin, and Bannister felt that he could commit murder for a crust of bread.

But he changed his mind just before he reached the cabin, for he saw that a goods train was standing before a red signal, and even as he came upon it the red changed to green, and the train started with a noisy clanking.

Without hesitation Bannister leapt upon one of the trucks, and fell among a miscellaneous assortment of agricultural implements. He was bruised and torn, but the welcome rest was like paradise to him.

It seemed to him that the train kept going for hundreds of miles. In reality it travelled about thirty, and then came to a standstill at a small, dark, deserted station. Bannister's wits were sharpened now, and he at once leapt to the ground and slunk away into the darkness. For perhaps a mile he walked, and then saw dimly before him a small cottage. It was in total darkness and seemed deserted.

Within ten minutes the exhausted convict was within a little scullery at the back, and almost at once he stumbled over some articles and caused a noisy clatter. But he was too physically weak to flee, and stood there in the darkness shivering as though with ague.

A door suddenly opened, and Bannister was dazzled by the light of a flickering candle. It was held by a tall, distinguished-looking man, obviously a gentleman. For a moment the pair stared at one another.

"Give me food!" croaked Bannister. "Give me up to the warders if you like, but I must have food."

The other man's face broke into a cynical smile.

"You do not seem to possess much stamina, my friend!" he exclaimed, in soft tones. "For an escaped convict you are surprisingly meek. But why should I give you food? If I do so you will probably turn upon me——"

"I'm done!" whispered the convict. "For Heaven's sake don't stand there like that. I knew I should finish myself by breaking in here. Hang you," he added suddenly, with fierce fury, "give me food or I'll——"

"I am afraid you will not do much," said the other grimly. "Or perhaps I had better say I am not afraid. But you have touched my heartstring, and I will see what I can do for you. It may interest you to know that I am carrying a fully loaded revolver in my coat pocket."

Bannister made no reply. He watched the tall man set the candle upon the table and then open the door of a small cupboard. From this he produced half a loaf of bread, a small joint of meat, and some cold potatoes.

Bannister was gulping down the food within a minute, and his whole attention was given to that task. He did not seem to notice anything strange in the proceedings.

If Bannister had expected anything at all he would have anticipated finding a farm labourer and his wife in possession of the cottage. This well-bred man with the calm manner was out of place in such surroundings.

And, as a matter of fact, there was a very definite reason for the stranger's behaviour, for he, too, was hiding from justice. And he was capable of finding a little sympathy in his heart for this poor, half-starved wretch who had appeared from the darkness of the night.

Moreover, the occupant of the cottage could have done little else under the circumstances. He had no wish to give the convict up to the warders; but he certainly wanted the man to leave his cottage at the earliest possible moment. And the best way of assuring that was to give him the food he demanded.

For this incongruous cottager was none other than Dr. Munro Taggert, the once famous London specialist. He had been implicated in a certain scoundrelly plot against a young Canadian, and had only escaped arrest by fleeing at the last moment. For weeks he had skulked in hiding, and at last had found refuge in this quiet country cottage.

It was disconcerting to find his peace suddenly broken by a starving convict. Dr. Taggert had no wish to have prison warders questioning him, and he was determined to throw this fellow out as soon as his hunger was satisfied. Taggert kept his head well and realised that his best course was to give the convict food and then bid him go.

It was a curious little scene in that tiny cottage kitchen, and Bannister ate the potatoes and bread with ravenous relish. The effect of the food was rather disconcerting for Dr. Taggert. Bannister was worn out; when he had arrived at the cottage he had been on the point of utter exhaustion.

And, having eaten, he fell forward in his chair, one arm upon the table, asleep. His hunger was satisfied, but his other terrible hardships had weakened him and made him a pitiful object.

"Come!" exclaimed Dr. Taggert sharply. "Get up, and clear out of this cottage. I will be generous and give you a chance of liberty——"

"It's important," muttered Bannister dazedly. "I won't forget, Elsmore. I know your daughter's address and I'll tell her. I'll tell her that secret which you've kept from her so long."

"Come, come!" repeated Taggert, shaking the convict's shoulder. "What are you gabbling about?"

"It's worth thousands—a vast fortune!" whispered Bannister. "And your daughter shall have all of it, Elsmore. I won't play you false. I—— Oh, oh! I—I—let me sleep!"

For a moment Bannister was alive to his surroundings, and then mumbled out the plea to let him sleep. He lay upon the table, still muttering to himself in a dull, toneless voice. Taggert caught some of the words, and the angry frown which had begun to appear on his face disappeared.

"A vast fortune! I wonder what the fellow can mean?" murmured the doctor to himself. "Merely raving, I presume. Yet I do not think so. I have had experiences of exhausted men before, but I believe this convict to be repeating some words he has uttered fairly recently. H'm! I must admit my curiosity is aroused."

It was not so much Dr. Taggert's curiosity. It was the mention of a fortune which made him pause. Taggert was in low water; he did not think it wise to communicate with old associates, and was rather pressed for money. He had foiled the police, but he was quite ready and willing to get hold of some money if half a chance presented itself.

It seemed preposterous to suppose that this convict should know of any means whereby a fortune could be obtained. But even convicts are sometimes entrusted with strange secrets, and Taggert thought it worth while to look further into the thing. He jerked Bannister upright with a sudden swing of the shoulder.

And then, as the man blinked dazedly up at him, Taggert held the candle at arm's length so that the light fell full upon his own eyes. They had become black as night, and gleamed with a sinister fire.

"Tell me about Elsmore and the fortune," he exclaimed slowly, deliberately, and with strange intentness. "Tell me everything you know. You will be well advised to do exactly as I order——"

Bannister seemed to pull himself together.

"Elsmore—Elsmore!" he muttered. "No, by thunder! I won't say a word about what he told me—not a word. I gave him my oath that I would act straight. Poor Elsmore—poor old chap! He was potted—potted in the chest——"

"My good man, I am not asking you to divulge any secret," said Dr. Munro Taggert, still keeping his gaze fixed upon the other's sleep-dimmed eyes. "I am a London solicitor, staying down here on a holiday. And, curiously enough, one of my legal duties is to see after a young girl named Elsmore. Her father is in prison, and I am in sole and absolute charge of her affairs. If there is anything which must be told to her, you will be wise to inform me. You see, I am quite open with you; you must be open with me."

"You—you are Violet Elsmore's guardian?" asked Bannister thickly.

"Precisely," was Taggert's glib reply. "I am Violet Elsmore's solicitor. She has hinted to me sometimes that her father had a great secret to tell her. If that secret is now in your keeping I will guarantee that the girl knows of it at the earliest possible moment."

Bannister was not an ordinary criminal; he was in prison for forgery.

He had foolishly attempted to obtain some money on a cheque which was worthless—which he himself had signed, copying another man's name. It had been done in a mad moment, and Bannister had been paying the penalty for three years.

Had he been a criminal born he would perhaps have been cunning enough to suspect that Dr. Taggert was merely pumping him. As it was, Bannister thought what a remarkably good stroke of fortune it was that he should be talking with the very man who could be properly entrusted with Elsmore's secret.

The convict's wits were dulled, and he was not capable of resisting his companion's will-power. Those eyes seemed to burn right into him, and he found himself speaking—forming the words with his lips—before his brain prompted him to do so.

Besides, had not Dr. Taggert shown himself to be well acquainted with the facts? If he were playing a trick he could not have spoken so freely and with such knowledge regarding Elsmore and his daughter.

Bannister did not know that he had been half deliriously referring to the very subject himself! As was only natural, he took it for granted at once that his distinguished-looking companion was what he proclaimed to be.

Bannister had given his word to John Elsmore that he would keep the secret and divulge it to no one else but Violet. And he had meant to keep his word, strictly and honourably.

But in these present circumstances the poor fellow was in no way to blame for blurting out the whole story. He had no conception of the cunning which filled the soul of this refined rogue who now faced him.

And Dr. Taggert was a man with a masterful will. He had on various occasions practised mesmerism upon weak-willed subjects with a certain measure of success. And now he knew that he had got this convict completely under his influence. Bannister was not weak-willed ordinarily, but now he was in such a state of physical and mental exhaustion that he had little more power of resistance than a child.

Taggert put his questions cunningly, and the convict replied to them all in a dull, toneless voice, which clearly showed how mechanically he was speaking—how automatically his weakened mind responded to the greater will.

Taggert dragged the whole story out of his victim. And as he proceeded the doctor's eyes became even more evil, and an expression of eager triumph found a place in them.

Taggert was told of the escape from Portmoor Prison, and how John Elsmore had been shot just when escape had seemed on the point of accomplishment. He learned how Elsmore had begged his companion to go to his daughter.

Taggert learned exactly where Violet was, and how she was living. He heard all about the locket—the gold locket which her father had entrusted to her on the day of his sentence.

That gold locket contained something of which she was in complete ignorance. Elsmore, thinking he was dying, and that his daughter would never benefit, had told Bannister all—making him swear that he would go to the girl and make known to her the wonderful fact that she could soon be rich. She was old enough now to know the secret, and Bannister had promised to seek her out and do precisely as her father had desired.

And Dr. Munro Taggert heard it all.

He learned every little detail, and knew—positively knew—that if he went to work in the right way, he would be able to gain for himself a fortune of

great proportions and luxury for life. No longer had he any doubt that this convict story was true. He was absolutely convinced of the genuineness of the whole pitiful tale.

And poor Bannister—he deserved to be pitied—was basely betrayed. Dr. Taggert, having learned the secret, realised that it would be better for him—far better—if Bannister were placed safely under lock and key once more. He would then be able to go his own way, and to take his own time.

The convict fell into a doze even as he answered the last question which Taggert put. And he only aroused himself for a moment to gulp down a neat wineglassful of whisky. He was unaware of the fact, but Taggert had consulted a small medicine case before offering his companion the whisky. In short, the spirit was drugged, and Bannister fell into a dead sleep from which he would not awaken for hours.

And then, in the darkness of the night, Dr. Munro Taggert dragged his victim out across fields and meadows until at last he reached a narrow by-lane. Here, upon the wet grass, he left the unconscious convict.

The result was certain.

In the morning Bannister was seen by some passing labourers, and an hour later he was once more in the hands of the Portmoor Prison authorities. His attempt to escape had been futile, and he had betrayed his trust! But, all said and done, Bannister was not to blame. He had fallen a victim to one of the basest rogues outside prison walls.

And thus, in that strange manner, John Elsmore's secret had passed from Elsmore to Bannister, and from Bannister to Dr. Munro Taggert. The two former were now utterly helpless, safely under lock and key at Portmoor. For Elsmore was not dying, as he had thought; he was only injured.

The situation was all in favour of Dr. Taggert. He possessed the secret, and was free to use it as he chose. And he fully intended to profit by his wickedly gained knowledge to the fullest extent.

END OF PROLOGUE.

CHAPTER I.

An Alarming M'shap—Eileen's Promise—At the Circus.

“GLORIOUS!” said Nipper admiringly.

The big open touring-car was spinning along at a keen, lively pace over the frosty roads. The sun shone down with unusual brilliance, and the air was pure, invigorating, and refreshing.

Nipper sat in the tonneau, and Nelson Lee in the front seat beside the driver. The latter was a slim girl, with rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes. She was, in fact, none other than Eileen Dare, Lee's lady assistant.

Eileen was an expert motorist, and the way in which she was handling the great detective's car was ample proof of her prowess. And Nipper, when he made his impulsive remark, happened to be looking straight at the girl.

Whether he referred to her or to the weather or to the motor-ride was a matter known only to himself. Certainly the word “glorious” applied in all three senses. For the day was perfect, the ride thoroughly enjoyable—and Eileen was looking her very best.

And she was glorious indeed. Always dainty and pretty, she now looked infinitely more so. The frosty air had coloured her smooth cheeks delightfully, and there was a sparkle of joy in her deep brown eyes.

She was attired in a rich fur coat, and a high collar, which completely covered her neck. Her head seemed to nestle in a mass of fur, and her little

hands were encased in warm, fur-lined gloves. Eileen was undoubtedly well protected from the cold, and she took sheer delight in letting the wind rush against her cheeks.

"Now, Mr. Lee, you're glad you came, aren't you?" she asked, turning her head.

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Very," he replied. "This ride will do us all good, I am sure. We shall soon be at Chelmsford at this rate. We are on the open country road now --and it's a good road all the way."

It was early afternoon, and at luncheon time both Nelson Lee and Nipper had had no intention of careering out into the open country merely for the sake of a "joy ride," as Nipper expressed it.

The great criminologist, in fact, had fully intended burying himself in the midst of some important chemical research work in his laboratory. Nipper was to have got busy filing up letters, cuttings, etc., which had been allowed to get behind.

But then, just as they were on the point of setting about their respective tasks, Eileen Dare had appeared. And that--to quote Nipper again--had "put the kybosh" on all work for the afternoon.

For the girl had come in with the fixed intention of carrying Leo and Nipper off for a ride into the country. It happened that her aunt, Miss Esther Gilbey, had run down to Chelmsford the previous day, and Eileen had decided to fetch the old lady back by road, the afternoon being so perfect.

And she had concluded that Nelson Lee's own motor-car would suit her purpose better than any other. Eileen had therefore called round to borrow it, and had persuaded the detective to accompany her on her journey. Nipper, of course, had taken it for granted that he should go too, and they were both now exceedingly glad that Eileen Dare had called.

For the motor-ride was thoroughly enjoyable in every sense. It would have been impossible to recollect a finer winter's day. The air was so clear that one could see for miles in any direction, and the sun shone down upon the frost-bound countryside with almost springlike warmth.

Lee had been tied to work in London for some little time, and he therefore found this journey exceptionably pleasurable. Eileen herself had not been working on any particular case for a week or two, and was anxious to find another opening for her singular talents.

For the girl was engaged upon a strange campaign. Although dainty, pretty, and seemingly harmless, she was amazingly clever in every branch of detective work, and Nelson Lee himself had several times admitted that Eileen was quite capable of giving him points now and again.

Months before Eileen's father had been disgraced and killed by a band of clever, scheming rogues who privately called themselves the "Combine." And the girl had been fighting this rascally Combine, and had already accounted for many of its powerful members. One by one they had laid themselves open to attack--and she had struck the vital blow at the right moment.

It was a grim business--a risky game for a girl to be playing. But Eileen Dare was so different from all other girls--so different in her ability and daring--that Nelson Lee was quite content to let her go her own way. In every big case she came to him for advice and help, and he was always ready and willing to give both.

The combine was not an organised society of criminals; it was merely a number of rich, influential City men who privately arranged "deals" with

one another. But everything they did was shady—shady and inky-black with crime.

The men Eileen had dealt with formed a formidable list—Sir Ambrose Shore, Basil Illingford, Jonathan Bridger, Rudolph Stebbing, Martin Hallton, Ransome Wilmore, Sir Caleb Hurst. All had suffered according to their deserts. And the Combine, strong enough still, was continuing with its scoundrelly work. Roger Haverfield was one of the chief members still practising his villainy upon his fellow-men. And there were Sydney Bradford, Melville J. Ross, Ford Abbercorn, Dr. Munro Taggart, Herbert Vikerson, Lord Max Roper, Stanton Hoading—to mention the chief enemies of Eileen Dare. All had taken part in the conspiracy against the girl's father, and all would suffer in turn.

Even a singularly brave and clear-minded girl would be somewhat overawed by that list of influential names. But Eileen had gone forward with her campaign relentlessly and thoroughly, and, with Nelson Lee's help, had made the Combine realise that villainy does not always pay. Dr. Munro Taggart, she knew, was already disgraced, but he was not punished. He had fled when Rudolph Stebbing had met with his fate, and was still in obscurity.

But, in spite of the grave perils of her self-imposed task, Eileen was always keen and happy. She liked detective work, and laughed at the dangers which necessarily accompanied it.

And this afternoon she was as gay as ever—and even prettier. When Nipper had made his remark relating to glory the car was speeding out into the open country on the other side of Romford. Brentwood lay ahead, and then, further on, Chelmsford. The journey would soon be accomplished, it seemed.

But before Brentwood was reached an exciting and alarming incident was destined to occur, and that incident, in its turn, was destined to lead to strange and dramatic developments.

Very soon the big touring-car was descending a slight, long slope. On the right-hand side a narrow road led to the village of Harold Wood, and the automobile slipped past ~~this~~ at a comfortable twenty-five.

Just a little further on there was another right-hand turning, and tall poplars grew on both sides of the road. It was impossible for Eileen to see down the side-road, even when the car was quite clear, and as it drew opposite Eileen caught sight of a figure on horseback.

The latter was just swinging into the main road, and Eileen instinctively pressed her finger on the button of the buzzer. At the same instant she throttled down and applied the brakes.

For the girl had instantly seen that the horse was a restive, high-spirited animal. A lady was seated upon the horse—a young lady of no mean attractions. And as the discordant buzzer sent forth a harsh, insistent warning the horse reared and plunged alarmingly.

Eileen brought the car to a dead stop, but the mischief was done. Nobody was to blame, but the result was serious. The girl on the horse attempted to quieten her restive steed, and proved herself to be a superb horsewoman.

But the animal was either frightened or ill-tempered, for, in spite of its rider's sharp orders, it grasped the bit between its teeth and tore along the main road at a terrific pace. The whole incident had happened in the space of twenty seconds, and Eileen had only just brought the car to a standstill.

"Great Scott!" gasped Nipper. "The brute's bolted!"

"Oh, dear, and I am afraid it was my fault!" Eileen exclaimed distressfully. "Look! Oh, that poor girl will be thrown——"

Even as Eileen was speaking her words came true. It was obvious to

Nelson Lee—and Eileen—that the runaway horse was in a wicked temper. It was not so much fright as sheer “devilment” which had caused him to bolt. And bolting was not his only trick, for he suddenly came to a dead stop, twisted round, and reared madly. The girl was shot headlong off the animal’s back, and she struck the hard frosty road with a terrible concussion.

She lay quite still, and the horse merely tore along the road for a few yards and then quietly came to a stop and stood grazing. To the three on-lookers in the motor-car it really seemed as though the horse had deliberately made up his mind to unseat his fair rider, and, having done so, was satisfied.

“Oh!” cried Eileen. “Oh, what a terrible fall——”

“I am afraid the girl is rather badly injured,” interjected Nelson Lee gravely. “We must make certain at once.”

But Eileen needed no telling. She had already slipped in the clutch, and the car was gliding swiftly along the road to the spot where the fallen girl lay. As it came to a halt Nipper and Nelson Lee leapt out, and with great relief they saw that the unfortunate young lady was struggling into a sitting position.

She was young—about Eileen’s age, in fact—and quite good-looking. But her prettiness was quite different to Eileen’s in all essentials. She was very dark and slimly built.

As Nelson Lee and Nipper hastened to her side they could see now that the girl was not nearly so badly injured as they had at first imagined. Her fall had been serious, and many girls would, indeed, have been grievously hurt. But somehow she had managed to fall upon her feet and hands.

“I am deeply sorry——” began Lee.

“Oh, it wasn’t your fault at all!” exclaimed the girl, trying hard to conceal her obvious pain. “Rajah has fits like that now and again. Oh, I don’t know what is the matter with him to-day; he has been obstinate and tricky all the time I’ve been out.”

Lee extended his hand.

“You will let me help you up?” he suggested. “Upon my soul, your hands and wrists are badly grazed, I see. Miss Eileen, I think you can be of some service here. I sincerely trust you are not otherwise injured?” Lee added, turning to the stranger once more.

Eileen was already bending over the injured girl. The latter’s hands and wrists were grazed rather badly, and were bleeding. And when she attempted to rise to her feet she uttered a sudden cry of acute pain and fell back again.

“My ankle!” she exclaimed agonisingly. “I—I don’t think it’s very bad, but it hurts me tremendously. Oh, suppose it should be broken——”

“We’ll soon settle that point,” interrupted Eileen promptly.

And the point was soon settled. Eileen, who was an expert at first-aid, found that the injured girl’s ankle was not broken, but sprained—and badly sprained. She had fallen fully upon that foot, and her ankle had consequently suffered. Very soon she had been assisted into one of the soft seats in the tonneau of the motor-car.

Fortunately there was an ample supply of lint, etc., in one of the car lockers—for Nelson Lee believed in being prepared for any emergency when motoring. Nipper had appointed himself the task of fetching the ill-tempered horse and tethering it to a tree close by. The animal now stood looking quite docile and harmless.

“He is often like that,” exclaimed the girl, as Lee was bandaging one of her wrists. “But to-day he seems to be particularly vicious. Oh, it is so good of you to go to all this trouble for me,” she added. “But I—I——”

“Well?” smiled Eileen. “What were you going to say?”

"Well, I'm sure I don't know how I shall get home," replied the other, looking worried and concerned. "And my father will be in a terrible way over this ankle of mine. I don't suppose I shall be able to walk for a day or two."

Nelson Lee smilingly shook his head.

"I am very much afraid you will be hors de combat for well over a week," he remarked. "And certainly you will not be able to walk with your usual freedom until a full fortnight has elapsed. Your ankle is badly sprained."

"A fortnight!" exclaimed the girl, in a startled voice. "Oh, what shall I do? How terribly—terribly unfortunate! My father will be at his wit's end. And how about to-night's performance?"

She spoke with genuine distress, and her listeners were very naturally somewhat curious.

"To-night's performance?" repeated Eileen gently.

"Yes, yes!" was the quick reply. "Oh, of course, you don't know, do you? My father is Mr. Boswell—my name is Violet Boswell—and he is the owner of the circus which is pitched in the big meadow, just on the other side of Brentwood."

Nipper nodded.

"I saw a bill not far back," he remarked—"a big bill stuck on a fence. 'Boswell's Gigantic Circus and Menagerie'—that's it, miss, isn't it?"

"Yes. But what shall I do?" said Violet Boswell, looking worried. "Oh, what shall I do? With this ankle—— Oh, Rajah, you have done a fine thing now!" she added, looking at the horse with sudden anger. "I sha'n't be able to perform for two or three weeks!"

"Ah, now I am beginning to understand," said Nelson Lee quietly. "This is most unfortunate, Miss Boswell. You will certainly be unable to use your left foot for some little time. I understand you take part in the performance?"

Violet Boswell nodded.

"I am the 'star' turn," she replied, smiling a little. "I say 'star,' Mr. Lee, because my father always bills me as such. But my little turn is really very simple and easy, and there are lots of people cleverer than I. But poor dad will be nearly off his head when he knows that I can't appear."

Eileen was very interested, and very concerned, for she told herself that she was partly to blame for the accident. In strict truth, Eileen was not to blame in the least degree. If the accident was anybody's fault, then the horse Rajah was the guilty one. It was owing to his ill-temper and viciousness that Miss Boswell had been thrown.

But Eileen argued that she had caused Rajah to bolt by sounding the raucous electric buzzer at an inopportune moment. Consequently, the girl-detective felt in some measure called upon to do everything in her power to help Miss Boswell. The latter, however, knew quite well that Rajah was solely to blame.

The problem as to how she should reach home—in other words, the circus—was soon solved by Nelson Lee, who, without hesitation, proposed that Miss Boswell should remain exactly where she was, in the tonneau of the car, and be driven home. Nipper would ride the refractory Rajah.

"Oh, but I'm afraid the lad cannot manage him!" exclaimed the circus girl.

Nipper grinned.

"Don't you worry, miss," he replied confidently. "I've handled tougher propositions than Mr. Rajah! If he starts any of his monkey tricks with me he'll jolly soon find he's got the wrong customer to deal with."

Nipper was not boasting, for he had on more than one occasion spent weeks

on end in big racing stables, and had tamed many an unruly steed. The youngster had a curious influence over animals of all kinds, and generally managed to get on well with any particular variety.

And he soon proved that his words were not idle. Under his hand Rajah was inclined to be restive at first, but almost at once the horse settled down into a quiet canter, and proved to be no trouble at all. He was, as Miss Boswell explained, a new purchase of her father's, and had not yet appeared in the ring. Violet's own horse was a quiet, good-tempered animal.

Brentwood was not so far along the main road, and it was just on the other side of the town that the circus was pitched. During the first part of the ride she was gravely worried and troubled.

The car was going very slowly, so that Nipper should be able to keep pace. Lee himself was driving now, and Eileen sat behind in the tonneau with Violet Boswell. The girl was very brave, for she was certainly in great pain.

"I'm thinking of dad!" she said at last, looking at Eileen with wide-open, concerned eyes. "I don't know what he will do—I don't know at all! You see, the circus isn't a large one, and without me the programme will be dreadfully shortened."

Eileen soon gathered that Violet was really the "star" turn of the circus; her natural modesty caused her to make the least of her own attainments. But Eileen could clearly see that Mr. Boswell would be in a serious dilemma owing to his daughter's indisposition.

He was absolutely relying upon Violet to provide the "swell" turn of the whole performance. Eileen shrewdly guessed that the circus was only a small affair, and that Violet—billed as "Viola, Queen of the Ring"—had no understudy. The show had only pitched in Brentwood that morning, and was due to stay four days. It would be little short of a disaster to hold the first performance in the town without the support of the principal feminine performer. Violet was pretty and attractive, and these qualities alone went far in a small circus.

Without her everything would be "dead"—the whole show would be tame and lifeless. She had always provided the genuine attraction. The other turns were more or less mediocre. The very spectacle of "Viola" galloping round the ring, pretty and dainty and delightful, drew forth great applause.

And on this—the first night—she would be unable to appear!

It would mean just the difference between success and failure. It was little wonder that Violet was gravely concerned, for she knew quite well that her father was relying on doing good business at Brentwood. Bad business would probably mean the closing down of the whole concern.

Violet told all this to Eileen, who listened with keen feeling and concern.

"It isn't so much what I do," Miss Boswell said, as the big car glided smoothly up the long hill into Brentwood. "But who is to take my place? There is nobody—nobody at all! Father can't possibly engage anybody else to-day. Besides, he hasn't the money to pay for a star. It will mean ruin, Miss Dare! Oh, I feel afraid to tell him what has happened. He advised me not to ride Rajah, too!"

"You mustn't worry yourself," Eileen said softly. "Mr. Boswell will get over the difficulty somehow, I am sure."

But Violet shook her head, and winced a little as the car jolted her foot.

"And it's our first day in Brentwood," she said dully. "I don't want to appear vain, but I know that the public will be terribly disappointed. What I do in the ring is quite simple—just an exhibition of riding and a few daring tricks which seem to be a lot more dangerous than they really

are. I—I suppose anybody could do the same—anybody, I mean, who is a good horswoman."

Eileen gave a sudden little start, and then her eyes lighted up and sparkled.

"I wonder!" she murmured, looking at the other girl with real pity.

"Oh, I wonder if it is possible——"

"I beg your pardon?" said Violet, hardly hearing the words.

Eileen gripped her companion's arm.

"I think I have a solution to the problem," she said gently. "You will certainly be unable to appear in the ring to-night, Miss Boswell—and for many succeeding nights, too. But the public knows nothing, and there is no reason why 'Viola' should not appear after all!"

"I—I don't understand!" said the girl, staring a little.

Eileen Dare laughed very softly.

"I am going to take your place, Miss Boswell," she announced. "Just to help you out of this difficulty, I will appear in the ring to-night!"



CHAPTER II.

Harlo, The Hypnotist—An Amazing Discovery—The Arrival of Eoko!

VIOLET BOSWELL opened her eyes very wide.

Eileen's statement was certainly a surprising one, and for a moment her companion could scarcely gather her meaning.

"You—you are going to appear in the ring?" stammered Violet. "You are joking, Miss Dare, surely?"

"On the contrary, I am quite serious," was Eileen's reply, as the car slowly passed down the broad main street of Brentwood. "Of course, it depends upon whether Mr. Boswell will accept my services. But I am quite willing to make the attempt, for you have made me realise how really serious the position is."

"But could—could you do any—any tricks?" asked Violet hesitatingly.

"I can have a try," smiled Eileen. "At all events, even if I only ride round the ring and do a few very simple tricks it will be something, won't it? Even the very little I can do will be better than nothing at all."

Violet Boswell's eyes welled with tears.

"How—how good of you!" she murmured gratefully. "Oh, I—I really believe that you will be able to save the situation, Miss Dare. You have given me such hope—such relief!"

To tell the truth, Eileen herself was rather astonished at her impulsively made offer. The thought had struck her just on the spur of the moment, and her suggestion had been voiced almost before she could give it due consideration. But the die was cast now, and she could certainly not withdraw her offer even if she wished to—which she did not.

For she was genuinely concerned over the whole matter. Eileen considered that she was in a certain degree to blame for Violet's accident, and the least she could do was to proffer her help. And Eileen was not doing so idly; she fully meant all she said, and, in truth, was rather amused and fascinated by the prospect.

It may be thought that she was vain in taking it for granted that she would be able to enter a circus ring for the first time in her life and give a creditable performance. But Eileen was not vain. She had based her offer upon the positive knowledge that she could do many startling tricks of horsemanship.

While her father had still been alive—before her grim campaign against

the Combine had commenced—she had owned a magnificent horse, and had taken a keen delight in performing all manner of clever tricks—just for her own amusement. Certainly it would have been difficult to find a more able horsewoman than Eileen Dare. And it was quite possible that the tricks she knew would bear comparison with those of Violet Boswell herself.

At least Eileen had not made an idle suggestion. And if Violet's father would agree, she was quite willing to sacrifice several days of her time in order to fill the breach. Moreover, it would really be a holiday for the girl detective; it would be a complete change, and she would be all the better fitted for her work afterwards.

Before the two girls could converse further the big touring-car turned sharply but slowly into a wide-open gateway. Eileen, who was about to speak, did not do so, but looked over Nelson Lee's shoulder ahead of the car with interest.

Boswell's Gigantic Circus and Menagerie was pitched quite near the road in a large, smooth-surfaced meadow. Upon the whole, Eileen was pleased with the spectacle. From Violet's description she had thought the circus to be even smaller than it was. Of course the day was glorious, and the weather-stained old canvas tent was looking its very best in the bright winter sunshine.

Gaily-coloured flags fluttered from all points of the main tent, and there were several smaller adjoining tents, and four or five caravans. A traction engine, decorated and gay, stood in full view, and served a double purpose—for it was used to haul the whole concern from place to place, and to make electric light when stationary. One caravan was bigger and more pretentious than the other, and fairly new-looking. Lee at once guessed that it was the proprietor's own residence.

A short, stout man, in a grey frockcoat and trousers to match, was directing two other men in a small job, and he looked round curiously as the superb automobile turned into the meadow. His grey top-hat was tilted rather rakishly on one side, and he was puffing at a long black cheroot. His face was red and round, and quite clean-shaven, and seemed to express unbounded good nature.

It was not difficult for Nelson Lee to guess that this quaint individual was Mr. Horatio Boswell himself. In all probability he had been christened Henry or Herbert, but for business reasons Horatio sounded far more impressive.

The car came to a standstill, and the stout individual toddled—no other word will suffice—across the short grass, and came to a halt, puffing, against the driver's place. He glanced at Nelson Lee, and was about to speak, when he saw the two girls in the tonneau.

"Hallo, dad!" said Violet, rising to her feet impulsively, and then falling back again as her ankle gave her a sharp, agonising twinge.

Mr. Horatio Boswell removed his cheroot.

"Lor' bless my soul!" he ejaculated blankly. "What's this—what in thump's name is this? Violet! What are you doin' in that car? And who—beggin' their pardon—are these good people? Great boiling codfish! Look at your hands!"

The stout man's tone altered quickly as he saw the bandaged state of Violet's hands and wrists. He was at once concerned and anxious, and leapt upon the step and peered closer at the girl.

"An accident—an accident!" he cried. "My poor little girl, how did it happen? I reckon this lady and this gentleman didn't have a hand in it, anyway! I reckon I know the right sort when I see 'em!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Fortunately, your daughter's accident was not serious," he explained, lightly stepping to the ground. "It was entirely an unforeseen occurrence, Mr. Boswell, and I don't consider anybody was particularly to blame."

And, with one or two interruptions from Violet and Eileen, Nelson Lee explained what had occurred. The circus proprietor listened gravely and with a lengthening face. He was deadly serious when Lee had finished.

"I'm obliged to you, sir—a whole lot obliged," he exclaimed. "You've acted the real gent. But my poor Violet! She ain't fit to enter the ring for weeks! Great lobsters! What shall I do—what in thump's name shall I do?"

"Miss Dare has offered to take my place——"

"Eh?" said Nelson Lee wonderingly—for he knew nothing of Eileen's proposal.

"Lor' bless my soul!" ejaculated Mr. Boswell. "That can't be, Violet—that can't be! Nobody can take your place! And to think of this swell young lady goin' into my ring—— Frizzling haddocks! It's unthinkable!"

Eileen Dare laughed softly—as much at Mr. Boswell's somewhat fishy expressions as anything else. The circus owner certainly appeared to have a considerable vocabulary of quaint ejaculations. As a matter of fact, Mr. Boswell had at one time been in the habit of swearing frightfully, and had suddenly realised the senselessness of doing so. Accordingly he had changed his tactics, and every time he felt like swearing he substituted a perfectly harmless expression. And as he was inordinately fond of every known variety of fish, this form of expression came to his tongue more readily than any other.

Eileen's laugh was musical and sweet.

"Why is it unthinkable, Mr. Boswell?" she asked. "I know quite a number of little tricks—and I love horses. Your daughter is unable to appear, and she has told me that you have nobody to take her place."

"That's true—dead true," admitted Mr. Boswell.

"Well, why not give me a trial?" asked Eileen. "I feel myself somewhat to blame for your daughter's accident, and I want to make amends. I cannot do more than offer to play her part in the circus, can I?"

The circus owner tilted his head and scratched his scanty iron-grey locks.

"You're a surpriser!" he exclaimed. "But you'd never be able to stand the life, Miss Dare. Great and little shrimps! It's rough and ready, and we have to take things as they come. You've got the figure and the face," he added, eyeing Eileen critically. "By thump! You'd certainly look fine in the ring! But I can't dream of acceptin' your kind offer. You ain't got any idea——"

"Will you let me try?" suggested Eileen gently.

She was in real earnest, and Mr. Boswell could see it. And finally he promised to allow Eileen to show what she could do. As a matter of fact, Mr. Boswell was hugely relieved, for he knew quite well that Eileen would form a decided attraction, whether she performed cleverly or not. And he had an idea that Eileen would prove to be even more of a "surpriser" than she would admit.

And Mr. Boswell was right!

As they were talking Nipper rode into the meadow on Rajah's back. The horse was at once taken away by a man, and Nipper was acquainted with the astonishing fact that Eileen had decided to join the circus as a performer! The lad was hugely delighted—until he learned from Lee that he and his master would take their departure almost at once. They would

fetch Aunt Esther from Chelmsford, tell her what had happened, and then return to London.

Nipper was disgusted. He proposed remaining with Eileen as a sort of bodyguard, but Nelson Lee would not hear of it. The great detective was rather pleased at the arrangement, for he knew that the change would do Eileen a world of good.

He little imagined that the girl was being pitchforked right into the heart of a new and intricate case!

Violet was gently placed in her own caravan—a dainty place altogether, full of feminine charm. Eileen was delighted with the caravan; she had had no idea that a circus “bedroom” could be so splendid.

And after the injured girl had been made comfortable Eileen and Nelson Lee and Nipper and Mr. Boswell adjourned to the big tent. Mrs. Boswell was in the town, and would not be back for an hour or more.

Several men connected with the circus regarded the little party curiously, but they knew none of the facts so far. Both Lee and Eileen were greatly pleased with the aspect of everything they saw. Mr. Boswell struck them as being a genuinely decent sort, and his whole “show” was clean, well-kept and ably managed. There was nothing tawdry or dirty about it. The circus was certainly not “gigantic,” as the bills announced; but, as Mr. Boswell explained, it was as well to make the most of the concern. If the public was told that the circus was gigantic they would probably believe it. At night, in the glare of the electric lights, and with the show in full swing, everything was very different.

Violet’s performing horse was named Sultan, and was, according to the show-bills, the most marvellous performing horse ever exhibited before the British public. But this, naturally, was an exaggeration—and a big exaggeration, too. Mr. Boswell explained that a large part of Violet’s turn consisted of putting Sultan through his tricks, and Eileen would be able to manage him quite easily once she had learned the general routine.

Sultan was a quiet animal, good-tempered and obedient. He took to Eileen from the first instant she patted his sleek neck. He was a valuable horse, and Mr. Boswell was rightly proud of him.

Eileen was soon ready for the rehearsal. She was quite confident and cheerful, and the fact that she had never before in all her life attempted to perform publicly did not worry her in the least. Nelson Lee and Nipper were quite prepared to see Eileen do some clever tricks with the horse, for they knew her sterling qualities, and she had often referred to the tricks she had performed—simply for her own amusement—in the old days. These were, after all, only recent, although it seemed ages.

But Lee and Nipper were astonished; while Mr. Boswell was literally amazed. Without giving any hint of her intentions Eileen straight away leapt upon Sultan’s back and rode him round and round the ring a few times. Then suddenly she lightly rose to her feet, and experienced no difficulty in keeping her position. She rode with extreme grace and prettiness.

“Great soused mackerel!” gasped Mr. Boswell. “Why, this is a plant, as sure as a gun! Miss Dare can ride bareback as though she were born to the thing. And just look at that—look at that, will you?”

But Nelson Lee and Nipper were looking without being invited. Eileen, having slipped down a stout elastic band from her waist to just below her knees—she had donned a special costume—had suddenly stood upon her hands, and was riding round the ring serenely and confidently. It was a difficult trick, for it required great skill to keep her balance. But during

her schoolgirl days she had practised it much with her own little pony, and she had not forgotten the art.

"Wonderful!" ejaculated Mr. Boswell. "What can it mean—what in thump's name can it mean? I'm hanged if my Violet can do as much as that! Seems that Miss Dare knew what she was about when she offered to take my daughter's place!"

"I assure you I was quite unaware of Miss Dare's capabilities in this direction," said Nelson Lee, lighting a cigarette. "What do you think of it, Nipper?"

"I'm not surprised," said Nipper coolly. "Just like Miss Eileen to spring this surprise on us. She's as clever as fifty average girls, guv'nor. I say, can't I stop behind with the circus?—Mr. Boswell will find me something to do. I'll admit it will be a bit hard for you, sir," the lad added cheerfully. "You won't be able to get on in London very well without me——"

"I assure you I have no intention of attempting such an impossible feat," interjected Nelson Lee smoothly. "The prospect of being in London without you, my dear Nipper, appalls me. Therefore, you will accompany me in the car, and we shall take our departure almost at once."

Nipper grunted.

"Rotten!" he exclaimed.

But he brightened up a moment later, when Eileen reversed her position with singular agility, and then leapt to the ground. Nipper at once started clapping his hands thunderously, and Lee and Mr. Boswell joined in.

Eileen smiled breathlessly.

"I wasn't sure whether I could do it," she said. "I know a few more——"

"Well, I'm jiggered if I know what to say!" exclaimed Mr. Boswell. "You're a real surprise-packet, Miss Dare! And I reckon it's a whole heap kind of you to offer me your services. Will I accept 'em? Boiling codfish! I should say I will!"

He rubbed his hands, and his eyes disappeared into puckers of his fat cheeks as he grinned with delighted anticipation.

"You'll bring down the house to-night!" he declared. "Mind you, my Violet would have brought down the house," he added suddenly; "but you'll 'fetch' 'em like one o'clock! I'm lost for words, miss. I'm struck dead! I'm groping for the next thing to say, and that's a fact! You're simply terrific—and you've never appeared in a circus ring before! Lor' bless my soul! How the thump I can ever thank you is more than I can imagine. You'll save the situation, as sure as ninepence! And you've got some more tricks, too——"

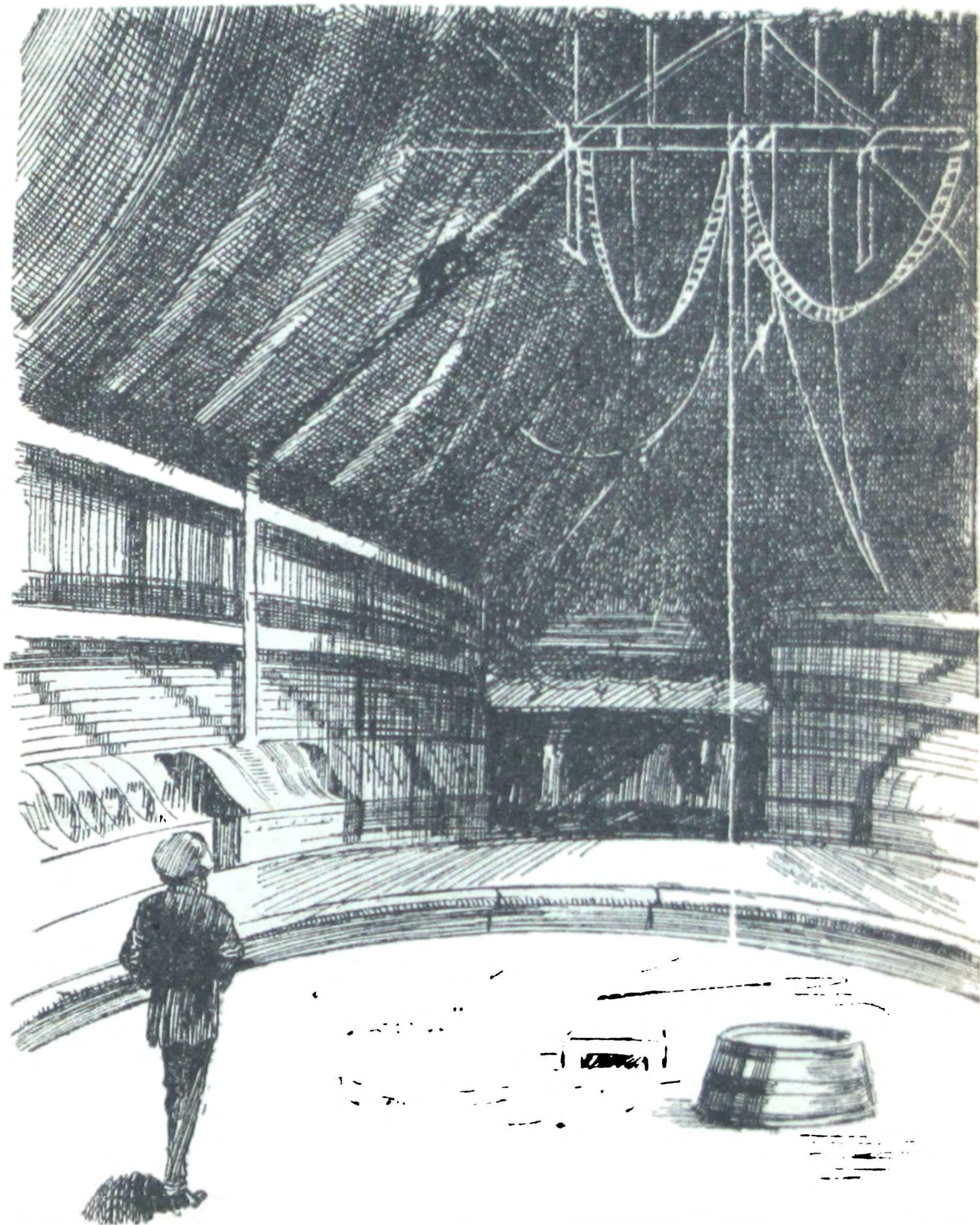
"Only one or two," interrupted Eileen, who thought that Mr. Boswell wasn't stuck for words at all. At least he was running on, talking freely and quickly, as though he would never stop. "I hope you don't mind, Mr. Lee?" added Eileen questioningly. "I haven't asked your permission——"

"Dear me! I shouldn't like to say 'no' once you have made up your mind, Miss Eileen," smiled Nelson Lee. "Moreover, I honestly believe the complete change will do you a world of good. You will be fresh and fit after a few days of this life. I only wish I could remain with you."

"I could stay behind——" began Nipper.

Lee chuckled, and gently but firmly pointed out to Nipper that his presence in the circus would be entirely superfluous. Nipper couldn't quite see it, but he was obliged to obey his master's orders.

And in less than an hour after being introduced to Mrs. Boswell, and after bidding Eileen and Violet Boswell good-bye, Nelson Lee and Nipper



Looking up in the comparative gloom, Nipper was astonished to see Dr. Taggert descending the ladder which led to the topmost trapeze platform.—(See page 30.)

re-entered their car, and continued their interrupted journey to Chelmsford.

It was a sudden change indeed. Eileen Dare was left behind with Boswell's Gigantic Circus and Menagerie in Brentwood. And the girl detective was resolved to stay until Violet was well enough to enter the ring again.

Truth to tell, Eileen was keenly enjoying herself already. It would all be experience for her, and the change would be a complete holiday. She had feared at first that the circus and everything to do with it would be dull and grimy and uninteresting and distasteful. But Mr. Boswell was a real gentleman in his own way, and Mrs. Boswell proved to be a fitting companion for him. She was a homely old soul, and Eileen took to her immediately.

The girl was told that she would take up her quarters in Violet's caravan. There was heaps of room for her, and there was an extra bed in the caravan—a tiny, dainty bed. Violet herself was delighted, and frankly told Eileen that she would take her time in getting well. Which only went to prove that Eileen's sunny disposition and natural charm had already made an impression.

But then—while the sun was still in the heavens—came the shock.

Eileen was to learn, abruptly and suddenly, that her sojourn with the circus was to be no holiday, but a period of stiff detective work! She was to learn that she had accidentally stumbled across one of her very own "combine" cases!

The amazing revelation came soon after she had had a hearty meal with Mr. and Mrs. Boswell in their own big caravan. A long, lean, gloomy-looking man had put his head in the door, and Mr. Boswell had introduced him to Eileen.

He was about forty-five years of age, and his face was singularly rubber-like. When he talked his face assumed almost alarming shapes. But his eyes twinkled with good humour, belying the gloomy expression of his face. He proved to be Mr. Billy Miles—known in and out of the ring as "Merriface," the clown. He had been dubbed "Merriface" because he was always serious, even in the ring. It was this preternatural gloom, in fact, which made him so funny, for Mr. Miles was a genuine humorist.

And, the circus being a comparatively small one, he filled two billets—three, as a matter of fact. He was the clown, he gave a special turn as "Rubbero, the Elastic Human Marvel," and he was also Mr. Boswell's secretary.

Probably not one member of the audience even guessed that "Merriface" and "Rubbero" were one and the same man. For, in the latter turn, Mr. Miles appeared devoid of his make-up, and grinned broadly throughout his whole performance. He was a clever fellow, and a real good sort.

He suggested taking Eileen round to see the "menagerie." This merely consisted of one huge elephant—who thoroughly earned his keep—an old, tame, harmless lion, a brace of monkeys, an alleged grizzly bear, and a terribly poisonous boa-constrictor which couldn't have poisoned or crushed a kitten.

But the whole lot combined made a brave show during the circus performance, and greatly added to the attractions. Merriface had "sized" up Eileen pretty well, and he was very polite and attentive. He knew that she was an absolute lady, and so he was on his best behaviour.

Zooloo, the elephant, Eileen learned, was Violet's special "pet." He was a shrewd, clever animal, and instinctively knew that Eileen was a friend. Elephants are quaint customers, but Zooloo made pals with Eileen

at the first introduction. The girl had a certain way with her which always won over all animals.

"He's a good old stick," remarked Mr. Miles, eyeing Zooloo critically. "Works as well as a dozen horses, and never jibs. Best-tempered fellow I've ever met. But he's got his likes and dislikes, same as us humans. For instance, he can't abide that new performer the boss has engaged—Dr. Harlo."

"I saw his name on one of the bills," said Eileen.

"Matter of fact, I brought you here to tip you a word or two about Dr. Harlo," went on Merriface gravely. "Hope you won't think I'm presumptuous, miss. 'Dr. Harlo—Hypnotist,' that's how he's billed. Hasn't been with us more than a fortnight, and none of us like him. But he's cheap, and his turn is popular, so the boss don't want to let him go. It's my opinion, though, that he's a wrong 'un. I don't like his eyes. And, most particular of all, old Zooloo won't take to him. Zooloo don't make mistakes, miss. If he don't like a man, you can write that man down as 'N. G.' So I thought I'd give you a word to be on your guard against him. He's just come in, and is knocking about somewhere in the meadow."

Eileen laughed.

"Thank you, Mr. Miles," she said. "I will bear in mind what you say. But I don't think Dr. Harlo will bother me. If he does, I shall soon settle with him. You say he is a hypnotist. Surely not a real——"

"Oh, no!" replied Merriface. "Just a fake affair, you know, miss. Goes down well with the public, though. But I'm not sayin' that Harlo couldn't give a fellow a real twistin'. He's got queer eyes—I don't like 'em. Mebbe he could do a bit of genuine hypnotism on a weak-minded subject."

Eileen soon forgot all about the precious Dr. Harlo, and presently Mr. Miles left her, and she wandered off into the big tent, alone. She was feeling like a schoolgirl, excited and interested. And although the ring looked drab and dull in the weak light which filtered in through the numerous cracks of the canvas, she knew quite well that when the big electric arcs were blazing down the ring would present quite a gay, lively appearance.

The girl stood looking up at the big trapeze, which was suspended from a stout iron rod which crossed the great wooden supports overhead. She was, to tell the truth, planning in her active mind a new trick which she might possibly suggest to Mr. Boswell later on.

And then she heard a movement close behind her, and turned. A gaunt, tall man was standing near by. He was broad, and attired in a heavy fur overcoat and a black velour hat. His chin was clean-shaven except for a tiny tuft of black beard on the very point. And he wore a moustache, with finely pointed extremities, which closely resembled a stiletto.

"Miss Smith, I believe," exclaimed this individual in a silky, smooth voice. "You are the new performer who is to appear in Miss Boswell's place, I understand? Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Dr. Harlo."

For one full, tense second the pair stood looking at one another in absolute silence. Then Eileen bowed slightly.

"I shall be with the circus a few days probably, Dr. Harlo," she replied. "I hope we shall get on well together."

And, without waiting for him to reply, the girl passed out of the gloomy tent and walked slowly away across the meadow to a quiet, secluded spot. She wanted to think—she wanted to consider things—for her mind was filled with amazing thoughts.

Outwardly she betrayed no sign whatever of her inward emotion. But

she had made a discovery of the most astounding nature. She was staggered, and at first told herself that she must be mistaken. The instant after, however, she knew very well that she was not mistaken. She had kept her head superbly, and was greatly pleased that she had betrayed none of her real feelings to Dr. Harlo. He had addressed her as "Miss Smith." There was nothing remarkable in this, for nobody in the circus knew her real name except Mr. and Mrs. Boswell and Violet. Eileen had suggested—with Nelson Lee's approval—that during her sojourn with the circus she should be known under the name of Miss Smith. Possibly the fact that Violet Boswell had met with an accident would leak out, and then some enterprising reporter or other would just as possibly insert a paragraph in a local paper. If he were acquainted with Eileen's real name he would naturally make the most of it; and the girl detective had no wish to be made the subject of such notoriety. Therefore she was merely known as Miss Smith.

Accordingly, Dr. Harlo was unaware of her real identity. Yet she, on the other hand, was not unaware of his! For she had made a most singular discovery. Eileen had, in short, recognised in Harlo the Hypnotist no less a person than Dr. Munro Taggert!

As the girl walked across the meadow with slow, deliberate footsteps, she found her mind in such a whirl that she could scarcely connect her thoughts. But the one outstanding fact which throbbed through her brain was that Dr. Harlo was her old enemy, Taggert, who had, not so very long before, been one of the chief members of the gang of highly placed criminals who called themselves the Combine.

That was the long and short of it. At the first Eileen thought it possible that she had made a mistake. But after due consideration she was equally positive that her first surmise had been correct. It was, indeed, no surmise; there was no "if" about the matter. Dr. Munro Taggert was a member of Boswell's circus.

But what could it mean?

Eileen fully remembered the case in which the famous—or infamous—specialist had figured. A young man named Clifford Harvey, hailing from Canada, had been taken to a secluded nursing home, and there Taggert had attempted to render him insane by the use of potent drugs and poisons.

He would have succeeded in his dastardly scheme but for the intervention of Eileen Dare and Nelson Lee. Instead of success, sheer disaster had overtaken the enterprise. Clifford Harvey had been rescued, and one of Taggert's confederates—Rudolph Stebbing, the solicitor—had met his death. The doctor had fled, and from that day Eileen had not heard a word regarding his whereabouts. But she had certainly resolved to deal with him if it were at all possible.

And he was here—hiding in this small circus!

On the face of it, the audacity of choosing such a hiding-place was rather startling. Taggert was practically before the public gaze; and who would think of looking for a hunted criminal in a circus? The whole aspect of Eileen's sojourn with Mr. and Mrs. Boswell underwent a complete change.

Instead of being a holiday she knew that she would be hard at work. For, without the slightest hesitation, she had fully resolved to remain on at the circus until she had learned Taggert's game, and had frustrated him. For the girl detective shrewdly suspected that the doctor was planning some evil scheme.

"He did not recognise me—I am sure of that," murmured Eileen, as she thoughtfully walked across the meadow. "During my former adventures with Taggert I was disguised as an elderly nurse until the very last

hour of the case. And even then my disguise was not fully removed. Taggert only knows me here under the name of Smith, and there is not one chance in a thousand that he knows my real identity. Why, it is almost providential that I decided to use another name."

And so it seemed. But Eileen, although not blundering, did not give Dr. Munro Taggert the credit which was due to him. He was shrewd—he was keen—he was as sharp as a needle. And, once having seen a face, he never forgot it. It was so now. The recognition, in fact, was mutual.

For Dr. Taggert had recognised in "Miss Smith" the girl detective who had been primarily responsible for his disgrace and ruin. He recognised her as Eileen Dare—the Combine's greatest enemy.

But he, too, curiously enough, thought the same as Eileen. He was positive that she had not recognised him. She was positive that he had not recognised her! It was a rather curious situation, and one teeming with dramatic possibilities.

Eileen decided to watch and wait, to give no hint of her suspicions, and to endeavour to learn the doctor's game. And Taggert, in turn, came to a similar decision. He would watch and wait; but his thoughts ran in more sinister grooves.

This girl did not know who he was, and, therefore, she would not be on her guard. And Taggert told himself that he would seize the opportunity which chance had flung in his path and kill Eileen at the earliest possible moment.

Needless to say, Taggert was alarmed and perturbed. He had thought himself to be as secure as a rock, and the sudden meeting with Eileen Dare was more than a surprise. If the doctor had been merely hiding from justice he would, perhaps, have been less agitated. But he was in Boswell's Circus for a more sinister purpose. In short, he was taking advantage of the information he had obtained from Bannister, the escaped convict.

John Elmore, thinking that he was dying on that fateful foggy day, had entrusted his secret to his fellow-convict, Bannister. The latter, after breaking into Dr. Taggert's cottage, had been forced into revealing the information which had been given to him in strictest confidence. Bannister was in no way to blame—he had not betrayed his trust.

For at the time he had been in an exhausted condition, and had succumbed to the greater will-power of Dr. Taggert. The latter, after days of inquiry and careful consideration, had determined to follow up the affair to the end. For in John Elmore's secret he saw a certain way out of his own difficulties.

From Bannister Taggert had got to know that John Elmore's daughter had been entrusted with a gold locket. And in that locket was the secret which was worth so much. Violet Elmore was no longer living with her aunt, but was travelling about with a second-rate circus, owned and controlled by a Mr. Horatio Boswell. Elmore had known this, because his daughter had kept him well informed of her movements, and had often referred to the locket in her rare letters.

Her aunt, it appeared, had treated her badly, and so she had run away just before her eighteenth birthday, and had joined Boswell's Circus. Reckoning accordingly, Taggert knew that the girl must have been with the Boswells for just over two years. The scoundrel had laid his plans cleverly, and had succeeded in obtaining a job as "Harlo the Hypnotist." There was no immediate hurry, and he had so far been spying out the land. He had had no opportunity of gaining his object which was to obtain possession of the locket.

Taggert had found that Violet Elmore was, to all intents and purposes,

the daughter of the Boswells. She had assumed their name, and looked upon the kind-hearted old couple as her own father and mother. She had not forgotten her father, and was only awaiting the time when he would come out of prison.

The situation, then, was by no means complicated. Dr. Munro Taggert was simply biding his time, and would strike when that time came. By pure chance Eileen Dare had appeared upon the scene, and he resolved to deal with her while he had the chance. He told himself that he was safe—that he had not been recognised.

And Eileen, for her part, was under the same false impression. But she would keep her eyes open, and do her utmost to discover why Taggert was in the circus, and what his game could be.

And, just before the performance was about to commence—when everything was dark, and the good people of Brentwood were flocking to the circus—Eileen hurried to the post office and dispatched a telegram in cipher to Nelson Lee.

That evening was one of satisfaction for all. Eileen performed her turn with the utmost coolness and skill, and earned—and received—tremendous applause. Mr. Boswell was beaming with satisfaction after he had checked the receipts, and his gratitude to Eileen was unbounded.

He knew well enough that the situation had been saved by Eileen, and just when the show was drawing to a close, and the audience was feeling well satisfied, Mr. Boswell had further cause for satisfaction. For he engaged a new clown, who would certainly add much to the attractions of the show.

The new clown was a small man, dark-skinned, with jet black hair, and huge bushy eyebrows. His professional name was "Boko"—owing to the fact that he appeared in the ring wearing a huge false nose.

And Boko was an old friend—for he was none other than Nipper!

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CHAPTER III.

Nipper's Shrewdness—A Narrow Escape—Events Move Apace.

NIPPER did not reveal himself to Eileen Dare until the following morning. And then he explained, with great satisfaction, that Lee had ordered him to hasten to the circus and take up his position there as a kind of bodyguard for Eileen. He would be always ready on hand in case of emergencies. For Nelson Lee fully understood the gravity of the situation.

Nipper had already arranged matters with Mr. Boswell. As the new clown's services were being obtained for nothing, the circus proprietor had nothing to grumble at. Mr. Boswell was, of course, told nothing of the real reason for Nipper's presence; but he informed the latter that he didn't care a thump how long he remained at the same rate of pay!

Nipper was disguised with extraordinary skill, and he looked fully thirty years of age. Even Eileen had not recognised him until he revealed his identity. The girl was very pleased to see Nipper there, for she knew that Lee fully grasped the urgency of the situation.

There was no fear of Nipper being recognised by Dr. Taggert, for his disguise was so clever and complete that even Eileen herself would never have known had she not been told.

And that morning Eileen determined to attempt a new trick she had been thinking over. When her father had been alive she had had a magnificent gymnasium, and had performed all manner of daring and hair-raising tricks

upon the trapeze. She saw no reason why she should not make the most of her knowledge and ability.

For the girl already liked Mr. Boswell exceedingly, and she felt that she wanted to do everything possible for him. She little guessed that her activity was to provide Dr. Munro Taggert with the opening he was looking for.

The trapeze, suspended from the central iron rod in the roof of the great tent, was very high above the ring—the tent itself was unusually lofty. A ladder, lashed to one of the wooden supports, led up to a little platform which was placed right against the canvas of the roof, and from which the trapeze was reached.

"Now my idea, Mr. Boswell, is to attempt a spectacular feat," said Eileen, as she and the circus proprietor and Boko stood in the ring some little time after breakfast was over. "I don't think it will be dangerous, but it will look rather impressive, and you will be able to make the most of it on the bills."

Boko shook his head doubtfully.

"I shouldn't advise you to get trying any dangerous tricks, miss," he exclaimed seriously. "That trapeze is up a good height, and by the way you keep looking at it, it seems to me you're thinking of——"

"Exactly," smiled Eileen. "I am thinking of using the trapeze. But I have a splendid head for heights, and never go dizzy. Besides, there will be no danger in the trick I am about to suggest. In all probability you will laugh at it and say that it is too tame."

Boko grunted. And Eileen recognised Nipper very plainly in that expressive grunt. But the lad was playing his part with great skill and cleverness. So far he had not seen the interesting Dr. Harlo, but the lad was fully determined to closely watch the alleged hypnotist in due course. For the present there was no immediate hurry. If it was found that Taggert was up to no particular game, he would, of course, be handed over to the police—who were anxious to lay hands on him. But Nipper, like Eileen, was of the opinion that Taggert had some ulterior motive in remaining with the circus.

Briefly Eileen Dare explained her idea. She was to mount the tiny platform, high aloft, swing on to the trapeze, and then hang head downwards. Then, by swinging to and fro, she would be able to grasp a lower trapeze. She would then repeat what she had already accomplished, and at last would be only a few feet above the ring. The horse Sultan would then canter underneath the lowermost trapeze, and Eileen would lightly leap down on to the horse's back, and then do her usual turn.

"It does not sound much, I know," said Eileen. "But it will be done quickly—very quickly—and it will appear terribly dangerous. I shall swing right down from trapeze to trapeze, and finally alight upon Sultan's back."

"Too risky!" said Nipper firmly.

"Lor' bless my soul! There's no risk in it," declared Mr. Boswell. "Leastways, not if you know anything of the trapeze business. But it's a thumping idea, Miss Smith—it's a sure corker! It'll fetch 'em no end. I'll have special bills out, too! Great wheelks! We'll break the record again to-night!"

Eileen smiled.

"But I am not sure that I can do it——"

"Stuff!" interjected Mr. Boswell, politely but firmly. "Beggin' your pardon, miss, for speakin' familiar-like. But you wouldn't have suggested

the idea at all unless you were pretty sure. But we'll need three trapezes, won't we? An' they'll have to be slung with care, too."

They went into the matter thoroughly, deciding where the extra three trapezes should be slung. Mr. Billy Miles declared that the idea was terrific; the trapeze descent from the roof would make a highly spectacular beginning to "Viola's" turn—for Eileen, of course, was taking Violet's circus name.

Merriface superintended the work, which was immediately put in hand. By noon the extra trapezes were fixed. The high trapeze against the roof was left just as it was. There was no necessity to alter its position.

And Eileen determined to rehearse the "business" at once. Suitably attired, she mounted the ladder, and from there stepped lightly on to the topmost trapeze. As she swung gently to and fro, she seemed to be in a terribly perilous position. For a fall would have meant grave injury, and probably death.

But the girl was perfectly at home. Agile, active, and nimble, she experienced no difficulty in carrying out the feat. It appeared, as she had said, far more dangerous than it really was. But, of course, if she had made a single slip, she would have been precipitated headlong to the solid ground.

Nipper looked on anxiously for the first few minutes, and then smiled quietly to himself. What a young ass he was! Eileen was as safe as houses, he told himself. The very manner in which she performed the trick eased Nipper's mind. And Mr. Boswell became more than ever convinced that Eileen was a true artist.

The whole thing was a complete success. After several rehearsals Eileen was sure that she would be able to perform the daring trick with ease and safety at the evening's performance.

And there was another interested spectator present in the tent during the trials. Dr. Munro Taggart had sauntered in unnoticed, and he stood watching and listening for some little time. And a few words uttered by Mr. Boswell caused him to set his teeth and come to a sudden decision.

"Yes, everything is O.K. as it now stands," said the circus owner, rubbing his hands with keen satisfaction. "You'll be the first to use the high trapeze, Miss Smith, so you'll know it's all in order. How in thump's name I'm to thank you I'm hanged if I know. You're a real live wire. I wish I could persuade you to sign a contract for a couple of years! Boiling codfish! You'd make old Boswell's Circus famous throughout the country. After a month of this you'll be able to——"

And then Mr. Boswell paused, and gloomily scratched his head. Eileen certainly wouldn't stay a month. But the next minute he was smiling as cheerily as ever. Mr. Boswell never troubled himself with thoughts of the future. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" was his motto.

And "Dr. Harlo" thoughtfully stroked his spearlike beard, his eyes glittering with sudden fire.

"Eileen Dare will be the first to use the trapeze this evening!" he murmured softly. "That is very interesting—very interesting indeed! By James! It seems that my opportunity has come!"

He turned, and quietly made his exit through one of the many doors which stood half open. Nipper and Eileen had not seen Taggart at all, and had no idea that he had been witnessing the rehearsal. For the time being Dr. Munro Taggart and all his works were allowed to drift. Eileen wanted to get herself thoroughly into the routine of the circus before she acted. And Nipper was of the same opinion.

Their object was to disarm suspicion. If they had known that Taggart already knew Eileen's identity they would, perhaps, have acted very differently.

After Eileen had changed in her own (or, rather, Violet's) little dressing-tent, she made her way to the caravan, where Violet was eagerly awaiting to hear how the new trick had panned out. The injured girl was sitting before a cheerful fire. The stove was small and compact, but the front was open, and a cheerful blaze was revealed. Violet's foot was badly swollen, and she could not walk a yard.

"Oh, I am so glad," she exclaimed, when she heard the result. "And to think that you are able to do all this, Miss Dare—oh, I mean Miss Smith!" She corrected herself smilingly. What a relief it is to father! I am afraid he will be very dissatisfied with me when I return to the ring——"

"Nonsense!" laughed Eileen. "After all, what I have done amounts to very little. I don't profess to be even a good trick-rider. I only used to practise it as a hobby. But how is your foot, Violet?"

They fell to discussing other matters, and in due course they had dinner together. Nipper fed with Mr. and Mrs. Boswell, and got on rippingly with the old couple. In fact, the lad regarded the whole adventure as a kind of holiday. He was unaware that a cunning scheme was even then being formulated in Taggart's evil brain.

In the afternoon things were slack. The frost still held, but the sky was cloudy, and there was a feeling of snow in the air. A cutting wind whistled round the big tent, and the canvas bellied and the bunting fluttered energetically.

Violet Elsmore—to give her her own name—was forced to remain in her caravan, and Eileen elected to stay with her. There was no reason why Eileen should stir out until after tea—until the time of the performance approached.

Nipper, hardy as a mountain goat, sauntered about, interested in the various little jobs which were being attended to by members of the circus. The big tent itself was left alone and deserted. Scarcely anybody went near it during the afternoons—except, of course, when there was a matinee.

Mr. Billy Miles, who did not know Nipper from Adam, was rather interested in the new clown. "Boko" had not yet been tried out, and Mr. Miles was somewhat curious regarding his rival's humorous qualities. But Merriface was in no way jealous, and if Nipper proved himself to be a genuine funny man, Merriface would be the first to congratulate him.

Nipper buttonholed Mr. Miles at about two-thirty, and had a chat with him. The lad, to tell the truth, already had a few first-classes wheezes for causing amusement during the show, and he thought that it would be far better for Mr. Miles and himself to work together.

Merriface was greatly struck by the original nature of Nipper's suggestions, and fell in with "Boko's" plans immediately. He realised that the boss had struck oil when he engaged this little brown-skinned fellow. If he proved to be a humorist in the ring, he would be invaluable. Once the audience was genuinely amused and in a good temper, the success of the whole show was assured.

And, then and there, Mr. Miles and Nipper arranged several little wheezes to work off during the performance. And at about a quarter to four the clown-elastic-human-marvel-private-secretary went off, in high good humour, to report to Mr. Boswell, and to attend to certain secretarial duties.

Nipper, left on his own, strolled off to the big tent, in order to practise a

few tumbling "stunts" in the ring. He knew that he would find it deserted—or at least thought that he would.

As he walked silently across the sawdust, however, he heard a slight sound above him, and, looking up in the comparative gloom, was astonished to see Dr. Taggert descending the ladder which led to the topmost trapeze platform.

"Hallo!" called Nipper cheerily, "are you practising some hair-raising trapeze tricks by way of a change, Dr. Harlo? Wouldn't be a bad idea to hang on that topmost bar by your eyebrows and hypnotise the whole audience!"

Nipper was not suspicious. He merely thought that Taggert had climbed the ladder just for a whim. The lad never guessed the black and ghastly truth. And Taggert, after a quick intake of breath, descended hurriedly to the ground.

Nipper had spoken cheerfully, because he wished to dispel any notion that he had been spying on the doctor, for the whole success of Nipper's plans depended upon his remaining unsuspected.

"I was just planning a variation of my turn," said Dr. Harlo curtly. "It was necessary for me to obtain an overhead view of the ring."

And, without any further word, he brushed past Nipper and strode out of the tent. The lad chuckled to himself, for he was sure that Taggert had not suspected him of any spying. Shrewd as Nipper was, he certainly did not realise that the doctor had been up to some villainous work.

The little incident passed out of his mind; or, to be more precise, it passed to the back of his mind. For Nipper did not forget things easily. The lad practised the tumbling "stunts" as he had intended, and after that it was close upon tea-time. And, that meal disposed of, the business of the evening commenced.

To Mr. Boswell's satisfaction the public flocked up splendidly, and some little time before the advertised time to commence the big tent was almost full. The higher-priced seats sold far better than the boss had anticipated, and he was genial and cheerful.

He was pleased, too, with Nipper's appearance in his clown's get-up. The lad was just at home in such a part, and his preliminary antics were very promising. His make-up was a masterpiece of its kind—for Nipper was an able second to his famous master in the difficult art of disguise. His great false nose looked marvellously real, and he had cultivated a shrill voice, which in itself was funny.

The first part of the performance went off with a bang. After "Harlo the Hypnotist" had appeared, and had mystified and interested the audience by some clever make-belief, Boko and Merriface tumbled into the ring with a terrific rush, and at once commenced an arranged "scene" which went down well. Nipper was in his element, and he made the audience roar with laughter at the most trivial thing. And Mr. Miles was no mean comedian himself. Between the two of them they succeeded in getting the public into a good humour.

And then came one of the most important turns of the whole show. "Viola," the Queen of the Ring, made her appearance. Eileen certainly looked wonderfully pretty and dainty in her gorgeously coloured attire, and every member of the audience could see that she was pretty in herself, and that paint and powder were conspicuous by their absence.

She was graceful and winning, and knew exactly how to treat her audience. On the stage Eileen could have made a fortune, had she chosen. She was a born actress, and she was not in the least troubled with nervousness.

Mr. Boswell—the ringmaster—strode forward in his resplendent attire,

and cracked his whip. He informed the audience of the "terribly dangerous" nature of the trick which Viola was now about to perform. And after an outburst of hand-clapping, Eileen lightly and nimbly ascended the ladder.

All eyes followed her up, as she climbed higher and higher. At last she stood upon the tiny platform, and stood ready to swing upon the topmost trapeze. She looked singularly dainty up there, and Nipper, below, watched the girl with a certain amount of anxiety.

He was standing just near the exit. The band had commenced to play some quiet, dreamy music—which would swell into a roar when Eileen commenced her descent. And several other performers were watching from the entrance. All were anxious, in fact, to see how the new "business" caught on. Probably Eileen herself was the least nervous of all. She was serenely confident, and smiled as she looked down at the sea of eyes on every side.

The band was just beginning to blare forth when Nipper, for some reason he did not know, glanced behind him. Then he started, and took a quick breath. Right behind him stood Dr. Munro Taggert. There was nothing much in this in itself. But the doctor's eyes riveted Nipper's attention on the second.

Taggert was gazing straight at Eileen Dare, and his expression was one of fiendish triumph. His eyes glittered evilly, and they were strangely fixed and rigid. The doctor seemed to be utterly oblivious of everything save the fact that Eileen was on the point of swinging on to the topmost trapeze.

And Nipper suddenly felt his blood race through his veins; he felt his very hair tingling with alarm and excitement. It all happened in less than a second, but many thoughts flashed through Nipper's active brain.

Taggert would rejoice if Eileen Dare were to be killed! And he obviously stood there waiting—waiting for what? Nipper remembered that Taggert had mounted to the high trapeze during the afternoon, when the big tent was deserted. At the time Nipper had thought nothing of it. But now, like a thunder-clap, the real significance of "Harlo's" movements struck the lad.

And Nipper acted—acted mechanically. Almost before his brain could direct his limbs he was in the ring. Even as Eileen was about to step upon the trapeze, Nipper hurled himself into the ring, roaring and cackling and jumping like a demon.

"Drat the feller!" muttered Mr. Boswell testily.

Eileen above paused, wondering why Nipper had interrupted at such an important moment. And Dr. Munro Taggert, just outside, caught his under-lip between his teeth and cursed under his breath.

"Wait for me—wait for me—wait for me!" yelled Nipper in a high-pitched voice, which made the audience chuckle. "You can't start that trick until I've given you the Royal assent. I'm the King of this ring!"

The lad had no wish to alarm the audience, and he only suspected treachery on Taggert's part. It would have been bad policy to create excitement—and possibly panic—by shouting out his real fears. So he made his actions appear part of the performance, leaving explanations until afterwards.

Nipper turned three quick somersaults, and then rushed straight at the ladder. He mounted it like a monkey.

"Might as well mount to the throne!" he exclaimed. "I shall get thrown out in any case! Hi, hi, hi! Miss Viola! Here we are—alive and kicking!" roared Nipper, as he neared the top. "Don't use the high trapeze—don't use the high trapeze—don't use the high trapeze!" he added

quickly and softly, so that none but Eileen could hear. "Savvy, miss? Don't use the high trapeze!"

"Yes, I understand," murmured Eileen, "but——"

"Explain afterwards!" said Nipper. "There's danger, that's all. Whoa! Here we go!" he added loudly, as he slid down the ladder at a terrible pace. He landed in the ring all of a heap, sprang up, and bolted out like a rabbit.

And Eileen swung herself on to the second trapeze, which was just within reach of her. This, and the other new ones, were secured to special fastenings—quite different from that of the topmost trapeze. Owing to Nipper's diversion, scarcely one member of the audience noticed that Eileen had missed the high trapeze; and her swift descent was watched with excitement and enthusiasm. Eileen landed beautifully upon Sultan's back, and then commenced her display of skill.

Dr. Munro Taggert, with a black, furious face, and with eyes that were now filled with alarm and anger, strode out of the tent into the night. He realised that his scoundrelly design had been detected—and by "Boko," too! Taggert instantly knew that, if he were to gain his object, he would have to act swiftly.

The show proceeded apace, and the audience was well satisfied. And afterwards, when the public had departed, Nipper made an examination—and found that the supports of the iron bar which held the trapeze were weakened to such an extent that Eileen's weight would have instantly sent the whole concern crashing to the ground!

"The devil!" muttered Nipper, with bated breath. "He knows, then!"

"I have had a wonderfully narrow escape," said Eileen quietly, when she heard. "And you saved my life, Nipper. It was splendid of you—the prompt way you acted. Oh, Nipper, what a terrible trap!"

But there was not an atom of evidence to fix any guilt upon Dr. Taggert himself. Nipper knew well enough that Taggert was guilty, but there was no concrete proof. The attempt to kill Eileen, however, had brought matters to a climax.

From that hour events were destined to move rapidly.

CHAPTER IV.

The Prowler—The Kidnappers—Nipper is Awake—Lee Takes a Hand!

EILEEN DARE and Nipper held a consultation soon after the show had "packed up" for the night. This was at about ten-thirty. Dr. Taggert had gone off somewhere nearly two hours previously—immediately after the failure of his dastardly attempt on Eileen's life.

Nipper was grave. He saw plainly enough that secrecy was no longer necessary. Taggert had deliberately tried to murder Eileen—therefore, he knew who she really was. Further delay would probably mean that the scoundrelly "hypnotist" would slip away.

So it was decided to wait no longer than the morning. If Taggert was at the circus for any sinister purpose, Eileen shrewdly argued, he would act immediately—before another day dawned. Accordingly, both Nipper and Eileen resolved to keep on the alert, and to be ready for any emergency.

The girl detective knew how near she had been to death, and she was rather thoughtful when she went to her caravan. Violet, however, was in the highest of spirits, and Eileen was soon laughing and joking.

The caravan was cosy and warm and comfortable. Both girls were fully dressed, and sat by the cheerful stove, chatting. It was rather a long job

attending to Violet's ankle. Eileen bathed it and rubbed the swollen joint with embrocation, and then re-bandaged it. By the time this was done eleven-thirty had struck.

The circus was quiet and still and dark. Everybody had gone to bed, and all the animals had been attended to. Violet was rather anxious concerning Zooloo, for she was exceedingly fond of the old elephant. But Eileen soon set her companion's mind at rest, for Mr. Billy Miles was making sure that Zooloo was being properly looked after and cared for. Eileen herself, too, had already made friends with the elephant—who was no mean judge of character.

The two girls talked on, about nothing in particular—their conversation being confined mainly to commonplace feminine chat. Violet seemed in no hurry to go to bed, and Eileen herself fully intended remaining awake, on the off-chance that "Dr. Harlo" would attempt any further villainy.

Eileen little guessed what was to occur that eventful night!

There were two doors by which admittance could be gained in the caravan—the big one at the rear, and a tiny door in front. There were also two small windows, and the rear door was glass-topped. All these, of course, were shaded. From outside, indeed, it was almost impossible to tell whether a light was burning within the caravan or not.

The night was very quiet. During a brief lull in the conversation Eileen distinctly heard the distant howl of a dog, or the nearer sound of one of the circus horses moving in its stall.

Near midnight Violet began to grow sleepy, and Eileen determined to put her companion to bed. But, just as she was on the point of bidding Violet undress, she suddenly held up her hand for silence, and listened intently.

"Why, what is it?" whispered Violet.

"I thought I heard something moving just outside," was Eileen's murmured reply. "Hush, don't speak at all!"

The girl detective placed her ear closer to one of the windows—which was open a few inches. She could see nothing, of course, owing to the thick blind; but her hearing was acute. And distinctly the soft footfalls of some midnight prowler came to Eileen's ears.

Somebody was lurking just outside the caravan.

Who could it be? After what had happened during the performance Eileen came to a conclusion at once. She felt certain that Dr. Munro Taggart was the prowler, and that he had come with the intention of performing the task he had failed to accomplish earlier. That Violet could be in any way connected with Taggart Eileen never suspected.

"Yes, there is somebody outside," Eileen murmured. "A tramp probably. Don't look so startled, Violet. He seems to be at the rear, so far as I can gather, so I will just have a look round."

In spite of Violet's protests Eileen stepped forward and made her way out of the caravan by means of the small door in front. She leapt lightly to the grass, and then stood perfectly still. In a few seconds the girl's eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom, and she could make out the dark bulk of the big tent, and the smaller shadows of the adjoining tents.

And immediately, even as she prepared to investigate, a dim form appeared from the other end of the caravan, and made off quickly in the direction of the big tent. Eileen did not move for a moment or two, and it seemed to her that the unknown prowler was walking as though with a set purpose—as though he had a definite destination in view.

The girl was quite sure that the man, whoever he was, had not seen her leave the caravan. Where was he off to now? Eileen decided to follow and

see for herself. Perhaps she would discover that her fears were groundless; that the man was merely one of the ordinary circus hands.

By this time the dim figure had disappeared round the tent, and Eileen tripped lightly forward through the darkness. Everything was still. Mr. Boswell's big caravan was all dark, and not a soul moved in the big meadow. Eileen reached the corner of the tent, and peered round.

Dimly, in the gloom, she saw her quarry making his way between a high hedge and a small tent—the tent, in fact, which was the home of Zooloo, the elephant. The man kept straight on, apparently making for the lower end of the meadow.

The events of the next fifteen minutes were startling, dramatic, and amazing.

Eileen reached the end of Zooloo's tent, and then paused for a moment. The unknown man she was following was still moving forward. And Eileen wondered if she was wasting time. Was the man merely a tramp? Certainly, his movements were not exactly suspicious, although they were questionable.

Then, without warning, a dry twig snapped immediately behind the girl. She turned swiftly, and found herself face to face with Dr. Munro Taggart.

He uttered no sound, but instantly acted. In one second Eileen was gripped tightly, and a gloved hand was clapped over her mouth. At the same moment she heard a soft, low whistle issue from between the doctor's lips.

Eileen struggled gamely, but she was taken unawares. She realised now, with anger and bitterness, that she had walked blindly into a trap. The shadowy figure ahead was a decoy. He had lured the girl out here, where there was little chance of a scuffle being heard or seen.

Taggart had his work cut out to hold the girl-detective; but within twenty seconds his confederate arrived. Eileen did not see who this man was, but he and Taggart at once bound a muffler round her mouth, and tied her hands behind her back. Then Taggart placed his face close to hers.

"Walk forward!" he ordered softly. "You will come to no harm."

Unable to resist, Eileen obeyed the command, and between her two captors she walked towards the extremity of the meadow. Here, as she knew, stood a low, wooden building—a mere hut. Without ceremony she was bundled into it, and the door was closed and secured on the outside.

Eileen was astonished. She had been expecting all manner of developments, and yet she had been simply bound and thrust into this dark hut. Her bonds, although secure enough, were not even tight. The girl realised that Taggart had imprisoned her from some motive other than that of personal revenge. Eileen had been imprisoned in the hut for some special purpose.

But what? Clearly she had been decoyed away so that she should be got rid of. For what purpose? Was it possible that Taggart had any designs upon Violet Boswell? Had Eileen been lured away so that Violet's caravan would be unprotected?

Eileen was greatly worried; but her shrewd guess was correct. Dr. Munro Taggart knew that drastic measures only would suffice now, and so, at the eleventh hour, he had made arrangements which would, he assured himself, end in complete success. His revenge upon Eileen Dare was, after all, of secondary importance. Once he had gained his main object, then would be the time to deal with Eileen!

Taggart had wasted no time after the failure of his scheme to kill his girl enemy. He knew that he must act promptly and act with decision, and he had hastened to an old friend—a member of the infamous Combine—and

made certain plans. This old friend was none other than Mr. Sydney Bradford, the well-known London solicitor. Bradford, who was as unscrupulous as he was cunning, saw big things in Taggart's scheme, and at once promised to help. And now the two men, unaided by any paid accomplices, were carrying out their plan. It was far better to "do the job" themselves. There could be no treachery and no blundering.

Having placed Eileen Dare in the hut, helpless, Taggart and Bradford hurried back to the dimly-lit circus tents. They did not speak; their plans were cut and dried, and they knew exactly how to proceed. It was a desperate game, but there was no reason why it should not succeed.

As silently as two sinister shadows they approached Violet's caravan. "Dr. Harlo" entered, and Bradford followed at once. They were within five minutes. No sounds emanated from the caravan, and shortly afterwards the two men re-appeared, carrying between them the limp form of Violet Boswell—or, to be more exact, Violet Elmore. The girl had been overpowered and drugged.

Swiftly, but silently, Violet was carried across the rough grass, round the main tent, and straight towards a low hedge which bordered a narrow lane. Through a gap, and the lane was reached. Here, unseen and in darkness, stood a low-built, motor-car of the landaulette type. It was Bradford's, and Violet was placed in the tonneau, and Taggart took his seat beside her. Bradford started up the engine, switched on the dim lights, and drove off.

Violet Elmore had been kidnapped.

She had been taken away from the circus, and not a soul was the wiser—at least, so it seemed. But such was not the case, for a certain alert person was fully aware of the situation, and was alive to the possibilities.

This alert person was Master Nipper.

Nipper was wide awake. Under the circumstances he had not retired to rest that night, but had determined to keep his eye well open for any sign of treachery. The lad, well wrapped and muffled up, had called out at about midnight in order to keep his eye upon Eileen's caravan. The lad was quite positive that nothing untoward would occur before midnight if, indeed, anything untoward occurred afterwards. So, by pure chance, Nipper failed to see Eileen leave the caravan and her resultant capture. But he had seen Taggart and Bradford enter the caravan on their return. Before Nipper could make up his mind how to act they had reappeared, carrying Violet. Naturally enough, Nipper concluded that it was Eileen Dare who had been carried off, and he became positively alarmed when he found that a motor-car was in waiting. Nipper made up his mind quickly.

There was a bicycle—the property of Mr. Billy Miles—standing in one of the tents close by. Thoroughly alarmed, Nipper did the best thing under the circumstances. He fetched out the bicycle, and followed the motor-car. The lad had had no idea that such exciting events were to occur, and he knew how wise his decision had been to keep his eye open. But even as he pedalled along in the wake of the motor-car he told himself that the situation was not only serious, but grave.

For he knew that he would not be able to keep pace. Once the car got into the stride it would be a matter of impossibility to keep it within sight. But through Brentwood the tracking was an easy matter, for the car proceeded at quite a moderate, easy pace. In point of fact, it went quite slowly, for Dr. Taggart had no wish to cause comment among the Brentwood police.

The car was making towards London, and Nipper was glad of this, for the road out of Brentwood in that direction was chiefly downhill. Accord-

ingly Nipper found it an easy matter to keep pace. And then he received a surprise.

Midway between Brentwood and Romford—quite near to Harold Wood, in fact—the motor-car turned down a narrow, rutty side turning. Almost concealed by trees a small cottage stood beside the road. Without any delay Violet Elsmore was carried into the cottage, and the car was driven into an adjoining field.

Nipper was in a dilemma.

He was relieved to know that he had followed the scoundrels to their destination, and was surprised to find that it was so near Brentwood. But he concluded that Eileen Dare was the victim. For what reason had she been brought here? Certainly the object was a sinister one, the lad concluded. But he was up against a tough proposition. He was only a lad, and there were two desperate and determined men to be dealt with. If he attempted any rescue he would only involve himself in disaster.

"The guv'nor!" Nipper told himself swiftly. "I shall make a mess of things if I try any tricks. The delay may be serious, but it's far better for the guv'nor to take a hand here. If I look sharp I can have him on the scene within an hour!"

This was no idle thought. Re-mounting his bicycle Nipper started off for Romford with all speed. He pedalled as he had seldom pedalled before, and arrived at Romford in record time. Here he found an all-night garage, and at the expiration of another five minutes he was supplied with a fast motor-cycle, and was off like a streak.

Through Ilford and Seven Kings and Stratford and Whitechapel he reared, regardless of speed limits and outraged policemen. Every second was precious, and it was rather a wonder that he arrived at Gray's Inn Road at all. But he was a superb rider, and had no mishap. He found his master in the laboratory, deeply immersed in an intricate chemical experiment.

"Good gracious, Nipper, what on earth is the matter?" demanded Nelson Lee, staring at the grimy apparition before him. "Is anything wrong?"

"Badly wrong, guv'nor," said Nipper huskily. "You've got to come at once! Miss Eileen's been carried off, and——"

Nelson Lee clenched his fists.

"Let's hear the story!" he rapped out crisply.

In a few sentences Nipper told the famous detective what had occurred. Lee, without a moment's hesitation, rang up a garage near by, and ordered his big car to be sent round at once. Nelson Lee always kept his motor-car ready for instant use, and it was round at the front door before five minutes had elapsed.

Looking terribly grim, Nelson Lee and Nipper entered the car and started off to the rescue. Would they be in time to foil Dr. Munro Taggert's evil designs?"

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CHAPTER V.

Taggert's Ruse—Eileen's Peril—Zooloo Acts—The Secret—Finis.

DR. MUNRO TAGGERT laughed harshly.

"You will be well advised to speak, my dear young lady," he exclaimed in soft tones. "It is your only chance of saving your father from re-capture and dire punishment. If you speak all will be well. If you remain silent——"

He paused, and shrugged his shoulders significantly.

The scene was a curious one. Violet Elsmore was seated on an old wooden

box in the front parlour of the little cottage amid the trees. The apartment was damp and bare of furniture. A candle guttered on the floor, and a heavy piece of sacking completely obscured the window. Taggert stood before his prisoner, and seemed to be quite at his ease.

Sydney Bradford was keeping guard outside—mainly because he had no intention of being seen by Violet. He did not wish to be mixed up in this business in any way whatever, except to share in the profits later on.

Violet was frightened—and little wonder. She had been attacked in her caravan, and had awakened to find herself in this noisome apartment, with the man she knew as Dr. Harlo standing before her. She was in no way harmed, and was assured that her release was only a matter of hours if she complied with her captor's demands.

Bluntly, Dr. Taggert had informed the girl that she must reveal the hiding-place of the gold locket which had been given into her care by her father five years before. At first the girl had refused—had refused indignantly and angrily. But then Taggert had resorted to a ruse. He lyingly informed Violet that her father had broken from Portmoor Prison, and that he was at present hiding from justice. John Elsmore's safety lay in Taggert's keeping. If Violet refused to reveal the whereabouts of the locket Taggert would hand her father over to the authorities.

If she consented, her father would be restored to her, and his freedom assured. The poor girl did not know whether to believe or disbelieve the story. But she had a dreadful suspicion that it was true. She had cherished that locket through the years, and she was alarmed at the thought of being forced to give it up now.

But there was nothing else for it. Still somewhat dazed by the effect of the drug, the girl was weakened and irresolute. And Dr. Taggert somehow influenced her with his coal-black evil eyes.

"Either you give up the locket or your father——"

Taggert paused as the girl gave a sudden sob.

"Oh, I cannot bear it!" she murmured thickly. "I will tell you—I will tell you! Only you must swear to me that my father will not be given up. The locket is not here—it is not in my caravan. It is concealed at the bottom of an old trunk which lies in the elephant's tent."

"You are not lying to me?" Taggert demanded harshly.

"No! I swear that is true," sobbed Violet brokenly. "It is an old trunk of mine, and contains nothing of any value except the locket. I—I placed it in Zooloo's tent because I thought it would be safe there. Who would think of looking for it in such a place?"

The doctor smiled evilly. He believed Violet's statement, and was, indeed, struck by the simplicity of it. Triumphant, he took the girl and placed her in a tiny cellar which adjoined the living room. It was fitted with a stout door on which were two bolts. There was no escape from that cellar.

Then, extinguishing the candle, Taggert hurried out and reported his success to the waiting Bradford.

"I hardly hoped for such quick success," murmured the doctor pleasantly. "We will return to the circus without delay, my dear Bradford. Once the locket is in our possession we shall have done with these people. This girl can find her way out of her own free will—she is safe enough for the night, at all events!"

But Dr. Munro Taggert had no idea of the many developments which were even then in the course of preparation. Scarcely more than ten minutes after he and Bradford had departed a huge racing car tore up at break-neck speed. Nelson Lee and Nipper had arrived! Their journey from

London had been one long breathless whirl. And now Lee acted drastically and promptly.

He took the bull by the horns and forced his way into the cottage, with no attempt at secrecy. But the place was seemingly deserted. A sudden cry, however, attracted the attention of the searchers, and Violet Elsmore was discovered in her prison.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Nipper breathlessly. "I—I thought——"

"What of Miss Dare?" asked Lee rapidly. "There has been villainous work to-night, Miss Boswell. Nipper thought that Miss Dare had been brought here."

"No, Mr. Lee," replied Violet, placing a hand on her heaving breast. "Oh, I am in such a muddle! I—I hardly know what has happened. But Miss Dare was not brought here. She left the caravan, and before she returned I was overpowered by Dr. Harlo and another man. Oh, I was so frightened——"

And Violet quickly told her rescuers of the events which had preceded her capture. It was a straightforward tale, and both Nelson Lee and Nipper were terribly grim. They guessed at once that Eileen Dare had fallen a victim to Dr. Taggert's plotting.

It was, indeed, a night of rush and bustle and excitement.

For the first time Nelson Lee and his young assistant learned Violet's true identity. She thought it better to be absolutely frank. And Lee was told of the locket, and of its story. But he had no idea of the locket's content, for even Violet herself was ignorant of that. It was obvious, however, that Dr. Taggert knew the secret; and it was obvious, also, that the secret was a valuable one.

"The scoundrel has a good start," Lee explained grimly. "But we may arrive in the nick of time to prevent the robbery. It will be touch and go. We know now, Nipper, why Dr. Taggert was attached to Boswell Circus. He had a very definite motive, and it seems that in spite of our precautions he stands an excellent chance of winning the game. But come—we must delay no longer!"

Violet was quickly made comfortable in the big racer, and then the car started off once more. There was now a double object in view; to foil Dr. Taggert's plot, and to learn what had become of Eileen Dare.

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But Eileen Dare had not been idle. It had been explained that she was merely placed in a hut so that the coast would be clear for Taggert's villainous designs regarding Violet. Eileen was bound and gagged, but not with especial care. After an interminable time—so it seemed to her—she succeeded in getting her hands free.

The rest was simple. She emerged from the hut, her mind filled with doubts and fears. She decided to hurry to the caravan straight away—for she instinctively knew that something terrible had happened.

To reach the caravan it was necessary to pass Zooloo's tent. And Eileen, with chafed wrists and aching ankles, hurried past with never a thought of the elephant. But suddenly she paused, wondering. Through a chink in the canvas she saw that there was a light within the tent! This was so unusual that Eileen mechanically paused to investigate.

And, parting the flap of the doorway, she looked upon a strange spectacle. A small electric lamp was standing upon the edge of an open trunk. Crouching over the trunk itself was Dr. Munro Taggert! In his hands he held a strange, old-fashioned gold locket. And behind him Zooloo, the elephant, stood wide awake and quiet.

"At last!" Eileen heard Taggert murmur in a triumphant tone. "The girl was right—she told the truth! It has been a narrow squeeze, but the locket and its secret is mine—mine!"

Eileen stood stock still. She was thrilled with excitement and sudden emotion. She had caught Dr. Taggert in the act! What the locket contained was a mystery to her, but it was clear that the scoundrel was bent on mischief.

And, without a second's hesitation, Eileen decided to act. The odds were in her favour this time, for she would take Taggert by surprise. The other man was certainly not here. As a matter of fact, Sydney Bradford was waiting in the little car some distance away.

"Hands up!"

The words, uttered softly and crisply, cut through the air as though they had been shouted through a megaphone. Dr. Taggert twisted round with a hoarse, throaty cry. He stared straight into the barrel of Eileen's tiny but serviceable revolver.

"By Heaven—you!" he choked hoarsely.

In that second—when triumph had seemed to be his—he went mad with fury and chagrin. Just when success was his, he saw disaster looming up. And, scarcely responsible for his actions, Dr. Taggert hurled himself at Eileen Dare, regardless of the threatening revolver. The attack was so abrupt and so unexpected that the girl was in no measure prepared for it.

The weapon was whirled out of her hand, and she found herself gripped fiercely and cruelly.

"You have come at the right time!" snarled Taggert thickly. "I will deal with you as you deserve, my lady! Ha, ha! Two birds with one stone—that is it! I will settle with you once and for all!"

And it seemed as though his words would come true. Strong as the girl was, she was like a child in his mad grip. She endeavoured to choke out a scream of warning, but his hands were at her throat, choking the very life out of her.

And then an amazing thing happened.

An unexpected factor entered the affair. Zooloo, trumpeting shrilly, lumbered round, his little eyes glittering in the light of the electric lamp. The elephant had decided to take a hand in the scene! Elephants are clever, shrewd animals, and their sagacity and intelligence is sometimes almost human. Zooloo's action at the present moment was undoubtedly astonishing.

He hated Dr. Taggert, and he had grown to like Eileen, even in the short time she had been with the circus. Elephants are quick to learn and to make friendships. Zooloo and Eileen were great pals.

The sequel to the struggle between Dr. Taggert and Eileen was dramatic. Zooloo lumbered round, whirling his trunk aloft. Taggert was unaware of the peril in his blind fury—unaware of it until he felt a strange, terrible grip upon him. Then, in a flash of horror, he realised the truth.

"The elephant!" he screamed. "The——"

Write to the Editor of

ANSWERS

if you are not getting your right PENSION

Eileen found herself released, and she staggered back, clutching her throat, and staring before her with wide-open eyes. She saw Zooloo grip Taggert in a terrible embrace, and then he lumbered out of the tent.

The girl shuddered. It seemed to her that she heard the sound of something snapping—something crunching horribly. Scream after scream rent the air. And outside, under the stars, the last act was being played.

Zooloo flung Dr. Munro Taggert aloft—flung him high into the air. And the doctor soared up, describing a wide arc, and fell to the ground with a dull, sickening thud. He was killed instantly, and paid the penalty for his many sins. Retribution had been dealt out by a strange medium.

"Great fried mackerel!" ejaculated Mr. Boswell breathlessly.

He had just heard the whole story. An hour had passed, and much had happened. Eileen Dare and Violet were in their own caravan, and Nelson Lee, Nipper, and Mr. Boswell had been holding a consultation.

Lee and Nipper had arrived just after Dr. Taggert's tragic death.

Sydney Bradford had escaped; he had heard his confederate's terrible screams, and had taken alarm. He had vanished, and nobody ever knew the identity of the man who had assisted Dr. Taggert in his scoundrelly work.

So much for the doctor's scheming—he had encompassed his own death. And Eileen Dare was rid of still another of her enemies.

And the secret of the locket?

In due course this was revealed. Just before John Elsmore's arrest, five years previously, he had invented a wonderful new method of making the famous T.N.T. explosive—a method which was simpler and easier, and which would save immense amounts of money in its manufacture. The new method had the advantage of being much safer than the method then in practice.

Elsmore had been unable to benefit by his creation. He had been convicted, and had written the formula of the new explosive—or rather, the new method of manufacture—on a small scrap of paper. This he had enclosed in the gold locket, concealed behind the miniature photograph.

And he had entrusted the locket to his daughter's care, knowing that she would guard it well. Dr. Taggert had been told of the secret, and he had fully realised the value of the invention.

At the present time, especially, when the country was at war, the Government would be willing to pay a fabulous price for the secret of the new method of manufacture. The project, therefore, was well worth a big risk. Dr. Taggert had taken the risk—and had failed. His plotting had cost him his life.

Months later, in parenthesis, Nelson Lee learned that John Elsmore had been pardoned. Lee himself had been using his good offices to secure Elsmore's release. The man had recovered from his wound, and returned to his daughter.

By this time his invention had been put to use, and he came out of prison to find himself a rich man. It was a joyous occasion for Violet, and the girl insisted upon her father supplying Mr. Horatio Boswell with a large amount of capital for the outfitting of a gigantic new circus—a suggestion which John Elsmore complied with. For he owed much to Mr. Boswell.

Meanwhile, Eileen Dare was continuing her self-imposed task of destroying the gang of highly-placed scoundrels who called themselves the Combine

THE END.

Next Week!—"THE BROKEN VASE; Or, The Mystery of Benton Square. By the Author of "The Black Wolf," etc.

THE ISLAND OF GOLD

A Story of Treasure Hunting in the South Sea Islands

By **FENTON ASH**

You can begin this story to-day!

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

They meet with many adventures. 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 catches 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 dishonest native named **ULTRA**, and an Irishman—one **PETE STORBIN**, who were the treasure hunters against a usually flibuster—**PEDRO DIBBO**, and his gang By some means the pirate has got to know the object of the expedition.

Groesome Fees.

ULTRA and **Storbin**, with some of their men, started off the next day on the return to their own island. They left most of their followers and a number of their canoes, however, behind them, and these were temporarily enrolled among the doctor's party as general helpers.

Now that he had settled matters with the Kanaka king, and recovered the full use of his injured foot, **Dr. Campbell** addressed himself energetically to the prosecution of his search for the mysterious "gold water."

"Bless me!" he exclaimed to his two assistants, as they walked back to camp after waving adieu to the departing canoes. "it's time we began to do something. What with my being laid up, and the discussions with those two gentlemen, which threatened to drag on for ever, we've wasted a lot of time. And now we must make up for it."

"We must make a start this morning by going through that tunnel of yours and recovering the boat. I've advised Captain **Barron**. He promised to have the motor-boat ready, fitted up with a searchlight, so that we shall be able to see our way. He's going to bring it ashore himself, he said."

"Is he coming with us?" Alec asked.

The doctor shook his head.

"No. As you know, he does not like leaving his ship."

They had not seen much of the worthy captain during the intervening days. He had passed most of his time on board, only coming ashore for an hour or two for a change occasionally.

He was one of those who believed that a captain's place should be on

(Continued overleaf.)

his ship, especially when she was on active service—i.e., not at anchor in a safe haven, or moored snugly against a quay in a dock. Moreover, he had heard about Pedro Diego and his ship, the Hawk, and Captain Barron, without talking of it, had been taking his own measures, so as to be in readiness against possible trouble from that quarter.

The doctor had come provided with a couple of small cannons, besides some maxims, and the skipper had been busy overhauling them, and seeing that they were ready for instant use.

This morning, a little later, he came ashore in the motor-boat with his mate Tom Read, who was to take charge of her.

"So you're going to venture into the underground regions again," he remarked jovially to the two young fellows. "Well, it's time you brought me my boat back. I only hope you'll find her. It is to be hoped that some uncanny monster of the underworld hasn't made off with it."

"No fear of that, captain," Alec replied.

"Oh, I don't know. I don't feel at all sure about it," the skipper declared, shaking his head. "I'll be deuced glad to set eyes on her again. I shan't feel any confidence that she's coming back till I see her."

After a little more friendly banter from the good-tempered skipper, the doctor and his party started.

The motor-boat was, in fact, a fair-sized launch, with a covered-in bow, and room on board for a good number. The mate had with him two sailors from the yacht, and Ben Grove was there as one of the doctor's assistants.

The run up the creek was soon made, and then, as the channel narrowed and the hovering, precipitous rocks began to close in upon them from either side, the speed was reduced. And it was reduced still further as they approached the entrance to the tunnel.

"We didn't crawl along at this cautious pace when we came this way before, did we, Clive?" laughed Alec. "We went in style, I can tell you—at express speed!"

"It's a wonder your boat was not smashed to pieces against these rocks," said the doctor, looking about with anything but pleasure at their grim surroundings. "You were a pair of mad rascals to get into such a tight place. Surely you could have cut the line and got free?"

"Just what we couldn't do, sir!" Clive returned. "You remember, we hadn't got the axe handy enough."

"Which reminds me," observed Alec. "Have we an axe here handy, if it should be wanted. We needn't be in the same predicament again—unable to get at it at the critical moment."

"There be two here, sir," said Ben Grove. "The doctor told me t' be sure t' see about it."

"So you brought two! Well, that's being on the safe side anyway. H'm! Here we are at the entrance to the tunnel. What a strange place it looks, with the searchlight playing on it! It seems more weird and eerie than it did when we came through it in the dark!"

It was certainly a curious scene, or, rather, series of scenes, that was revealed as they travelled along the strange waterway. The beams of the searchlight fell upon the rocky roof and sides, and were reflected again from the moisture which dripped over them.

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