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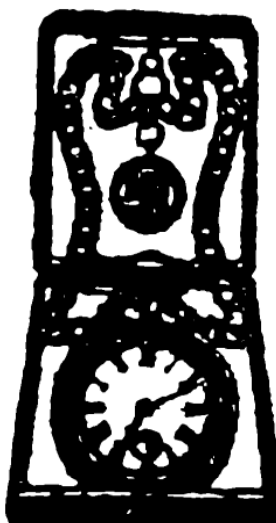
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CHAPTER I.

The Story of Lieut. Philip Langford—And a Cunning Plot.

"**A**MERICA, eh? That's my country, lieutenant. When will you be making the trip?"

"Almost at once," said Lieutenant Philip Langford. "It will be my first visit to the States—and I don't suppose a very happy one, either. But there is no reason why I should bother you with my troubles, Mr. Ross."

Mr. Melville J. Ross smiled.

"You're not bothering me," he replied, lighting a fresh cigar from the stump of his old one, and tossing the stump into the fire. "I'm here for an hour or two, lieutenant, and I'm dead tired of the newspapers, with their everlasting war news. I guess you may as well keep me entertained—if you're inclined that way."

The two men were seated in big, comfortable armchairs before a cheerful fire in the smoking-lounge of the Wayfarers' Club, in Piccadilly. It was fairly early in the evening, and outside it was raining heavily.

Lieutenant Langford was not a young man; his age was probably in the neighbourhood of forty. He was well-built, and his khaki uniform fitted his sturdily-made figure to perfection. His clean-shaven face was lined a little, and against his temples a few stray grey hairs showed amongst the dark chestnut.

His companion was very similar in size and bearing, but differed greatly in features and eyes. They had met for the first time just over a week previously, and had chatted together almost every evening since.

They were not friends, for they had never met outside the walls of the Wayfarers' Club; but they were on excellent terms, and Langford, at least, was rather fond of a chat. He was a talkative man by nature.

He had mentioned to Ross that he was about to take a trip to the United States; that he had been granted special leave for the journey. Ross, who wasn't particularly interested, was, nevertheless, quite ready to listen. He was enjoying the fire and his cigar, and the chair was extremely comfortable.

"You mentioned that your visit to America would probably be lacking in happiness, Lieutenant Langford," exclaimed Ross lazily, crossing his legs. "You were speaking of the war, no doubt?"

"The war? Oh, no," was the officer's reply. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Ross, my father is dying, and I am going out to be with him before the end."

Melville J. Ross looked grave.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know."

"Perhaps I am not quite so sad as I ~~should~~ be," remarked Langford, with a slight smile. "But it would be sheer hypocrisy to display marked sadness over the death of a man who is a complete stranger to me."

"A stranger? I thought you said——"

"That I am going to my father's bedside? Exactly," said the lieutenant. "It probably sounds remarkable to your ears, Mr. Ross. Indeed, it is remarkable. But I have never seen my father, to my recollection."

"Well, I'm surprised—a heap surprised."

"That is only natural. From what I have been told, I last saw my father when I was three years of age. But, as you can imagine, that is tantamount to saying that I have never seen him at all. A man cannot remember the things that happened when he was three," smiled Langford. "That would be close upon thirty-seven years ago."

"I guess you'll be real pleased to see the old gentleman."

"In one way, perhaps," replied the lieutenant. "But until very recently I had not the slightest idea that my father was alive. Now, it seems, there is a lively prospect of my inheriting a big fortune."

"Say, that's rather fine," remarked Ross heartily.

"Perhaps I had better just tell you the little yarn from the beginning?" suggested Langford, laying back and lighting a cigarette. "About my mother and my father, I mean. Of course, you are probably bored to death——"

"Not at all," said the other. "Fire away. I'm quite keen."

"Well, it's necessary to go back thirty-seven years," said the lieutenant. "It was when I was about three years old that the rupture occurred. Even to-day I do not exactly know why my parents separated. It was just an ordinary domestic quarrel, I know; an affair which would have blown over within a week between two normal people. But my father—so my mother has always told me—was astonishingly eccentric. He positively refused to heal the breach, and sailed for America, declaring that he would never return to England again."

"And he never did return?"

"Never. Over a trivial, absurd quarrel, he left my mother and went to the United States," replied Langford. "As it happened, my mother was well provided for—she had a fairly large income of her own, so she and I were never in want. But I was brought up to believe that my father was dead. He was never mentioned, and I always thought that he was, actually, dead."

"And all over some petty household squabble?"

"Exactly. But it reveals to you my father's unrelenting nature. He would never, under any circumstances, admit himself in the wrong. He went to America and cut himself completely and absolutely adrift from his old life, and began anew."

"Say, it's not my affair, and I don't want to be inquisitive," said Melville J. Ross. "But doesn't that seem a bit steep, lieutenant? I should say that something more than a domestic quarrel occurred."

"I have often thought so myself," replied Langford readily. "But I am convinced that the affair could have been healed up if my father had not been so headstrong. However, it matters little what the quarrel was about. I know, at least, that there was no disgrace attached to it in any way."

"That is comforting," at all events."

"My mother died about ten years ago," went on the lieutenant. "About two months before she fell fatally ill she told me that my father was alive, and in America. But more than that she did not know; she had not the slightest idea where he was, or in what position he was."

"Of course, I was surprised to hear the news, but it made no impression upon me. Why should it? I was told that my father was alive, but that was all. After my mother's death I practically forgot what she had said, and still looked upon myself as an orphan. And it was not until a fortnight ago that I fully realised the fact that I had a father."

"What happened a fortnight ago?" asked Ross.

"I received a long cablegram from New York," was Langford's reply. "A cablegram which must have cost a nice little sum, for it was fully five hundred words in length. It was from my father, Mr. Heron Langford."

Ross half raised himself in his chair.

"Gee!" he exclaimed, in his surprise. "Do you mean *the* Heron Langford?"

"Precisely. I made the astonishing discovery that my father was none other than the well-known multi-millionaire railroad magnate," said Langford. "You see, I had always understood my father's name to be John Langford, and I never for a moment dreamed that Heron Langford was my father. On looking up family records, however—for the first time in my life—I found that my father's full name was John Heron Langford. But the most surprising part is yet to come."

"You don't say so!"

"In the cablegram he explained that he is on his deathbed—that he is slowly dying. And an intense desire has obsessed him to see the son he left in England thirty-seven years ago. After this lapse of years my father wishes to make reparation for his harsh conduct. But, of course, to me it is like getting a message from a complete stranger."

"Sure," agreed Ross. "And what about the Langford millions?"

The lieutenant smiled.

"If I arrive in New York on or before the twenty-third of this month, and go to my father, I inherit a sum something like eight million dollars," he said. "That is a stipulation—I must arrive before the twenty-third; or, at least, not later."

"Eight millions!" murmured Melville J. Ross absently. "Great poker!"

"It seems that the doctors have told my father that he cannot live after the twenty-third," continued Langford. "In some cases doctors can pretty well forecast how many days a man has to live. So it pretty well amounts to this. If I arrive at my father's bedside while he is still alive, I get the fortune. But if I arrive after his death, I get nothing."

"That's rather thrilling," said Ross, with a keen look in his eyes. "It's something of a gamble."

"But you can quite easily understand the old man's attitude," returned Langford, with a smile. "He wants to see his son before he dies; if that son arrives in time he will be rewarded——"

"But, say," interrupted Ross, "how will old man Langford know you?"

"He won't know me."

"But you'll take proofs of your identity——"

"Of course. That is all I can do," said the lieutenant. "It is not possible, is it, that my father can recognise me? When he last saw me I was a child of three. We shall be as strangers to one another."

Melville J. Ross nodded abstractedly.

"As strangers," he muttered under his breath. "Gee-whiz!" Then

he looked round at his companion. "And you are going to the States at once?"

"By the next available boat," replied Langford. "I have been granted special leave, and have already made all arrangements. It is a quaint situation, don't you think? I am off to see my father—a perfect stranger. And if I arrive before the twenty-third—which I certainly shall—I inherit eight million dollars!"

It was, indeed, a quaint situation.

And Melville J. Ross, far from being bored, now seemed strangely excited. His eyes were gleaming, and he averted them, so that Langford should not notice. He questioned the lieutenant closely, and the latter answered readily and without realising that he was being pumped.

He merely thought that Ross was interested.

And in this Lieutenant Langford was certainly right. Melville J. Ross was interested—he saw possibilities. He saw huge possibilities.

If Langford had only known his companion's real character he would have kept his mouth tightly closed. But Langford did not know. Ross was a member of the Wayfarers' Club, one of the most select and exclusive clubs in the West End. That fact, surely, was proof enough that he was honourable?

And, in any case, the lieutenant would not have been particularly uneasy if a score of strangers had overheard the conversation. It was personal, no doubt, but how could anybody profit by the knowledge?

Langford, although nearly forty years of age, was a child in matters appertaining to crime and criminals. He would never have dreamed that capital could be made out of the information he had given Ross.

For the American—Ross was of that nationality—was a criminal of the very worst type.

He was not the type of man one would associate with crime at all. He moved in the best circles; he was well educated; he seemed to be a gentleman to his finger-tips. And his name was well known in City business quarters, well known and well respected.

Yet under this cloak of respectability lay the man's real character. He was a bird of prey; he worked secretly, and in the dark. And he did not work alone, for Melville J. Ross was a member of a secret clique of men who privately termed themselves "The Combine."

This Combine, however, was not an organised band of criminals. Its members were composed of highly esteemed City business men and private gentlemen. There was no leader and no secret meetings. But when a "good thing" was encountered, the Combine gathered together and the blackest villainy followed.

For some months the Combine had been suffering many blows. Several of its most valuable members had been exposed and punished. And this result had been achieved by a mere girl!

Eileen Dare was the name of that girl.

Her campaign against the Combine had been signally successful all along the line. Many months before, her father, an expert engineer, had been murdered by the Combine, and his life invention had been stolen by them.

Eileen had sworn to make every man pay the penalty for that foul crime. She had had the assistance and co-operation of Nelson Lee, the famous detective, in all her cases, and her enemies had been slowly but surely accounted for.

Many had gone, but many still remained. The Combine was still powerful, was still conducting its criminal practices.

Melville J. Ross was one of those who had taken an active part in the pl

against Eileen's father. So far he had escaped her attentions, but fate was destined to take a turn which would ultimately bring about his defeat and downfall.

When Ross left the Wayfarers' Club, he took a taxi straight to the house occupied by Mr. Sydney Bradford, the well-known solicitor. Bradford happened to be at home, and he greeted Ross cordially. For Bradford, too, was one of those snakes in the grass who struck from behind and in the dark.

After a short, earnest talk with Bradford, Ross got busy on the telephone, and within an hour the solicitor had several visitors. These were all men as well known as himself. They were all men whose names were well known and highly respected.

Mr. Ford Abbercorn was there, and with him came Herbert Vikerson, Stanton Roding, and Roger Haverfield.

The latter resided in the Midland city of Birmingham, and it was at his great steel works that Mr. Lawrence Dare had been murdered. And he had been more than murdered. Mr. Dare had been accused of being a traitor to his King and country, and had been condemned to death. The night before his execution, however, Dare had died from shock.

In the eyes of Heaven he had been murdered, and his name was left blackened and besmirched. Roger Haverfield had taken an active part in the compiling of the false evidence which had told fatally against Dare at his court-martial. But Haverfield was no more to blame than his confederates. They were one and all responsible.

Soon after the arrival of Haverfield and his companions, a new-comer was announced, and Lord Max Roper joined the men in the library. Lord Max was a man of about fifty, and to judge from appearances he would not have hurt a fly. Yet, as a matter of fact, he was one of the most unscrupulous and callous members of this infamous band of highly placed criminals.

The meeting in Sydney Bradford's library, in fact, was a meeting of the Combine. This does not mean to imply that Bradford's library was a recognised council chamber. The Combine meetings were held in various places; anywhere so long as they were private and business could be discussed.

And the business under discussion on this occasion was the affair of Lieutenant Philip Langford.

Melville J. Ross had lost no time!

"I've called you together," he began, "because I guess I'm on a real good thing. But I don't want to go into it on my own. When it comes to real big things, we all pull together and help one another. It's possible that I shall want a whole heap of help in obtaining a passport to get out of England within the next two days."

"What's the scheme, Ross?" asked Bradford bluntly. "That's the question. We generally expect something rather startling from you."

"And you'll get it this time," declared Ross with satisfaction—"something that will fairly make you stare! As a beginning, I'll tell you that millions are at stake. Worked properly, there's a decided chance of raking in a cool eight million dollars! How's that?"

The Combine were sceptical.

"That sounds rather too rosy, my dear Ross!" exclaimed Ford Abbercorn. "It sounds more in dollars, of course; but it's a huge figure, all the same. But I'm intensely curious to hear more."

Abbercorn's curiosity was soon satisfied, for without further ado Ross proceeded to explain what had passed at the Wayfarers' Club scarcely more than a couple of hours before.

"Can't you see the possibilities?" concluded Ross eagerly. "Say! The whole thing bristles with 'em! I honestly believe that the game can be worked and brought off without a hitch."

"What game?" demanded Bradford. "What is your plan?"

"Just this!" was the American's reply. "Lieutenant Langford is booked for New York. He's got to arrive before the twenty-third, and he'll go straight to his father's bedside. The pair of them are absolute strangers."

"Phew!" whistled Haverfield softly.

"You've hit upon the scheme?" asked Ross calmly. "Did you ever hear of anything so simple? All we have to do is to put Langford out of the way—kidnap him, in other words—and hold him a prisoner until it suits us to let him go. Then I'll run across to America and see old Heron Langford, and take positive proofs with me that I'm his son."

"Suppose you are bowled out——"

"I don't suppose things that won't happen," interjected Ross calmly. "I shall take thundering good care not to get bowled out! Besides, old man Langford will be just about three-parts dead by the time I arrive, and it will be the easiest job in the world to kid him. Once I've got the dollars—and that will be immediately—I'll convert them into untracable securities and vanooose."

"It sounds easy," began Abercorn doubtfully.

"My dear fellow, so far as I can see the game is well worth attempting," put in Lord Max Roper languidly. "There are no great obstacles in the way. Everything is simple and straightforward. But much, of course, will depend upon Ross himself. He will have to handle the business with great cleverness once he arrives in New York; but he is quite capable of doing so."

Melville J. Ross nodded.

"You can rely on me," he exclaimed. "Of course, I sha'n't attempt to leave England under another name. I shall travel to New York in my own personality. Once I get there, the real game will commence. It would be impossible to take Langford's identity at the very start. I should never be able to get out of England."

"And how about Langford himself?" asked Stanton Roding, a big, fleshy man with protruding eyes. "How do you propose to clear him out of the path? It is a delicate task, Ross, and there is very little time to waste!"

"Time is limited, I'll admit," was the American's reply. "But there's no need to worry. Langford will have to be kidnapped on the day he sails from Liverpool. My idea is to do the trick while he is in the train."

And Melville J. Ross outlined his scheme.

The Combine were greatly interested, and for fully two hours they planned and plotted, and when they finally broke up everything was cut and dried to the last detail.

CHAPTER II.

A Cheerful Trio—The Accident at Charing Cross—Nelson Lee's Commission.

NELSON LEE glanced at his watch.

"Well, if we mean to carry out our arrangement, we shall have to be making a move!" exclaimed the famous criminologist, reluctantly rising from the luxurious chair in which he had been lolling. "Nipper, I entrust you with the task of ringing up for a taxi."

"No particular hurry, guv'nor!" remarked Nipper. "I expect Miss Eileen will be about half an hour getting ready. Young ladies always take a terrific time to get their hats and things on, don't they?"

"Really, Nipper, I shrink from answering that question," said Nelson Lee drily.

"They say that listeners never hear good of themselves!" exclaimed a

sweet, girlish voice at the door. "But I sha'n't be half an hour, Nipper. Give me just five minutes, and I will be quite ready."

Nipper went crimson.

"I—I didn't know you—you heard, Miss Eileen," he stammered. "Of course you won't be half an hour! That—that was only a figure of speech, you know. I'll bet you beat most other girls, anyhow!" he added stoutly.

Eileen Dare laughed merrily.

"Is it time for us to go, then?" she asked. "You know where to telephone to for a taxi, don't you? There is a garage just a few streets away. You'll find the 'phone number written on the tablet just over the instrument."

The scene was the dainty sitting-room of Eileen Dare's flat in Chelsea. A cheerful fire blazed in the grate, and the electric light, softly shaded, cast a warm glow down upon the delicate furniture.

Nelson Lee and Nipper had been taking tea with the girl detective and her aunt. A few minutes before, Eileen and Aunt Esther had left the apartment, leaving Lee and Nipper to themselves.

It had been a delightful meal, that afternoon tea, and the time had sped so quickly that the evening was well advanced before the visitors realised the fact. It was not often that Nelson Lee found time to indulge in afternoon tea, so when such an occasion occurred it was made the most of.

For some months now the great detective had known Eileen Dare. He had been associated with the clever girl in several important cases, all of them being connected with Eileen's enemies—the Combine.

On this particular winter's evening, Eileen was looking her best. Her delicately moulded figure was shown to perfection in the rich but plainly cut evening-gown. Her hair was coiffured very sweetly, and her deep, brown eyes sparkled with happiness and the keen joy of living.

Certainly there was no daintier, no prettier, girl in London than Eileen Dare, and Nipper, at least, would have gone to the ends of the earth to serve her. Nelson Lee admired her greatly—admired her for her wonderful ability. For she had proved her sterling worth on many an occasion. Pretty as she was—seemingly fragile, indeed—she was a girl of action and determination. Lee would have trusted her with almost any perilous task, knowing full well that it would be accomplished expeditiously and meritoriously.

Her detective ability was something to wonder at. She possessed astonishing powers of deduction, and was capable of holding her own in any battle of wits. Her enemies had excellent cause to fear her activity:

The arrangement which Nelson Lee referred to was nothing in particular. On that evening there was a special concert at a famous hall, a concert which was remarkable for its long list of renowned singers. Lee had obtained three excellent seats, and he and Eileen and Nipper were to attend. Aunt Esther preferred to stay at home; she disliked the dark streets and the cold wintry night.

Nipper had soon arranged for a taxi to be sent round, and Eileen was as good as her word. Within five minutes she was ready, and by that time the taxi was waiting outside the flat.

Bidding Aunt Esther good-bye, the trio descended the stairs, and emerged upon the short pathway which led to the street. They were soon howling away, Nelson Lee puffing at a cigar—having obtained permission to smoke from Eileen.

It was a cold, dreary night.

Sleet had been falling during the early evening, and even now a few flakes of watery snow were floating down from the blackness above. The roads were in just that exact state of grease which is the most treacherous.

The taxi proceeded cautiously along the darkened streets. There was no

particular hurry, and within the cab the trio were gaily laughing and chatting. Often enough they were brought together by grim work of some kind; but very seldom by pleasure. It was quite an occasion.

But fate was destined to intervene.

That wonderful concert was to be missed, after all. And Nelson Lee and Nipper and Eileen Dare were to start upon a case which would lead to the most amazing adventures and perils. Yet, as they sat in the taxi, they little thought of the dangers of their particular calling. To-night they were out for pleasure.

The taxi-cab reached Charing Cross, and just opposite the entrance to the great station, in the Strand, the vehicle was pulled up for a moment by a crush in the traffic.

The driver watched his opportunity, and as soon as he saw a break he jammed his clutch in, and the taxi jerked forward swiftly. And at that very second the tall figure of a man—a military officer—appeared from the rear of a motor-omnibus. He was striding full in the path of the speeding taxi.

"Hi! Look out, there!" roared the cabby frantically.

The officer started, turned his head—and leaped nimbly aside. Nelson Lee and Nipper bent forward, peering through the glass. They saw the khaki figure leap aside, and Lee nodded approvingly. But the next second came disaster.

It was one of those cruel tricks of chance which occur daily in London streets. If the officer had remained perfectly still he would have been safe. For, exactly as he leapt aside, the taxi-driver jammed his brake on hard.

The result was serious.

The vehicle skidded violently, the rear wheel locked. And the back portion of the taxi struck the officer with terrible force. He was flung down and crushed and battered.

There was uproar in a moment.

Dark as the Strand was, plenty of people saw the accident. Several women shrieked, and one or two frightened shouts came from men. Then the traffic came to a standstill, and there was a rush of people to the spot where the injured man lay.

Nelson Lee wrenched open the door of the taxi and leapt out.

"Stand back, please!" he ordered sharply. "Stand back!"

There was authority in his voice, and the crowd instinctively checked its rush. Nipper, within the cab, caught hold of Eileen's arm as the girl made as if to step out into the road.

"I shouldn't go out, Miss Eileen," said Nipper quietly.

Eileen gently shook her arm free.

"I believe the poor man is badly injured, Nipper," said the girl simply. "If I can do anything to help him it is my duty to be by his side. I should be a poor specimen of humanity if I remained in this cab, idle and frightened."

And Eileen stepped out and quickly walked to Nelson Lee's side. The detective was kneeling in the muddy road, regardless of the injury to his clothing. He looked up as Eileen and Nipper bent down. At the same time a police-constable forced his way through the crowd.

"Broken leg," said Lee shortly. "Better take him straight to hospital."

"By Jove! What an infernal nuisance!" gasped a painful voice. "Are you sure my leg is broken, my dear sir? It feels all right except for a dull throbbing. Whew! that gave me beans, though!"

The fallen officer was speaking quite calmly. He was obviously conscious, and in full possession of his wits. He was a man of about forty, and Lee saw that he was a lieutenant by the two stars on his coat-sleeves.

"Can I do anything?" asked Eileen Dare quietly.

"Nothing, Miss Eileen," replied Lee. "The best thing is to get him straight to hospital. Ah, constable, you're just the man—— No, we don't want an ambulance—waste of time. The taxi will do!"

The constable glared round at the pressing crowd.

"Now then, keep back!" he shouted. "Keep back, there!"

The unfortunate officer was gently placed in the taxi, the driver of the vehicle looking a bit shaky and pale. His number was taken, and he was then allowed to proceed. Nelson Lee accompanied the injured man, and Eileen Dare and Nipper followed in a second taxi.

An hour later the trio were standing round a cot in one of the wards of a big hospital. They had completely forgotten about their extra-special concert. The accident at Charing Cross had altered everything—and was destined to alter everything to a far greater extent than they dreamed of at the present moment.

The officer, they found, was Lieutenant Philip Langford.

His injury was not serious—that is, there was no fear of serious complications arising. His left leg was broken, and his side badly bruised. But this, except for grazed knees and wrists, was the sole amount of the injury. His leg had been set with great success, and he was now fairly comfortable. He had been conscious throughout, and had borne the pain with great fortitude.

He declared again and again that he, alone, was to blame. Nelson Lee had introduced himself, and Langford had been rather pleased. He had often heard of the great detective, of course, but had never met him before.

Then Eileen and Nipper were introduced; but, in spite of their efforts to cheer the patient up, he wore a worried frown. Indeed, it almost seemed as though he were in fear of something.

"It was my own fault, Mr. Lee," Langford said, once again. "I was an infernal fool to dodge out behind that 'bus. The taxi-man did his utmost to avoid me, too. What a pity—what a terrible pity it is!"

You will be laid up for weeks, I am afraid," said Lee gently.

The lieutenant nodded ruefully.

"I'm not worrying about the pain," he said. "I ought to count myself lucky for not being wiped out altogether. Jove! It's queer. I've been facing death in France for months past and didn't get a scratch—and then I nearly get killed by a miserable taxi-cab!"

"Jolly hard lines!" commented Nipper feelingly.

"But I'm done—I'm completely done!" went on Langford, as though to himself. "This means the loss of eight mill——"

The lieutenant paused suddenly, and looked at Nelson Lee with fixed attention. Lee and Eileen and Nipper watched the patient cautiously. For fully three minutes not a word was spoken. Then Langford seemingly came to a decision.

"Are you willing to accept a commission, Mr. Lee?" he asked abruptly.

"I don't think I quite understand," replied Lee.

"I mean, are you free at present?"

"I am not engaged particularly for the moment——"

"Then I want you to do me a service," went on Langford, with sudden eagerness. "Oh, I will pay you a handsome fee—— I beg your pardon, Mr. Lee," he added quickly, "but I am anxious to obtain your aid. I know you to be a man of honour—a man who can be trusted in all details. Your friends, too——"

"My friends," interjected Lee, with a smiling glance at Eileen and Nipper, "are as reliable as myself, Lieutenant Langford. If you can trust

me, you can trust them. But you surprise me. How can I render you assistance?"

"By taking the very next boat to New York!"

"Dear me! Will you please go into details?" asked the detective smoothly.

So, with the trio listening intently, Lieutenant Langford told them of the cablegram he had received from his father, Heron Langford, the multi-millionaire. He told them of the stipulation that he should arrive in New York on or before the twenty-third of the month.

"This accident, of course, has nailed me down to one spot for weeks," Langford went on. "It is obviously impossible for me to travel to America. You understand now, perhaps, why I have been looking glum? I stand to lose a fortune—a vast fortune. In short, eight million dollars!"

"Phew!" whistled Nipper, staring. "That's rough, sir!"

"But something can be done, surely?" asked Eileen Dare.

"That is what I am hoping. I want you, Mr. Lee, to go to New York, and personally see my father. I want you to explain the circumstances. If he has a spark of humanity in him he will realise how impossible it is for me to be by his side by the twenty-third. Will you go? Will you do this for me?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"You must give me a minute, at least, in which to consider," he said.

"Forgive me! I am impulsive and eager," exclaimed Langford, laying back rather wearily. "But you will realise what this means to me, Mr. Lee. I am not exactly poor, but it would be galling to lose such a fortune—to lose it, moreover, without making an effort to set matters right. You are the one man for the task—you are the one man who can explain the affair properly."

"We must consider all points," said Lee thoughtfully. "Surely a cablegram to your father would be sufficient? Please do not think I am raising objections. I am only thinking of saving you needless expense——"

The lieutenant shook his head.

"Is it worth the risk?" he asked quietly. "Remember, there are millions at stake, Mr. Lee. It is possible that a cablegram would be sufficient—but by no means certain. If I despatched such a message father might think the whole thing a lie, invented just to save myself the trouble of crossing the Atlantic. But if you went yourself, carrying with you letters from me, my father would know at once that I had done my very best to comply with his wish. He would know that only an unkind fate prevented me from being by his side. What do you think? And how does it strike you, Miss Dare?"

"I think you are right," replied Eileen, at once. "With so much at stake, it would be foolish in the extreme to trust to a mere, cold, characterless telegram."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Exactly," he agreed. "I will go, Lieutenant Langford."

Langford took a deep breath, and bent slightly forward.

"You will accept my commission?"

"Yes."

"Thank you from the bottom of my heart," said the lieutenant, wincing a little as his leg gave an agonising twinge. "By Jove! You have taken a weight off my mind. I feel that everything will be all right, after all. My father will listen to you, Mr. Lee. He will see that I did my best."

The detective glanced at his watch.

"Our time is nearly up," he said. "The doctor told us not to bother you for too long, you know. I will obtain a passport immediately, lieutenant."

and make arrangements to leave England by the Olympia, if possible. She sails the day after to-morrow, I believe. In the morning I will visit you again, and you can then go into fuller details. You must not excite yourself any more to-night."

Langford smiled as he lay back among the pillows.

"I shall sleep like a top," he exclaimed cheerfully. "It is rough luck getting crocked like this, but I never was a fellow to grumble. And I am delighted at my good fortune in securing your services, Mr. Lee. If you had refused, I don't know who I could have got to take the job on. Ross might have been willing——"

"Ross?" asked Eileen quickly.

"A friend of mine—or, rather, an acquaintance I met at the Wayfarers' Club," replied Langford. "We have been together a good deal lately. Mr. Melville J. Ross is his full name. He is an American, I believe, and he might have helped me. But you're the man Mr. Lee! I can trust you implicitly."

Nelson Lee and Eileen Dare and Nipper exchanged glances.

"Oh!" said Eileen. "Did you tell Mr. Ross of this?"

"Of which?"

"Of your proposed journey to New York and its object?"

Langford nodded, rather surprised.

"Yes, I told him the yarn," he replied. "Why? What's the matter?"

"Nothing at all!" was the girl's quick answer. "I only wondered. You see, I know Mr. Ross a little."

For just a second there seemed to be an awkward tension, but it broke as Lee began to speak of his prospects of getting a passport on the morrow. Eileen Dare did not display any emotion whatever, and Nipper did his best to look bored.

But they knew—Lee and Eileen and Nipper all knew—that Melville J. Ross was a member of the Combine, and such information as Lieutenant Langford had just imparted was not likely to be very safe in Ross's keeping.

Until that moment, Lee had not thought the affair of much importance. This piece of news, however, changed things a lot. Ross knew all! And Ross was "out" for information of that sort! Perhaps, at this very moment, villainy was afoot! Nelson Lee realised that it was fortunate for Langford, perhaps, that he had broken his leg.

The matter was in Nelson Lee's hands now.

If the Combine had any evil scheme on the move, they would have to reckon with the great detective—not with a simple, easy-going Army officer!

Perhaps the Combine had no intention of interfering. Perhaps they were not interested in Langford's movements at all; but, on the other hand, they might be very interested indeed! Melville J. Ross might not have been struck by the possibilities. Time, of course, would show.

And time did show!

CHAPTER III.

Ross Reads the News—A Change of Plans—Nelson Lee Disappears!

MR. MELVILLE J. ROSS yawned and stretched himself.

It was about nine o'clock on the morning following Lieutenant Langford's accident. Ross had just risen, and he was now attired comfortably in dressing-gown and slippers, and was glancing over his letters.

The American lived in a fine set of chambers off New Oxford Street. He kept two servants, both men, and was ostensibly a well-to-do business man of unimpeachable character.

And, as a matter of fact, Ross did transact quite a fair amount of honest business. But this was only done to keep up appearances. His real source of income was of a very different nature. The scheme which was on hand at the present moment promised to develop amazingly well.

There was work to be done to-day—brisk work. Ross intended leaving for America on the following morning, and so he had not much time to spare. And it was necessary for many preparations to be made. The American's colleagues, of course, would do much to bring about the desired results; but Ross knew that he would have to be extremely active himself. The Langford affair was, after all, a "special" piece of business, in which Melville J. Ross would take the principal part.

He glanced through his letters, and then tossed them aside and lit a cigarette. Then, as he flung himself into a chair, he picked up the morning newspaper and glanced over the headlines and principal columns.

"H'm! Nothing much this morning," he murmured through the haze of blue cigarette smoke. "Never does seem to be much nowadays. I shall be thundering glad when this darnation war comes to an end! I stand a chance of being torpedoed while crossing the Atlantic, as it is!"

Ross opened the paper at another page, and just cast his eye down the columns. He would read the paper later on, when he had more leisure; but he always liked to scan the headlines.

Suddenly he stared, and gripped the paper more tightly..

"Good heavens!" he ejaculated aloud.

He seemed to become nerveless, and the cigarette dropped from his lips and fell upon the carpet, and he feverishly read a short paragraph which occupied an unimportant corner of the page. The news item, in fact, was only trivial, and not worthy of a more prominent position.

But to Ross it was absolutely vital. For the paragraph ran:

" DARK STREET PERILS.

"Several street accidents occurred last night, all of them more or less trivial, fortunately. The most serious injury was that of Lieutenant Philip Langford, of the East Wessex Regiment. This officer was knocked down by a taxi while crossing the road just opposite Charing Cross Station. He was at once conveyed to the Trafalgar Hospital, where it was found that Lieutenant Langford's leg was fractured below the knee.

"At Chelsea an old gentleman was struck by a motor-'bus, and——"

Ross did not read any more. He had already seen quite sufficient to make him realise that the Combine's evil plotting was to bear no fruit.

Lieutenant Langford was in hospital with a broken leg! It was obviously impossible to kidnap him now!

Fate had intervened.

"The whole game's ruined!" snarled Ross, flinging the paper aside with a curse. "Just when everything was going so smoothly, too! I guess this is my luck right through! What's to be done now?"

Ross was furious.

But he soon realised that fury would not help him. It was necessary to be calm, and to consider the new aspect of the case without excitement. How did matters stand? What exactly was the position?

Melville J. Ross lit another cigarette and paced the room.

To begin with, it was impossible to kidnap Lieutenant Langford. The newspaper paragraph, although short and devoid of details, was conclusive. Ross knew well enough that there was not another officer in the East Wessex Regiment named Philip Langford.

And how about Ross's plans? Since Langford was in hospital, it would be

futile for Ross to travel to America in the lieutenant's place. For Langford, probably, had cabled to his father the news of his accident. Therefore, if Ross presented himself in New York he would be an obvious impostor.

It looked as though the whole plot was wrecked.

"Hang it!" grunted Ross savagely.

There seemed to be only one chance. The accident had occurred the previous night, and it was now early morning. Very possibly Langford had not yet despatched his message to America. If that proved to be the case, there was still hope, for Ross felt sure that he would be able to manage things himself in some way or other.

"Gee! I'll have to look lively!" he told himself, coming to a swift decision. "If Langford hasn't sent the wire to New York, I'll surely be able to persuade him to entrust it with me."

That was certainly the simplest way out of the difficulty, Ross thought. If Langford had decided to cable to his father and gave the message into Ross's keeping, then everything would be all right.

For the American would simply destroy the message, and would travel out to the United States and carry out his original scheme. But had Langford wired? Everything depended upon that.

Upon due consideration, Melville J. Ross thought it more than likely that he would arrive at the hospital in time. Surely Langford had not acted yet? Ross little dreamed of the great surprise which was awaiting him!

He hurriedly dressed, and informed his valet that he would breakfast out; then, looking quite spruce and well-groomed, he took his departure and went straight to the Trafalgar Hospital.

After a delay of fully ten minutes, he was in conversation with one of the nurses. He had already handed his card to an attendant.

"Lieutenant Langford will see you, sir," said the nurse. "The doctor has given his permission for you to remain with the patient for a quarter of an hour. Fortunately he is progressing very favourably."

"I guess that's real good news!" remarked Ross as he followed the nurse. "What is the injury exactly?"

"A fractured left leg."

"He won't be able to move for weeks, then?"

"I'm afraid not," replied the nurse. "But I do not think any complication will set in. Lieutenant Langford is in a very healthy condition."

Three minutes later Melville J. Ross was in the ward which contained Langford's bed. The lieutenant had just disposed of a hearty breakfast, and was quite cheerful in spite of his injury. His mind was free and easy, for he knew that he could trust Nelson Lee with the task of travelling to New York and of making matters right with Mr. Heron Langford.

He was rather surprised to see Ross, but not exactly displeased. He had hardly thought Ross cared sufficiently to pay him so prompt a visit.

"You've been in the wars!" remarked Ross pleasantly, as he sat beside the bed. "Say, lieutenant, how did you manage to do it?"

"I was knocked over by a taxi," replied Langford. "An infernal nuisance, of course; but one must take these things philosophically. I am only thankful that I was not completely smashed up."

"I saw a paragraph in the morning paper," went on the visitor, "so I at once came round to look you up. I'm real sorry, lieutenant! I guess this must be galling for you—especially when things are in such a fix with you."

"A fix?"

"Sure! Wasn't you going to the States right off?"

"That, of course, is impossible now," said Langford. "I can't very well arrive in New York by the twenty-third, can I?"

"I reckon you'll cable this item of news across, eh?" said Ross carelessly. "Or perhaps you have wired already?"

"No; and I don't intend to."

Ross's eyes gleamed for a second.

"But, say! You're not going to let the whole thing slide?" he asked, in genuine surprise.

Lieutenant Langford smiled.

"Hardly," he replied drily. "I think I told you, Mr. Ross, that my father made it a stipulation that I should personally be at his bedside by the twenty-third—or lose the fortune."

"That's just what you said."

"Well, of course, I can't go over to New York in this condition, can I?" went on Langford. "It may mean the loss of the eight millions, but I'm doing my level best to secure them, at all events. As for sending a cable, I don't think that's quite good enough. I shouldn't like to risk it."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"I've already made my plans," said Langford comfortably. "You may have heard of Mr. Nelson Lee?"

Ross started abruptly.

"Nelson Lee?" he exclaimed, rubbing his nose violently in order to conceal his agitation. "Why, sure, I've heard of that man. He's a private detective, I believe. You are not thinking of seeking his aid——"

"As it happens, I have already fixed things up," interjected the injured man. "Mr. Nelson Lee has consented to travel to New York as my representative—to explain the circumstances to my dying father. A cable would be cold and characterless. But I am quite sure that Mr. Lee will be able to work the oracle. He sails for the States to-morrow, by the Olympia."

Melville J. Ross clenched his fists.

"Well, I don't suppose you could have done better than that!" he exclaimed, finding the greatest difficulty in controlling himself. "But you haven't lost any time, lieutenant."

"No. You see, Mr. Lee was in the taxi which knocked me down," replied Langford. "And so we became acquainted at once. The whole thing was fixed up last night—within a couple of hours of the accident."

"That was fine!"

There was a short pause. Ross managed to keep up an appearance of being mildly interested. But his brain was whirling, and he felt almost frantic. Under the circumstances, he retained his composure admirably.

For he had received a tremendous shock.

Nelson Lee was to be reckoned with now; and the famous detective had booked a passage on the Olympia!

Ross himself had intended travelling by that boat. Obviously, he could not do so now. But the scoundrel did not give up hope completely. For a solution at once occurred to his acute brain.

No telegram had been sent to America, and so the situation was as it had been before. If Lee could be prevented from travelling by the Olympia, Ross could arrive first. He could carry out his original scheme, and obtain possession of Heron Langford's fortune.

Ross hated the idea of giving up a project once he had fairly started. And in this particular case the stake was so huge that it was worth a great amount of trouble and risk.

Everything had gone wrong—but there was yet time to right matters.

But not one second would have to be lost, and further plans would have to be conceived. A meeting of the Combine was essential. Ross was highly pleased with himself for having learned all the facts so promptly.

He changed the subject when he spoke to Lieutenant Langford again, and for a few minutes chatted cheerfully, and promised to call again within a day or two. Then he took his departure.

Exactly two hours later there were five visitors at Ross's chambers. They shut themselves up in the library, and talked. Those visitors were Sydney Bradford, Ford Abbercorn, Lord Max Roper, Herbert Vikerson, and Stanton Roding.

It was, in short, an impromptu meeting of the Combine.

At about the same time, curiously enough, Lieutenant Langford received another caller. This was Nelson Lee, who announced that everything was proceeding satisfactorily.

"And now," said the great detective, "I want you to tell me all the facts, from beginning to end, in detail. It is most important that I should be thoroughly acquainted with my subject."

"I will tell you everything you want to know, Mr. Lee," said the patient. "By Jove, I hardly expected to be so cheerful this morning! You are my second visitor, you know."

"Indeed!" smiled Lee. "Who was the first?"

"Mr. Melville Ross——"

"What!" Lee could scarcely help shouting the word. "Has Ross been to see you this morning, Langford?" he added sharply.

"Yes. But what on earth's the matter?" asked the lieutenant, staring curiously. "You seem quite startled, Mr. Lee."

Nelson Lee looked grim.

"I am not startled," he replied—"merely annoyed. I know something of Mr. Melville J. Ross, and I hope you did not confide in him. Did you make any reference to the arrangement we have come to?"

"I told him that you were leaving for New York on board the Olympia——"

"Tut, tut! What a nuisance!" Lee exclaimed irritably. "A matter such as this, Langford, ought to be kept strictly to ourselves. You trust Ross, of course, but——"

"My dear Mr. Lee, what harm have I done?"

"Possibly none. But I am not exactly comfortable," replied the detective. "However, we will not talk about Ross."

And the subject was changed. After Lee had had a fairly long talk he took his departure, and when he arrived home at Gray's Inn Road he found Eileen Dare waiting to hear how things were progressing.

"I think I have an item of news which will interest you, Miss Eileen," said Lee rather grimly. "You remember Langford mentioned last night that he was acquainted with Melville Ross? Well, Ross has visited Langford to-day, and left the hospital with accurate knowledge as to Langford's plans."

"Oh, do you think it means anything?" the girl detective asked. "Surely the Combine is not plotting in any way, Mr. Lee."

"I am decidedly uneasy," declared Lee. "Ross did not go to the hospital early this morning just for the sake of paying a sympathetic call. He had some ulterior motive. And remember the startling possibilities which present themselves in this singular case. Millions are concerned, and it is just conceivable that the Combine have some idea of making an attempt to secure Langford's fortune for themselves. The Combine is quite capable of making the necessary plans."

"But how——"

"How? Why, by sending out somebody to America," was Lee's shrewd reply. "Old Heron Langford has never seen his son, and an imposter clever enough might be able to hoodwink him. I tell you, Miss Eileen, I don't

like Ross's activity in this affair. It strikes me as being sinister and significant. Well, we must be cautious, that's all."

"I don't think the rotters are up to any game, guv'nor," observed Nipper sagely. "There's no time, anyhow. You're off to-morrow morning."

"That is certainly rather comforting," said Lee. "Possibly Ross was only spying out the lie of the land in the hope of being able to make use of the knowledge. He will realise the time is too limited, and nothing will come of it all."

So, in the absence of any positive information, the matter had to go at that. And Lee was very soon busy on other matters, and had no time to think of Mr. Melville J. Ross. Eileen Dare, too, was busy that day, for she was greatly interested. And when she parted with Lee at about tea-time, it was arranged that she and Nipper should accompany the detective to Liverpool to see him off.

Lee had arranged his passport, and during the evening he gave his attention to making final plans and packing. He had obtained many documents from Langford, and much other information. His pocket-book was rather stuffed when he placed it into his pocket just as the clock was striking seven-thirty.

"Now for the packing, Nipper!" Lee exclaimed cheerfully, looking across at the lad, who was on the other side of the room dusting a portmanteau. "Considering the short time at our disposal, I think we have done everything remarkably well."

Lee selected a cigarette from his case, and lit it.

"Oh, by the way, how about cigarettes, young 'un?" he asked. "I shall want a few while I'm away. You'd better pack a couple of hundred in that portmanteau, where I can get at them easily."

"You haven't got any, guv'nor," said Nipper, looking round. "The remnants of the last hundred are on the table now. I'll trot down the road——"

"No; you get on with the work," interjected Nelson Lee. "I'll fetch the cigarettes. I can do with a breath of fresh air."

Lee always obtained his cigarettes from a small but high-class shop in Gray's Inn Road, not more than three hundred yards away. They were a special brand, made to the great detective's order, and he always preferred them to any other.

Saying that he would be back in five minutes, Lee left his room and walked briskly down the pitchy dark street. It was rather empty, and a thick mist hung low upon the ground. The evening, in fact, was a most miserable one, and it was scarcely possible to see the edge of the pavement.

Nipper went on packing, whistling cheerfully to himself, until he came to a point where he needed his master's advice. Then he glanced at the clock, and saw that the time was ten minutes past eight.

"Jolly long five minutes!" grunted Nipper to himself. "The guv'nor's only gone to the tobacconist's. What's he doing all this time? Can't have gone anywhere, because he hadn't got his overcoat or stick or anything. Jawing, I expect."

Another half-hour slipped by, and at last nine o'clock struck. Nipper was now rather wrathful at being left alone for so long. He couldn't get on with the packing any further, because it was necessary for Lee to be present.

When the half-hour struck Nipper was fuming. At ten o'clock he was just a little anxious. Where on earth had his master got to? Nelson Lee had positively declared that he would be back in five minutes.

And he had been gone for two hours and a half!

Five or six times Nipper went down to the front door and peered up and

down the dark, misty street. A cold, miserable drizzle was now falling. Nipper was more than anxious as the time sped by and the hours grew later. The lad became positively alarmed when, with a start, he saw that the time was exactly midnight! He came to a quick decision, and ran down Gray's Inn Road to Lee's tobacconist. The shop, of course, was closed, but Nipper hammered at the private door, and within a few minutes the tobacconist was peering out into the gloom. He had been just on the point of going to bed.

In answer to Nipper's inquiry, he declared that Nelson Lee had not been to his shop that evening at all—that he had not seen the detective, in fact, for over a week. This was rather a startling piece of news, and Nipper returned home scarcely knowing what to think.

Many terrible fears found places in his mind, and he paced the consulting-room feverishly and with ever-growing anxiety.

CHAPTER IV.

Eileen Suspects —At the Shipping Office —The Girl Detective Decides.

THAT night was one of the worst Nipper had ever spent in all his life. He did not sleep a wink, but waited and waited—and waited in vain. When at last the dawn light came Nelson Lee was still missing.

Nipper had wrung up the police and several hospitals, thinking, perhaps, an accident had occurred. But he had learned nothing.

It was certain, at least, that his master had met with no ordinary mishap. Knowing all the facts, Nipper was now practically certain that there had been foul play. For some reason or other Nelson Lee had been kidnapped in the dark. And surely the authors of the outrage were the Combine!

But Nipper kept telling himself that he was worrying uselessly. Often enough Lee had left his rooms "for five minutes," and had calmly returned at the end of five days. It was possible that something had taken him off on this occasion. Nipper looked at every point of view.

Perhaps Lee had seen somebody watching the house, and had shadowed the man. Perhaps he would coolly walk in to breakfast with a cheerful nod. If that was the case, Nipper promised himself a very special five minutes. The lad, in fact, rehearsed the terrific speech which he would deliver.

But, somehow, in the back of his mind he knew that he was only consoling himself; that something had really happened—something serious. And he was quite convinced that if Lee was all right he would let Nipper know that fact at the earliest possible moment—certainly by breakfast-time.

But breakfast-time came and passed. Nipper didn't touch a morsel. At twenty minutes to nine he came to a sudden decision and chartered a taxi. Just after nine o'clock he pelted up the stairs to Eileen Dare's flat. He found the girl-detective and Aunt Esther at breakfast.

They were both surprised to see the lad, and very worried to hear the news. Eileen sat thoughtful for a few moments, and then looked at Nipper calmly, and with a grim expression in her large, beautiful eyes.

"Mr. Lee has been kidnapped," she said quietly.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" exclaimed Aunt Esther.

"You mustn't worry yourself, auntie," went on Eileen, turning quickly to the old lady. "I must be off at once. Nipper, the Combine is responsible for Mr. Lee's disappearance, I am sure."

"That's what I figured, miss."

"I'm ever so glad you came to me; two heads are better than one," said the girl crisply. "Mr. Lee suspected that my enemies were planning some new villainy, didn't he? Everything points to treachery. Ross knew that Mr. Lee intended leaving England to-day on board the Olympia. A plot has been engineered to prevent Mr. Lee's departure."

"What's to be done?" asked Nipper anxiously.

Eileen considered for a moment. She was keenly alert now, and in her element. The more serious the situation the better was Eileen Dare able to cope with it.

"We must indulge in some guesswork, Nipper," went on the girl. "It is now fairly obvious that Ross is after poor Mr. Langford's millions, and, since Mr. Lee has been kidnapped, it is also clear that Ross is preparing to leave for New York. I think it highly probable that he will attempt to take his departure from this country on board the Olympia."

"But what can he do in America?"

"Pose as Lieutenant Langford, and receive the fortune," replied Eileen promptly. "It sounds rather far-fetched, but such a thing is not only possible, but fairly certain of success, when such an astute scoundrel as Melville Ross is at the bottom of it."

"By gum," exclaimed Nipper hotly, "we'll stop the game, miss. But the gov'nor! I'm terrifically anxious——"

"For the moment we must neglect Mr. Lee," interrupted Eileen, taking command of the situation instinctively. "The very first thing is to find out whether Ross has booked a passage on the Olympia. Come, we will go to the shipping-office at once."

In a very short time the pair were off, and at about a quarter to ten they were interviewing the manager of the large steamship line which owned the Olympia. Eileen's fears were verified almost immediately, for she was informed that an American gentleman named Melville J. Ross had booked a saloon passage to New York the previous day—at the last moment, as it were. He had only obtained the berth by paying an extra stiff price.

The whole thing was now grimly clear.

Ross, knowing the facts, had decided to make a bold bid for a great fortune. Eileen reasoned everything out shrewdly and cleverly. In all probability, she thought, the Combine's plans had been made before Langford's accident. Eileen reasoned that the original plan had been to kidnap Langford himself.

That being impossible, the villains had transferred their attention to Nelson Lee. Ross had been told of Lee's activity in the case of Langford himself, and he knew all the details. Eileen deduced the whole train of events with remarkable astuteness and accuracy.

It was only too plain that Ross intended impersonating Langford once he arrived in New York. To impersonate him from the start was impossible, mainly owing to passport difficulties. But Ross was a neutral, with plenty of money at his disposal, and it had been comparatively easy for him to fix things up quickly.

Eileen knew that she must act with decision.

The boat sailed from Liverpool in four hours' time, and Langford was in hospital and Nelson Lee a prisoner, hidden somewhere beyond discovery.

The situation was indeed a startling one. As things stood, Melville J. Ross would have everything his own way. To telegraph to the liner would be quite possible, but futile.

Of what use would it be?

There was not one iota of proof of Ross's villainy. He had booked his passage on the Olympia openly and with no attempt at concealing his

identity. His reason for doing this was as clear as everything else in this strange affair. If he had attempted any trickery on this side of the water he would certainly have been bowled out. The Combine, doubtless, had shrewdly realised this.

As the matter stood Eileen could do nothing to stop his departure. The girl knew well enough that grim villainy was afoot, but she had no proof. No doubt the police would believe her, but even they would be helpless. A man cannot be detained or arrested without some evidence or suspicion of rascality.

Eileen considered every point swiftly and decisively as she sat in the shipping office. To cable to New York—to Heron Langford—would be worse than useless. When Ross arrived he would present himself to the old man armed with sufficient proofs. Nelson Lee's pocket-book had been stuffed with valuable documents, and it was certain that they were now in Ross's possession.

In short, the facts were these: Melville J. Ross could not be detained, and if he was allowed to arrive in New York alone he would have everything his own way; he would succeed in his scoundrelly designs.

There was one course—and one course only—to adopt.

Eileen Dare must travel to America by the same boat! It was a startling enough suggestion, but the only possible solution, and the girl-detective came to a decision at once. There was not a second to be lost.

Nelson Lee, of course, would have been better able to handle the affair, but Nelson Lee was a prisoner in the enemy's hands.

Nipper could not leave England. Indeed, he would probably have refused point-blank if Eileen had suggested such a thing. With his master's fate in the balance Nipper would die sooner than leave the country, and leave Lee to his fate.

While Eileen travelled to New York, therefore, Nipper would have to be left behind to search for Nelson Lee. It was the most feasible plan. Under the critical circumstances it was better to divide forces. And the clever girl displayed the most astounding keenness and sagacity in her reasoning.

She at once asked for an interview with the managing-director of the steamship line. Nipper was left below in the waiting-room, his mind in a whirl, uneasy, irritable, and tremendously worried.

Just in the space of twelve hours everything had gone wrong—terribly wrong. The Combine had shown their teeth with a vengeance! It was obvious that Melville J. Ross was prime mover in this particular game, and Melville J. Ross had all the odds in his favour.

Lee was a prisoner, perhaps in dire peril—perhaps dead!

Nipper went almost frantic as the terrible thought found a place in his surcharged mind. And the most appalling feature about the whole affair was the limited time. Ross was even now on his way to Liverpool! Indeed, it was highly probable that he was already on board the liner.

Wiring to the ship would be useless, so what could be done? Nipper was nearly crazy with worry and anxiety by the time Eileen Dare rejoined him. The lad, perhaps, was not so very much concerned regarding Lieutenant Langford's affair. It was the disappearance of Nelson Lee which caused the youngster such perturbation. Nipper loved his master more than he ever realised, and he was impatient to get on the move. In such a crisis as this idleness was worse than untold agony.

"Well, miss?" asked Nipper huskily as Eileen appeared.

Eileen took the lad's arm.

"Come, Nipper, there is not a second to be lost," she exclaimed quietly. "I have just time to run home and then catch the boat-train at Euston."

"Why, what the dickens——"

"I will explain while we are hurrying home," said Eileen.

And the girl did so. Her interview with the managing-director had been a most momentous one. She had explained the situation in detail, knowing that her only chance of success was to be absolutely frank.

"Well, Nipper, I found that there is not a single berth vacant on the Olympia," went on the girl. "When I learned that I was almost ready to burst into tears. Sir James Millen, the director, sympathised with me and saw how necessary it was for me to travel by the Olympia."

"How is it being managed, miss?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"It seems that a stewardess is required for the saloon cabins," replied the girl quickly. "A woman has already received her instructions and, I expect, is now on board. But Sir James promised to wire to the ship's purser at once and alter the arrangements."

"So the woman has got the sack?"

"Oh, no. I would not agree to such a mean trick as that," was the girl's reply. "She will be paid her wages just the same, but will wait until the Olympia returns from America. And I am going straight away to Liverpool to join the ship. Sir James Millen is making all the necessary arrangements."

Nipper breathed hard.

"You're a wonder, miss," he ejaculated. "I suppose you'll disguise yourself a bit, eh?"

Eileen nodded grimly.

"Just sufficiently to avoid being recognised by Ross," she assented. "It has been quick work, Nipper, but I believe I shall foil the scoundrel after all!" The girl's eyes gleamed with the light of battle. "I am ready for anything that comes along," she added, "and Mr. Ross will find himself in a tight corner when he arrives on the other side of the Atlantic!"

"And what about poor little me?" growled Nipper worriedly. "Where do I come in, Miss Eileen? I'm left behind, I suppose?"

The girl gripped Nipper's arm.

"Yes, you are left behind," she replied smoothly. "It is the best way. Mr. Lee must be found, and the task of finding him is in your hands. While I stick to the trail you must get to work in London!"

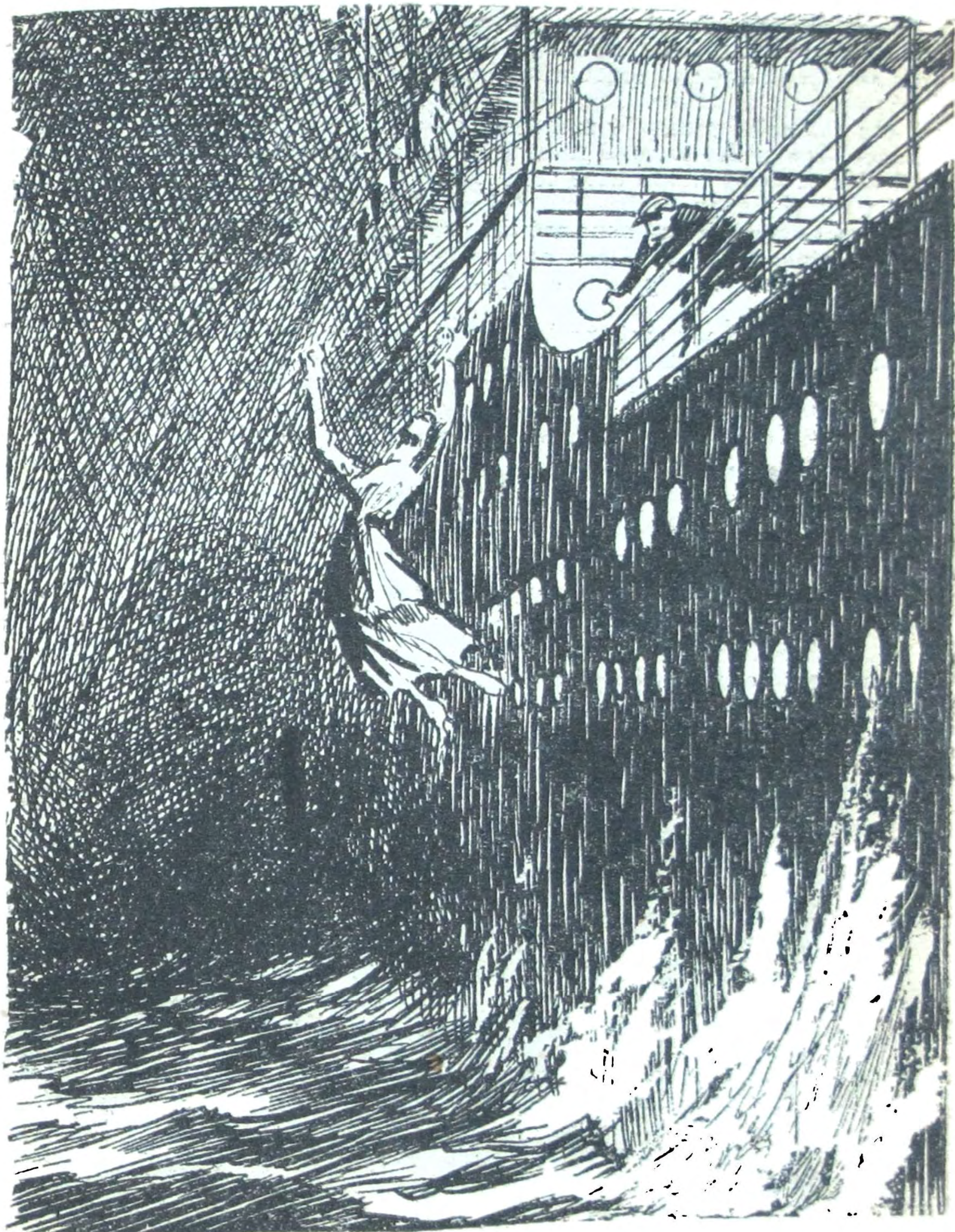
Thus, in less than an hour's time the girl-detective was en route for Liverpool. She would arrive at the very last minute, just in time to go on board the outward-bound vessel. As she had said, she had slightly disguised herself so as to appear ten years older. Sir James Millen had arranged everything so that there should be no hitch.

And Nipper, in London, immediately set about the task of locating the whereabouts of his missing master.

The situation was critical.

But Melville J. Rose, pacing the saloon deck of the Royal Mail Steamer Olympia, little guessed that there was somebody on board who was determined to frustrate his evil designs. He little guessed that Mary Griffith, an insignificant stewardess, was none other than Eileen Dare—the Combine's greatest enemy.

And Melville J. Ross, unaware of these facts, believed himself to be perfectly secure, and he was in high good humour.



. . . . And the next moment Eileen Dare found herself flying through space, downwards—downwards.—(See p. 31.)

CHAPTER V.

Nipper on the Track—Success—Nelson Lee Wastes no Time.

LESS than half an hour after Nipper had seen Eileen off at Euston, the lad was busily endeavouring to get on the trail of Nelson Lee.

Somehow, Eileen had instilled into Nipper an intense vitality. The girl's own briskness and quick-wittedness had set Nipper an example which he was not slow to follow.

Eileen had acted promptly and drastically. At a moment's notice she had bade good-bye to her startled Aunt Esther, and was off to the United States. Hesitation or delay would have been fatal.

But what of Nelson Lee?

The great detective had gone out the previous night to buy some cigarettes within a stone's throw of his own rooms, and had completely vanished. Until now—after seeing Eileen off—Nipper had had no chance of investigating.

The lad set to work systematically and thoroughly. First of all he had a good think. While he was thinking the telephone bell rang, and Nipper found that the man at the other end of the wire was Detective-Inspector Fuller, of Scotland Yard. Fuller was an old acquaintance of Lee's, and he had been told of the detective's disappearance.

Nipper's face flushed with hope as he heard the inspector's voice; but the dull look came into the lad's eyes again a moment later. Fuller had only rung up to hear if anything had been discovered of Lee. The police had hit upon no clue, and Nipper realised that he would have to depend upon his own ingenuity.

But how could he make a start?"

"Let's get everything clear," muttered Nipper, pacing up and down the consulting-room. "The poor old guv'nor went from here to buy some fags—and never reached the tobacconist's. What happened? That's the giddy question. What happened while the guv'nor was walking from our door to the 'bacca shop?"

The most probable explanation seemed to be that Nelson Lee had changed his mind and walked off somewhere else. Yet Nipper could not reconcile himself to this theory. For he remembered that Lee had been wearing a pair of light house shoes—just slippers, in fact, and utterly useless for a long walk in the damp streets. Surely Lee had not gone off on foot wearing nothing but thinly soled slippers?

"Everything points to treachery," decided Nipper. "Something happened to the guv'nor while he was walking down to the cigarette shop. He was whacked on the head, perhaps, and bundled into a waiting motor-car."

This theory, although sounding improbable, was by no means an absurd one. Nipper remembered that the evening had been intensely dark. Gray's Inn Road had been fairly deserted at seven-thirty, and there had been a thick mist, into the bargain. Nipper had known of kidnapping cases in broad daylight; it all depended upon the quickness and audacity of the kidnappers.

At all events, for a start, Nipper decided to question the shopkeepers who occupied the various premises between Lee's rooms and the tobacconist's. The lad shrewdly realised that the circle of inquiry was limited to just that short distance. This made Nipper's task all the easier.

If Lee had gone out without saying what his destination was to be the matter would have been very different. Nipper would have had no starting point whatever. He would have been completely baffled. To get on the

track would have been impossible. But, as matters now stood, there was just a chance.

Nipper wasted no time.

He went from shop to shop and questioned the owners and assistants until he was tired and weary. For he learned nothing. He asked if anything suspicious had been seen outside in the road at about seven-thirty the previous night.

But the answers he received were all the same.

Nobody had seen anything unusual; and, indeed, most of the shopkeepers suspected that Nipper was attempting to "pull their leg." It seemed obviously preposterous to suppose that a man—especially a man like Nelson Lee—could have been kidnapped in Gray's Inn Road, at seven-thirty in the evening.

But Nipper knew well enough that the theory was not preposterous.

The night had been dark and misty, and clever kidnappers could have done the "job" without much difficulty and with scarcely any risk. The only point was, how had the abduction been carried out? A vehicle of some sort had presumably been employed, but what vehicle?

A closed motor-car, in all probability. If so, then Nipper's task would be hopeless, indeed.

The lad persevered, anxious and worried. And just when he was beginning to feel dreadfully despondant and weary, he received an item of information which sent his blood coursing swiftly through his veins, and which gave him hope.

Next door to the tobacconist's there was a barber's shop, a high-class toilet saloon which Nipper often patronised himself. It was owned by a Swiss gentleman with a name which Nipper never troubled to pronounce. He always familiarly addressed the barber as "Scotty." This nick-name was derived from the fact that the Swiss gentleman had spent several years in business in Scotland, and had cultivated a Scotch accent.

"Did I see anyzing suspecious last nicht, mon cher Neeper?" he asked, in response to the lad's anxious inquiry. "I do not quite understand."

"About half-past seven the guv'nor—Mr. Lee—walked from our rooms to the tobacconist's next door," replied Nipper. "He never got there, and I believe something happened to him on the way. It was as dark as pitch——"

"Mon Dieu!" ejaculated Scotty, and then he added: "Hoots! I'm 'inkin' I do know somezing of zat, Neeper. I saw somezing which made me wonder vair much, I'll hae ye ken."

Nipper's eyes gleamed.

"What did you see, Scotty?" he asked eagerly.

"I was standing at ze door, for customers were few last nich," replied the Swiss-French-Scotch hairdresser thoughtfully. "I only went to ze door for about twa meenutes, ye'll undairstand. Trough ze meest I saw a—what you call him—a costair's barrow. Zere were twa rough men wiz ze barrow, Neeper, and it was just along ze pavement in ze meest—I could just see it."

"Well?" asked Nipper impatiently.

"I was looking ze ozair way, ye'll know, when I heard a sound like a shuffle of feet. It was nozzing to be alarmed about—just a wee sound trough ze meest. When I look round I saw one of ze costairs (so I t'ought) on ze groond."

"By gum!" breathed Nipper. "The guv'nor!"

"I zink so now, Neeper," said Scotty excitedly. "At ze time I imagined zat one of ze men had fallen—drunk perhaps—and zat ze ozair was peeking heem up. Ze meest was tick. I'll hae ye remember, laddie. Ze barrow zen went off."

"Which way?" rapped out Nipper.

"Towards Holborn."

"Scotty, you're a good'un!" declared Nipper crisply. "Now let's hear some more details."

The lad was highly elated—he was on the track! And the hairdresser proceeded to enlarge upon his original statement. But there was not much more to be learned from the worthy man.

At seven-thirty a coster's barrow, with two rough men, had been standing against the kerb about twenty yards from the barber's shop, in a particularly dark spot. The barber had heard a sudden scuffle, and had looked to see one of the men lying on the ground. It had been impossible to see distinctly, owing to the mist. But Nipper was almost sure that the man on the ground had been his master.

One important point which Nipper learned was that the coster's barrow had carried a large Chinese lantern instead of an ordinary lamp. Obviously the ruffians had used it because it is quite a common thing for costers to carry such a light. But the men had, probably, been too clever, for the Chinese lantern would serve as a good distinguishing mark.

It was some time after mid-day now, and Nipper had tasted no food since the previous night. So, after a hasty meal, he started off on a tour of inquiry. He was sure that it would be a wearisome task, and that his prospects of success were doubtful.

The task was wearisome enough, certainly.

Nipper knew most of the police in almost all the City of London districts—knew them to nod to, at least. And he commenced his investigation by questioning the officers who were on their beats the previous evening.

One policeman remembered seeing the coster's barrow go down Holborn and then across the Viaduct. After a wasted hour Nipper learned that the barrow had proceeded in the direction of the East End. Without wasting time in making inquiries near by, Nipper travelled straight away to Aldgate. He thought, perhaps, that it was rather a long shot, but he soon found out that he had been wise in making the move. For at Aldgate he learned from two different sources that a coster's barrow, pushed by two men, and carrying a Chinese lantern, had passed somewhere about eight o'clock the previous evening.

When Nipper learned these facts it was growing dusk, and he knew that the most difficult part of his task was before him. But he persevered without a pause, and at last found himself somewhere in the neighbourhood of Wapping.

At a certain point near a low-class drinking house, he lost the trail completely. From that spot he couldn't find a soul who had seen the barrow. It seemed to have disappeared utterly.

Nipper argued that there was only one explanation. The barrow must have entered some narrow alley or yard quite close by. His last informant had been a burly Irish police constable. This individual had told Nipper that he had seen the barrow—and remembered the occurrence particularly because of a certain incident which had occurred.

Three or four ragged little urchins had been playing about in the street, and had thrown handfuls of mud at the Chinese lantern as the barrow passed. One of the men with the barrow had sworn frightfully at the urchins, and had finally chased them. But the cheeky youngsters, yelling defiance, had thrown more mud, and had followed the barrow into the mist and darkness. That was the last the Irish constable saw of the men or the barrow.

From that point Nipper could obtain no information.

He was at a deadlock.

The lad felt that he had practically tracked his master to his place of imprisonment. But his efforts had been useless—unless he could discover the barrow's destination.

Nipper was not beaten.

He spent two solid hours searching for the urchins who had thrown the mud. They, and they alone, could help him. And, perhaps, even if he did find the youngsters, he would not get much further.

But at last he located two of the boys—two kiddies of about ten, dressed in rags and as dirty as the very street.

And, to Nipper's intense joy, he obtained definite information. His day's work had not been wasted. It had been a tiring, wearisome task, but success crowned his efforts.

For the street urchins, it appeared, had followed the barrow, as urchins will, until it had turned into a narrow cul-de-sac; at least, it appeared to be a cul-de-sac at first glance. At the entrance the boys had given a last yell of defiance and had fled.

Nipper rewarded the two young rascals with a shilling each, and then went to examine the supposed cul-de-sac. It was a narrow alley, filthy and smelly. But at the very bottom Nipper found a half-broken door. The door led into a stable-yard, and beyond this was an old, half-ruined stable, with a loft above.

"The guv'nor's here!" Nipper told himself, nearly wild with elation.

At first, he thought of investigating further; but prudence bade him consider. In all probability Nelson Lee—if he were, indeed, imprisoned in the ruined stable—was guarded by one of the rough men who had kidnapped him. and it would be a disaster indeed if Nipper ended the day by getting himself captured into the bargain.

So he hastened at once to the nearest police-station and told his story. As a result, a sergeant and three constables accompanied him to the old stable, and a sudden raid was made.

As it turned out, Nipper's precautionary measure was not necessary, for the police found nobody to arrest, and there was no free fight, as the officers had half anticipated.

In the old loft, Nelson Lee was found. He was tied with ropes and was lying upon a pile of dirty straw, which, fortunately, was dry. The great detective was bound most cruelly, and no amount of effort on his part would have loosened the bonds.

Once his circulation had been restored, he felt quite himself, except for a ravenous hunger and a terrific thirst, for he had been given neither food nor drink, and had been practically alone the whole time.

After some little delay, Nelson Lee and Nipper left the police-station, where they had repaired to after the rescue, and were very soon in an Underground train, bound for the West End.

It was now close upon eleven o'clock, and Lee made straight for a favourite little restaurant in Charing Cross Road. Here, in a cosy nook, he and Nipper proceeded to demolish a tremendous meal.

It was not until this moment that Lee asked for any information; but Nipper, now bubbling over with jubilation and thankfulness, could tell that his master was grave and troubled.

"I suppose you thought I was rather a long while fetching those cigarettes!" remarked Lee. "I admit frankly that I was completely off my guard. The very simplicity and audacity of my abduction made it not only possible but absurdly easy. I was striding along when I received a stunning blow on the back of my head. That was the last I remembered until I awoke

in the stable-yard to find myself lying on the coster's barrow, covered with straw and sacking, and feeling as though my head was split in two."

"The Combine did it, of course, sir?"

"Undoubtedly the gentlemen you mentioned are primarily responsible," replied Nelson Lee grimly.

"But why did the rotters wait for you to go out, guv'nor? They might have had to wait in Gray's Inn Road for hours!"

"I do not suppose for one moment that they intended waiting one minute," was the detective's reply. "It was their plan, I presume, to fetch me out by a trick and then collar me. But it just happened that I walked out of my own accord and saved them the trouble. In the mist and darkness, the attack was risky but comparatively easy. It seems to me that it was an act of desperation, and it came off."

Nipper explained how he had got on the track, and Lee was extremely pleased with his young assistant. And then Nipper revealed the fact that Melville J. Ross had sailed that morning—or, rather, in the early afternoon—on board the Olympia.

"That is no news to me," exclaimed Lee gravely. "My pocket-book was stolen, young 'un, and Ross will have the benefit of its contents. The whole situation is galling, for I really do not see what we can do. For once I feel like despairing. Ross will arrive in New York with plenty of evidence to prove that he is Lieutenant Philip Langford. And what can I do to remedy matters?"

"You can cable——"

"Don't forget that Ross will assume the identity of Langford as soon as he lands in New York. He is a clever scoundrel, and possesses a suave tongue," said Lee. "He will easily be able to explain any cablegram which I might send. He has everything his own way!"

"Not quite, guv'nor," said Nipper. "Miss Eileen got terrifically busy as soon as she heard that you'd been pinched. You can guess the rest, can't you? She's disguised herself, and is at this moment on board the Olympia."

Lee dropped his knife and fork with a clatter.

"What?" he exclaimed, with blazing eyes. "By James, I never expected—— That girl is a marvel, Nipper! She's one in a million!"

"Rather!" agreed Nipper heartily.

Lee's attitude was totally changed now, and he listened eagerly while Nipper went into details. The famous detective was intensely pleased with the girl's resourcefulness, but was more than anxious for the brave girl's safety.

Straight away Nelson Lee and Nipper drove to the Trafalgar Hospital, and there interviewed Lieutenant Langford. Langford, it proved, was still doing well, and was quite cheerful. But he was not so cheerful after Lee had explained the situation, for the detective thought it better to be quite frank.

Langford was startled and amazed when he heard of Ross's treachery, but in no way did he blame Nelson Lee for having fallen into the trap.

"But let me urge you, Mr. Lee, to travel to America by the very next boat," said the injured officer gravely. "Miss Dare may be able to cope with the situation herself—she has proved herself to be a wonderful girl—but would it be fair to leave her to see the thing through alone? Do you not think it would be better for you and Nipper to follow——"

"Far better!" agreed Lee at once. "I had, as a matter of fact, already decided to do as you suggest, Langford. As it happens, there is a small liner starting for America to-morrow. It is, I think, a poor-class boat, but not slow. In fact, she will arrive in New York just about two days behind the Olympia."

"That's splendid!" declared Langford. "Go by it, Mr. Lee! Move heaven and earth——"

"I do not think it will be quite necessary to go to such lengths as that," was Leo's dry interjection. "You may be sure, Langford, that I will do my best in every way. Miss Dare has set me a splendid example of devotion and quick-wittedness."

And arrangements were made accordingly.

Lee made things hum, as Nipper expressed it. At least, he succeeded in obtaining passports for both himself and Nipper, and secured a couple of excellent berths on the small liner *Rosslynn*.

The famous detective had lost no time in getting on the trail of Melville J. Ross. True, Lee and Nipper would not arrive in New York until two days after the *Olympia* had docked, but Eileen was on the spot, and the detective felt sure that his girl assistant would do her very utmost to spoil Ross's game.

Moreover, there was scarcely any chance now of the scoundrel being successful in his mission unless he acted with amazing promptitude as soon as he landed. It all depended really upon what sort of a passage the *Rosslynn* made. She was due to arrive two days after the *Olympia*, but she might possibly be two or three days late. It was altogether too much to hope that she would arrive in advance.

The start was made without a hitch.

And, meanwhile, what was occurring on board the *Olympia*?

CHAPTER VI.

Ross Makes a Discovery—"Man Overboard!"—Into the Fog—The Crash.

THE great liner *Olympia* was steaming along serenely and smoothly over a calm sea. She was three days out from Queenstown, and had so far encountered very favourable weather.

The day after leaving Queenstown, however, there had been a mishap in the engine-room—nothing serious—and for thirty-six hours the liner had been obliged to proceed at half-speed.

But now she was travelling at her customary rate, repairs having been effected. None of the passengers knew exactly what had occurred, but they knew that there had been no danger.

The *Olympia* was filled—at least, there was not a single saloon berth vacant. There were a good few in the second-class and steerage, but a berth in either of these would have been useless to Eileen Dare. For her primary object in undertaking the voyage was to keep as near to Mr. Melville J. Ross as possible.

Eileen was ostensibly a stewardess, but Sir James Millen had given special instructions, and Eileen's duties were very light.

On this, the third day out, the sun was shining rather weakly and with very little warmth. Men and women strolled the decks, closely wrapped and protected. One man in a huge fur coat was leaning against the rail smoking a fat cigar and looking pleased with himself and the whole ship's company in general.

"That man was Melville J. Ross.

The American, in fact, was, metaphorically speaking, patting himself upon the back. He had been engaged in this pleasant pastime ever since the boat had left the Liverpool docks, for, so far as Ross could see, everything was all right.

Mainly through his agency, Nelson Lee had been kidnapped on the very night before his departure. The detective had been prevented from taking the voyage.

There was a chance, a bare possibility, that Nelson Lee would escape; but, even so, the odds were all in Ross's favour. The scoundrel knew that another boat was leaving England two days after the Olympia had sailed, but Ross did not imagine for a second that Lee would be able to travel by it.

There was no other America-bound ship for at least a week. Therefore, Ross argued, he had a clear eight or nine days before him after he had landed on American soil, and, once in New York, Ross was sure that it would be easy to convince old Heron Langford of his identity, and once the formalities were concluded, the day would be gained.

Ross had been chosen for the "job" mainly because he knew many people in New York who would be able to render him invaluable assistance. He knew perfectly well that once he had hoodwinked the old man the rest would be plane sailing.

So, taking everything as it stood, Melville J. Ross had excellent cause to congratulate himself. He had left his opponents behind, and did not see how they could get upon his track. And, more than that, he would leave no loophole whereby he could be connected with the gigantic fraud.

It was, after all, a huge gamble—a gamble for millions. It might fail, but the chances were that it would succeed. And, at all events, it was well worth quite a large amount of risk.

Ross was enjoying himself on board the Olympia. Over and over again he planned in detail exactly what he would do upon arrival in New York. His whole plan of action was cut and dried.

And the more he thought of it all, the more firmly he became convinced that everything was O K—as he himself expressed it. But the scoundrel was destined to receive a shock.

It was not until the fifth day out, however,. He was allowed to remain in a peaceful state of mind until that day. The night had been rather rough, and the day which followed proved to be decidedly rougher. Most of the passengers thought that a gale was blowing, and that the liner was in the midst of a terrible storm.

The Olympia's officers, however, were quite unperturbed. If they had been asked any questions regarding the weather they would merely have replied that it was "blowing a bit." The weather has to be terrible indeed before a ship's officer will admit that a hurricane is blowing.

But this "blow," at least, was quite sufficient for the passengers. There were very few who desired to find out what a real storm was like. The sea was decidedly troubled, and spray was constantly dashing over the decks.

And, large as the vessel was, she dipped and rolled quite alarmingly at times—alarmingly, that is, from the unsophisticated passenger's point of view.

The sky was leaden, but no rain was falling. The wind cut keenly, and it was necessary to be very well wrapped up indeed in order to brave the elements on deck.

Most of the saloon passengers kept below. Some, as a matter of fact, were feeling as though their last day had come. Mr. Melville J. Ross was not amongst these. He was an excellent sailor, and had never been seasick in his life.

He strolled on deck wrapped up to the ears. Or, perhaps, it would be more appropriate to say that he staggered; for to stroll was practically impossible. The vessel was dipping and rolling in a manner which made an ordinary walk quite a difficult task.

Ross and two other men were clutching the rail of the promenade deck, gazing down upon the foaming waters below. There was a certain fascination in watching the hissing waves as they beat against the ship's sturdy hull.

There were one or two women, too, who were hardy enough to venture on deck. Eileen Dare was off duty; her duty, indeed, did not amount to much, as she was off far more than she was on.

The girl loved the sea, particularly when it was in an unruly humour. At the commencement of the voyage she had been just a little unwell, but by now the effects of her slight sea-sickness were over, and she was feeling splendidly fit and healthy. She was keenly satisfied with the way things were going.

She was quite sure that Ross had not the slightest idea that his plans had gone wrong. He was so obviously pleased with himself that the girl knew he was under the impression that the game was playing into his hands.

She had no wish to enlighten him, and had always avoided meeting him face to face. She was disguised, it is true, but only in a superficial manner. She wore a wig and pince-nez. From a distance Ross could never have recognised her; and she was determined never to meet him face to face. To have disguised herself more thoroughly would scarcely have been practicable for so long a period as the voyage. And, being a stewardess, Ross would never give her a moment's attention.

Eileen saw the American against the rail as she walked along the deck on this stormy morning. She smiled quietly to herself, and then transferred her attention to a small tramp steamer which was wallowing along with difficulty away to leeward. Eileen moved forward, intending to reach the deck rail. But at that very moment a great wave struck the ship with unusual force, and the spray whirled overhead in great cascades, borne by the wind, with stinging force.

The next second the Olympia rolled giddily, and Eileen lost her balance on the wet and slippery deck. With a little cry she fell sprawling, and slithered along, quite unable to recover herself. And Ross and his two companions turned round at the sound of the girl's cry.

"By George!" exclaimed one. "We're wanted, I think!"

Ross smiled at the stewardess's discomforture, but condescended to hasten forward and pick the girl up. Almost at the same second the three men grasped Eileen and helped her to her feet.

"Thank you so much!" exclaimed the girl breathlessly.

Her pince-nez had fallen off, and her eyes were filled with spray to such an extent that she could scarcely see.

If she had been able to do so she would have observed a curious change in the expression of Mr. Melville J. Ross.

The man was smiling when he first stepped forward. He had bent down quite close, and his face was within a couple of feet of Eileen's. Her eyes were closed, owing to the salt water.

Ross's first glance had been careless, but then he started.

His face paled a little, and, quickly, he bent forward. He took one long, searching stare at the girlish face, and then back away hastily, leaving the other two men to assist Eileen to her feet.

He clutched at the rail and stared out across the wind-whipped sea.

"I guess I'm not mistaken!" he muttered hoarsely. "That girl—
Great Joseph! That girl is Eileen Dare!"

For a full three minutes Ross remained in one fixed position. When he looked round the "stewardess" had vanished, and he was alone on that

particular part of the deck except for three or four men and one or two members of the crew.

"Eileen Dare!" he murmured. "How in the name of thunder did she get on board this ship? I've been telling myself I'm as safe as houses, and that infernal girl is at my heels the whole time! Gee whiz! I guess I shall have to do a whole heap of quick thinking!"

But, although Melville J. Ross thought quickly and for hours on end, he could obtain no peace of mind. That feeling of security which had been his until to-day had utterly vanished.

For he was under no false impression regarding Eileen Dare's capabilities. He knew very well that she was a girl of action and fully as capable as any three ordinary men. He knew that she had been responsible for the downfall of Jonathan Bridger and Rudolph Stebbing and Ransome Wilmore and Sir Caleb Hurst, and several other former valuable members of the combine.

It was a disquieting thought.

If this girl could deal with his former colleagues so effectively she could treat him in the same way. Ross knew that she was as sharp as a needle, and he became alarmed when he thought what would happen after New York was reached.

Would he be able to carry out his programme?

The answer to that question was more than doubtful. For Eileen would certainly land as soon as he did. And she would take steps to render his scheme futile. She would, indeed, probably cause his arrest if he attempted any villainy.

"She'll land at the same time as I do," Ross muttered fiercely. "She'll step into New York——"

He paused, not caring to think further. The whole aspect of the case was changed. So far as he could see he might as well have stopped in England. If he so much as lifted a finger to put his plans into execution he would find himself under arrest. That was quite certain. Eileen was on board this boat for one reason—and one reason only.

And when he arrived in New York he would be compelled to retain his own identity, for to assume that of Lieutenant Langford would be fatal. And all this just because a mere slip of a girl had managed to get on board the Olympia.

For the remainder of that day Ross kept to his cabin, his sole source of comfort being a bottle of whisky. By evening the bottle was empty, and Ross was feeling desperate and furious.

He was by no means intoxicated, but the spirit had certainly got into his head. He had not touched food, and his mind was topsy-turvy and somewhat fuddled.

Soon after the dinner-gong had sounded Ross determined to take a walk on deck in order to clear his brain. His temples were throbbing painfully, and his throat was parched.

When he arrived on deck he found that the wind had gone down considerably, and the sea with it. But the weather was still uncertain, and the night as black as pitch. It was quite easy, now, to walk along the decks, and he did so scarcely knowing where he went or where his footsteps led him to.

He was close against the rail upon a very dark stretch of the promenade deck when a slight figure turned a corner and came towards him. When the figure was about six yards away a beam of light from a deckhouse fell across the face.

The newcomer was Eileen Dare!

Instinctively Ross clenched his fists. He and Eileen were alone; there was not another person in sight! This particular spot was in darkness, and no officer could observe what occurred there.

Eileen was bent on reaching another part of the ship, and she was walking briskly. For her part, she had not the slightest idea that Ross had recognised her when she had fallen during the morning. Her eyes had been closed, and she did not even know that Ross had helped to pick her up.

Moreover, although she saw the dim figure ahead of her, she did not know that it was that of her enemy. She was on duty now, and had been sent on a certain errand.

Melville J. Ross came to a quick decision.

It was a decision arrived at on the spur of the moment. He acted on a sudden impulse. No doubt the spirit he had consumed had a lot to do with his desperate state of mind, and he was utterly restless.

But the opportunity had presented itself abruptly, when he least expected it. If Eileen Dare did not arrive in New York he would be able to carry out his plans exactly as he had arranged. And there were millions at stake!

Without a word, but with a sharp intake of breath, he flung himself upon Eileen with terrible ferocity. The girl was totally unprepared for the attack, and was in the scoundrel's grip before she could attempt to offer resistance.

It was all over in a moment.

Eileen found herself lifted clean off the deck, and the next second she found herself flying through space downwards—downwards!

A scream left her lips—a scream not of terror, but of sheer surprise and alarm. It was a scream which carried far on the wind; and then came dead silence.

Melville J. Ross, panting heavily, and with his eyes staring and fixed, slunk away and locked himself in his own state-room. There, shivering and trembling, he sat and gulped down a glass of brandy.

Truth to tell, the scoundrel was terrified at his own action. He had flung Eileen into the sea! He had committed murder. Rascal though he was he would not have performed that action had he not been under the influence of drink. And, now that it was over, he was half terrified and half relieved.

Meanwhile, there was much commotion on deck.

For murder was not committed, after all.

Eileen's alarmed cry had reached the ears of the officer on the bridge. And one of the forward hands, leaping to the rail as he heard the scream, dimly saw a shapeless form strike the water and then disappear.

"Man overboard!" roared the man frantically.

And, a few moments later, he distinctly heard a far-away cry for help in a choked, girlish voice.

But the Olympia was already coming to a standstill. Her engines were reversed, and the screws churning away desperately.

Fortunately the passengers were at dinner, for the most part, and scarcely a soul was on deck beyond those members of the crew who were on duty. With considerable difficulty a boat was lowered, and it went off into the darkness to search for the unknown passenger who had fallen overboard—as it was thought.

It was fully twenty minutes before the boat returned. And when it did so and had been hoisted up to the boat-deck, a pale limp form was gently lifted out and carried below. There were two doctors on board, and they

were very soon in attendance. Eileen Dare was found to be alive, but in an utterly exhausted state.

There had been delay in finding her, for her battle with the icy waves had been a terrible one. Indeed, she had been on the point of sinking when her rescuers dragged her into the boat.

It had been a very narrow squeak, and even now it was not certain whether the girl would recover. She was quite unconscious, and in a state of absolute collapse. Both doctors declared that she would not recover until long after the ship had reached New York.

Thus, although Eileen's life was saved, it seemed as though her project would be useless. Ross had acted upon impulse, and would, it seemed, win the game after all.

It was not until the following morning that the saloon passengers knew what had occurred. And even then their knowledge was limited. It was generally supposed that the stewardess had accidentally fallen overboard. Even the captain did not suspect that there had been a deliberate attempt at murder.

When Ross heard that his victim had escaped he was, at first, furious and terrified. But then he realised that even if Eileen recovered consciousness at once she could not harm him. For there was nothing to prove that it had been he who had flung her overside.

And the American soon learned that Eileen was placed hors-de-combat for many days to come—until long after New York had been reached.

Upon the whole, the situation was vastly improved, for Eileen could do absolutely nothing while she remained in her present plight.

Meanwhile, while these startling events had been happening, Nelson Lee and Nipper were fuming and fretting on board the *Roslynn*. This vessel was a much smaller one than the *Olympia*, but she could travel at quite a decent speed.

But the voyage was tedious in the extreme to both Lee and Nipper. It was galling to know that Eileen was somewhere ahead, alone and unprotected. It seemed totally wrong that she should have all the risks to bear and they none. But circumstances had ordered events to be so, and Lee and Nipper could only hope and trust for the best.

They would have given much to know what was occurring on the *Olympia*. It was, perhaps, better that they did not know, for they would only have been sorely troubled.

Eileen was in a bad way. But she had a magnificent constitution, and was much hardier than the *Olympia's* doctors at first thought. It was soon learned that she was in no danger, and that she was progressing very favourably.

And the great liner continued its voyage without any further delay. But the adventures of that momentous voyage were not over yet, for within two days of New York the *Olympia* ran into thick fog.

This was no unusual occurrence for this time of the year. The liner continued at reduced speed. But reduced speed does not necessarily mean safety—especially when the speed of most Atlantic liners is only reduced in a small degree.

The great fog-horn was blowing continuously as the vessel nosed through the white, impenetrable fog. The atmosphere was icily cold, and hinted at icebergs. But none of these ocean death-traps had been encountered so far, and the *Olympia's* skipper decided not to reduce speed further. He was anxious to make up for the loss of time which had occurred at the commencement of the voyage, when nearly a whole day had been wasted.

The captain would have been wise had he acted differently, for at noon

exactly there was a sudden frantic yell from the look-out. That yell caused the steersman to twirl the wheel desperately—but all to no purpose.

There was a sickening crash—abrupt, sudden, and jarring. The great liner came to a complete stop, shuddering from stem to stern, and with every bolt strained and every plate stretched.

The Olympia had struck an iceberg!

CHAPTER VII.

Crippled—Ross's Villainy—In New York—A Surprise.

DISASTER had overtaken the great liner!

Her bows were stove in and badly damaged. At first it was thought that there was to be a repetition of the awful Titanic tragedy.

But the Olympia's forward bulkheads held firm, and it was found that there was no danger of the vessel sinking. She was completely crippled, however, and the captain's dream of making up for lost time was more badly shattered than the bows of his ship.

At first there had been signs of a mild panic. But order was kept, and the startled and excited passengers soon learned, to their intense relief, that there was no particular danger. The only result of the collision was that the ship would be late in arriving. But this was easily to be borne.

Melville J. Ross received another fright, for he imagined that the Olympia would not reach New York by the twenty-third. In this, however, he was wrong, for it was reckoned that the vessel would arrive certainly not later than the twenty-first. In fact, she would not be so badly behind time, after all.

Under her own steam she proceeded at about quarter speed, and at last the first sight of American soil was seen. Eileen Dare was below, still confined to her cabin. But she was quite conscious now and well on the road to recovery. She was quite sure that she would be well enough to land with the other passengers once the Olympia ended her voyage.

At first the doctors had thought that Eileen would develop a high fever; but their fears were, fortunately, groundless, and by the time America was sighted the girl was able to leave her bunk and sit in an easy-chair. She had been given into sole charge of the younger doctor, and he assured her that she was progressing marvellously.

The girl had much time for thought during the days which followed the collision. She knew well enough that Ross had attempted to kill her, but she decided to say nothing, and to let things remain as they were. She would keep to her cabin until the end—it would be safer. Ross could not get at her there.

And she was fully determined to land at the very first opportunity. Her enemy's desperate plot had failed, and she fully believed that he would not take any action whatever with regard to Lieutenant Langford's fortune.

But for once Eileen was wrong. Melville J. Ross had not reached the end of his resources.

On the morning of the day that was to be the last of the voyage Ross got into conversation with the younger doctor—a man named Hallam. He learned that Eileen would be fully capable of stepping ashore with the rest of the passengers.

This was something of a surprise to the American, for he had thought

hat the girl would be kept in bed for several days longer. And he decided upon a last effort before he gave up the game.

It was touch and go now.

Ross was not so desperate as he had been when under the influence of drink. But the stake was, nevertheless, worth a certain amount of risk, and he made a bold move. He took the doctor aside and diplomatically led up to a certain suggestion.

In brief, he told Dr. Hallam a very plausible story which was, it is unnecessary to add, totally devoid of truth. Ross made it appear that he was merely perpetrating a practical joke, and the doctor believed him. This does not mean to say that Hallam was a fool; it merely emphasises the fact that Ross was decidedly clever.

Dr. Hallam became the richer by accepting one hundred pounds—that was certainly worth accepting. And he was to keep Eileen Dare in her cabin for at least another three days. Hallam had sole charge of the case, and if he decreed that Eileen was not to be moved nobody could gainsay him.

The doctor's word was law, and even if Eileen protested in the most determined terms she would not be heeded. To the doctor's mind there seemed no harm in the arrangement.

But it meant everything to Melville J. Ross.

When at last the crippled Olympia reached port and allowed her passengers to go ashore Eileen began to make preparations. But Dr. Hallam solemnly assured her that he could under no circumstances permit her to venture out. Certainly, Eileen was pale and wan, and the weather, as it happened, was very severe.

"But I insist upon leaving the ship," Eileen declared indignantly. "I'm well enough to leave, doctor——"

"Pardon me," interrupted Hallam quietly; "I think I'm the better judge regarding that point. I do not feel justified in allowing you to go ashore in such a state as you are in. I fully believe that you have pneumonia. No, my dear young lady, your protests are useless. You must remain in your cabin."

And notwithstanding Eileen's frantic entreaties she had to remain.

Meanwhile, Ross went ashore full of jubilation, and lost no time in carrying out his original plans. The path was clear before him, and he was quite convinced that his task would be an easy one. He went straight to a certain gentleman whom he knew intimately, and who had already received a very lengthy cablegram.

Exactly five hours later—at seven o'clock in the evening—"Lieutenant Philip Langford" presented himself at the superb residence of Mr. Heron Langford, the multi-millionaire, on Seventh Avenue.

As he had expected, he was admitted without a moment's delay. Ross was feeling confident and full of vitality. He had primed himself for this ordeal for long enough, and was positively certain of success.

He found himself in a superb entrance-hall, and was handed over by a liveried footman into the care of a distinguished-looking gentleman who, Ross found, was Dr. Cyrus Mangrove—Heron Langford's physician, and one of the most distinguished in New York City.

"I am glad you have arrived in time, Lieutenant Langford," said the physician gravely. "Your father is weak, but in no immediate danger. He is very anxious to see you, and has been expecting you for several hours past."

"I was delayed," explained Ross calmly. "I am very glad to hear that my father is fairly well. It would have been a blow to me if I had arrived too late."

"I am sure of that," said the other, leading the way up the magnificent staircase to the noble landing.

Ross was ushered into a stately bedroom where soft, subdued electric lights glowed upon a large, old-fashioned bedstead. The rest of the room was in comparative gloom, thus heightening the effect.

"My son—my son!"

The voice was quavering but eager, and the false Lieutenant Langford saw an old man, with snowy white hair, propped up in the bed. He was clean-shaven, and his face was sunken and pale. But there was vitality in his eyes, and he held out a welcoming hand.

"Father!" exclaimed Ross, taking his hand and acting his part well. "This is a strange meeting. I never thought that I should see you in this world. Until recently I had thought you dead!"

The old man chuckled.

"I am not far off—I am not far off!" he exclaimed, shaking Ross's hand again and again. "You are only just in time, boy. But I am glad you have come. Ah, I can see your mother's likeness in your face!"

Ross inwardly smiled, but kept a solemn countenance. He had hardly expected to be accepted as Lieutenant Langford so readily. It was a pleasant surprise for him. But yet, he argued, it was only natural, for the old man could never have dreamed that an impostor would present himself.

"I should have been here sooner, but the ship met with an accident," said Ross, seating himself beside the bed. "But no doubt you have heard of it?"

"I learned of the collision this morning," said Heron Langford. "Dr. Mangrove would not permit me to know sooner. And now I suppose you are wondering how much money you are going to get, eh?"

Ross made a protesting gesture.

"I came from England to see you, father," he said earnestly. "Mother often referred to you, and told me how splendid it would have been—"

"Tut, tut! Let us get to business, Philip—that is your name, isn't it?" quavered the old man. "Ha, ha! It's queer—don't know my own son's name! But I'm glad you arrived in time—Um glad, boy! Give me your hand again!"

Ross held out his hand, and Heron Langford wrung it with surprising strength.

"Yes, to business!" he went on. "I'm not losing any time, I guess. It's a strange world, Philip. Thirty-seven years, isn't it? You're nearly forty? Why, you'll soon be dying yourself!"

And the old man chuckled again.

"Business, father?" asked Ross curiously. "What were you referring to?"

"Ah! I'm losing no time," repeated the millionaire. "I might go off at any moment. The doctor says so.

But I've seen you, and I'm satisfied. You're a fine man, Philip. Just what I hoped for. But the business you ask? I'm keeping you on tenter-hooks, eh? Well, well, I'll get it out."

Heron Langford waved his hand to Dr. Mangrove.

"You've got to be a witness, doctor," he went on shakily.



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attorney will be along very soon. It's all for you, Philip—it's all yours. Millions of dollars, boy—millions! They'll be yours within the hour—yours to do as you like with!"

"Oh!" ejaculated Ross, taking a deep breath.

"I've done with them—they've only worried me for months past. Tomorrow you'll be able to buy anything that takes your fancy—you'll be a millionaire. Think of it, Philip! Wasn't it worth coming to America for?"

"I came to see you, father," said Ross quietly.

"But not with the intention of seeing me, I believe!" exclaimed a quiet voice immediately behind Ross. "Good-evening, Mr. Melville J. Ross!"

The impostor spun round like a top.

His jaw dropped, and his eyes started from his head. Standing before him was Nelson Lee! And on either side of the great detective were two other figures—Nipper, and a big man in the uniform of a police captain.

"Nelson Lee!"

Melville J. Ross stared at the detective stupidly, then seemed to become panic-stricken. The colour fled from his cheeks, and he quivered visibly. He attempted to speak, but the words refused to come. Ross licked his dry lips, and stilled his chattering teeth.

"N-Nelson Lee!" he stammered hoarsely.

"I think you have got my name correctly," was the detective's suave answer. "You have failed, Ross. You have failed miserably."

Old Heron Langford chuckled.

"And I played with you well, you rogue!" he exclaimed, shaking his fist. "I played with you, and made you think I had been hoodwinked! Like my poor wife—eh? Huh! If you were really my son I would disown you!"

Ross turned on the old man fiercely.

"You old——"

"I think Mr. Langford has had enough excitement for one night," protested Dr. Mangrove, roughly gripping Ross's arm. "Here, Captain Booth, take your prisoner!"

The police officer came forward at once, and in a moment the handcuffs were snapped upon the wrists of Melville J. Ross. The rascal made no attempt to resist. Indeed, he was too utterly flabbergasted to offer fight.

He turned to Nelson Lee with quivering lips.

"How—how did you get here?" he asked falteringly. "I left you in London, a prisoner! How did you get here first? Are you a wizard?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Not at all," he replied. "I simply came across the Atlantic on board the Rosslynn. The vessel made good time—that is all. The Olympia was delayed at the start of her voyage, and delayed again by the collision with an iceberg. The Rosslynn arrived in New York three hours before——"

"Great Joseph!" gasped the prisoner faintly.

The explanation of Lee's presence was absurdly simple, after all. The

Write to the Editor of

ANSWERS

if you are not getting your right PENSION

smaller liner had merely come across in her usual time—or, perhaps, a little under schedule. And the Olympia had been just over two days late!

Immediately upon landing, Nelson Lee had found that the Olympia had met with an accident, and that she would not arrive until later in the day. So the detective had gone straight to Heron Langford, and had fully explained the whole circumstances. The old man had seen everything in the right light, and understood perfectly. And more—he had agreed to participate in a little play-acting, in order that Melville J. Ross should be caught absolutely red-handed.

Lee and Nipper, and Captain Booth, of the New York Police, had concealed themselves behind a screen in a dark corner of the bedroom, and had heard everything that had passed.

It was all surprisingly simple.

Ross's villainy was apparent, and the trap was a complete success.

The charges against Melville J. Ross were serious enough. Conspiracy, fraud, kidnapping, and attempted murder! One thing was certain—the clever scoundrel would be rendered quite harmless for many years to come.

Old Heron Langford was intensely pleased with Nelson Lee's efforts on his behalf. But for the detective's activity, the old man's millions would have fallen into wrong hands.

Eileen Dare was fetched from the liner without delay, and Dr. Hallam did not think it necessary to explain why she had been detained. He realised that he had very nearly been entrapped in a dangerous corner.

The girl was made a great fuss of by the old millionaire, for he took to her at once. And her sunny influence worked wonders with him. He declared that he would remain alive until his son—his real son—recovered sufficiently to undertake the voyage to America!

And the old man did remain alive until then—and for several months afterwards, too!

But by that time—by the time Lieutenant Philip Langford arrived in New York—Nelson Lee, Eileen Dare, and Nipper were back in London, hard at work on other cases. They had stayed in New York just two weeks, and on the voyage home Eileen recovered her health completely.

And Melville J. Ross was in gaol. He had received the reward which was his just due. It would be quite a long while before he saw the open streets again.

The Combine had once again suffered a severe blow. Eileen Dare's campaign was progressing steadily and relentlessly.

THE END.

NEXT WEDNESDAY'S ISSUE

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

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

They fall in with a party of blacks led by a stalwart native named **OLTRA**, and an Irishman—one **PETE STORRIN**, who warn the treasure hunters against a rascally filibuster—**PEDRO DIEGO**, and his gang By some means the pirate has got to know the object of the expedition. Later a fight takes place, but the treasure hunters are victorious. (Now read on.)

Sealed Up.

AMONGST the loose rubbish which blocked one of the many streams in the caverns, they discovered many more pebbles showing traces of gold-coating. And on some of these the coating was of such a character as to lead the doctor to decide to make an effort to clear the way and follow it up to its source.

Picks and shovels, drill and wheelbarrows, gunpowder, and even dynamite were carried round, and regular, organised parties of natives were set to work every day, returning to the camp at night to sleep.

This went on without a hitch for a week. Good progress was made, and as nothing was heard or seen of the filibusters the doctor began to hope they had decided to go away for a while and leave him to carry on his quest in peace.

This idea probably spread imperceptibly from the leader to his followers, and may have led to over-confidence or to carelessness in the work of scouting.

Be that as it may, at the time when all seemed to be going merrily as a marriage bell, trouble descended suddenly upon the treasure-seekers, and in a sinister form.

It so happened that Alec was just then staying in camp for a day or two. The doctor had got behind in the work of preserving his specimens, which

were suffering in consequence, and Alec had volunteered to take it in hand for him.

He accordingly remained behind, and the two blacks, Menga and Kalma, who were his constant attendants, remained with him.

The doctor and Clive, with Ben Grove and a number of natives, all well armed as usual, left the camp, and made their way to what they now all called the "mine"—they had not got so far yet as to put "gold" before it.

As usual, they left a guard of two or three natives at the entrance, and then entered the underground passage, and made their way through it to the place where they had left off work the previous afternoon.

They had scarcely started operations, when there came along the passage they had come through the sound of rifle-shots far away. As had been prearranged in case anything of the kind happened, each worker threw down his tools, snatched up his rifle, and hurried back along the passage towards the entrance.

But they were too late. Ere they had traversed half the distance there was heard a deafening, earth-shaking roar, and they were met by a terrific blast of fire, hot air, dust, and suffocating smoke.

Then followed a series of resounding crashes, the thunder of falling rock and boulders tumbling about on the mountain side.

Dr. Campbell, like many of his companions, was knocked over by the terrible blast, and as he lay on the rocky floor he realised that this must be the work of Diego and his gang. They had played a deadly trick upon the explorers. They must have surprised and overcome the natives left on guard, and then blown in the entrance to the passage.

Thus the doctor and his party were not only prisoners; they were effectually sealed up in those underground passages, with only such food and other necessities as they had with them.

.

"Doctor, be you theer?"

Doctor Campbell, lying in a state of semi-consciousness, recognised as in a dream the voice of Ben Grove.

All was darkness around. The rush of air had extinguished all their lanterns at the same time that it had knocked most of them over.

The veteran mariner, Grove, had by good luck been round a corner when the blast had come, and so had escaped its full force. He was now stumbling about in the darkness, trying to find, with the aid of a few matches, first a lantern which he could light, and then his less fortunate companions.

Just then someone rose from the rocky floor, and, staggering blindly along, nearly tumbled over him.

"Steady on, steady!" the sailor called out. "Who be you a-ramblin' about in the dark?"

It was Clive. He was half dazed, but he knew the voice.

"It's me, Clive, Ben!" he said feebly. "Thank Heaven, you're here! Is the doctor all right? Do you know where he is?"

"I just called out, thinkin' he might 'ear me, but——"

"I'm here, my friend," now came from somewhere not far away. "Are you hurt—either of you?"

"Well," said Ben, "so far as I know I be all right. I ain't bin hurt."

t' see nuffen o' meself yet, but I think I'm all 'ere. How do you feel yerself, sir? An' you, Mr. Clive?"

Just then Ben succeeded in his efforts to get a lantern to light, and he flashed it about him, first on Clive, and then, following the direction of the voice he had heard, on the doctor.

"Well, I be main glad t' see as ye be both alive," said the old sailor thankfully. And now t' get another light, and then we shall see better what's wrong with ye."

"I'm all right, I think," Clive said; "but it's suffocating here. That's right, Ben. Better light two or three lanterns, then we can see our way. The first thing is to get out of this into a better atmosphere—and we must take the other poor chaps with us. It's enough to kill anyone here!"

"That's right," said the doctor, who had now risen to his feet. "I will help you; I feel better now. We must get everyone here back to the large hall. We shall find the air better there."

Aided by the lanterns Ben had now found and lighted, the three white men set to work to aid their black followers. Some were found all right, only a little stupefied, and these helped to carry their less fortunate fellows, some of whom had been struck by flying or falling pieces of rock, and were not only unconscious, but badly cut and bruised as well.

After a time the whole party were assembled in the large grotto, or "hall," as they called it. And then the doctor went round among them all to tend to their injuries and see how many were badly hurt.

Fortunately he had taken the precaution to accumulate some stores in the place, amongst them such things as lint and bandages, and these he now made use of.

When all was finished that could be done in this way, the three white men sat down apart to discuss the situation.

The doctor was profoundly dissatisfied with himself and was full of self-reproach.

"My friends, this is my fault," he declared. "I ought to have foreseen it, and taken better precautions against it."

"No reason to blame yourself, sir," Clive hastened to answer. "It's those treacherous scoundrels—Diego and company."

"Ay, ay, sir," Ben agreed. "It be them as 'as done it—the murdering villains. They've set on our chaps suddint like, an' murdered the poor fellows."

"But I ought to have provided against such a chance. I might have guessed they would play some such trick upon us. And yet one would not think the natives would allow themselves to be caught unawares."

"Of course not, sir," Clive commented. "They have allowed themselves to be surprised, that's plain. It's no use blaming them, however, poor fellows. They have paid a heavy penalty for their carelessness, I'm afraid."

"I thought for certain that at the worst," the doctor murmured, "they could have held their own till we had come to their help. Then we ought to have been able to beat off any attack with a position that was easy to defend. But there! The mischief is done, and the question is, what are we to do? We are boxed up here like rats in a hole. I am afraid there is not much doubt about that. It is, however, our duty as practical men to make sure of it. That means going back to the entrance to ascertain exactly the state of the case there. But we had better leave that awhile for the foul air to disperse, and meantime we can occupy ourselves usefully here

in taking stock of our stores. It's a good thing we did not neglect to look ahead a little."

"A good thing, indeed, sir," Clive agreed. "We can live here for a while, at any rate. Surely we ought to be able to hold out till help comes from the camp. They will not leave us here to be starved to death!"

To this the doctor made no direct reply. He was very grave and thoughtful. When he spoke he said only:

"Well, as prudent men we shall have to make what we have here last as long as possible. So we had better look round and take stock, as it were. Then we must allowance ourselves. We have a good many mouths to feed, remember."

They had a large quantity of tinned food and biscuits, which had been stored rather to provide food for the workers during the day than with any thought of standing a siege. They had also a good stock of oil for their lanterns, of ammunition, and of blasting powder and dynamite, which last two, however, were not likely to be of much use to them, so far as could be seen.

Presently, when the doctor thought the state of the air in the passage would permit it, they made their way to the entrance—or, rather, as near to it as they could get. The result was depressing; it effectually damped any hopes they might have been secretly nursing as to making an opening for themselves in that direction.

"They've done their devil's work only too well," growled the doctor, shaking his head. "Escape in this direction is practically impossible. It would take us months to make a way out here—if, indeed, it could be done at all from inside, which I very much doubt."

They returned once more by the way they had come, and as they passed the point where the passage forked Clive paused, and nodded his head in the direction of the branch passage which led down to the lake.

"That is our one way of escape, then, after all," he said, with a shrug of the shoulders. "I was in hopes we had done with that horrid place. But I suppose we shall have to trust ourselves to it once more. Alec and Tom Read will come to look for us that way in the motor-launch when they know what has happened, and find they can't get to us the other way."

The doctor remained silent. He dared not speak out what was in his mind; he could not say the words which must crush practically all hope out of his young follower's heart, and fill it with a stony despair. He at least was under no delusion as regarded the hopelessness of their position.

Ben Grove, however, was busy just then with the same thoughts as the doctor, and all unthinkingly he uttered them aloud.

"Mr. Alec, Tom Read, ay, an' Captain Barron," he said slowly, "be all a-fightin' fur their own lives by this time, an' if they a-bin took by surprise like we was it's little chance they'll ever have of comin' t' look fur us!"

"I wonder where my two darkies have got to this morning?" mused Alec, as he stood in the doctor's tent looking over some specimens which he was going to take in hand that morning.

Neither of his two natives, Menga and Kalma, was to be seen. As a rule, their devotion to Alec was so marked as to be at times even a little embarrassing. The way they watched him about, ready to run hither or rush thither for him at his slightest sign was like nothing so much as the behaviour of two clever sheepdogs with their shepherd. Though neither he nor they had made any very great progress in learning one another's spoken language, they had between them brought the sign language to something very near perfection. Alec no longer found himself

(Continued overleaf.)

in any difficulty on that score. He could make them understand almost whatever he wished, indeed, very often they seemed, in some strange way, to divine his thoughts before he got so far as to make any signs.

As stated, their devotion was such as to be rather a trouble. They seemed to arrange between them that they should never both leave him at the same time. One or the other was always close at hand, patiently waiting in readiness for a call or a sign, so that Alec sometimes felt as though he were living under a sort of inspection, and he rather wished that they would occasionally, as he expressed it, sometimes "run off and play for an hour or two."

Well, this morning it seemed as though that was just what they had done, gone off for a while to amuse themselves in their own way.

"They might have let me know they were going, though," Alec thought. "I could have arranged to get someone else for a while."

As he could not get on without someone to assist him, he strolled outside, and looked up and down to see if anyone was about, black man or white, whom he could call upon to come and give him a hand.

As he thus stood, pipe in mouth, gazing around, he saw a boat approaching the shore, with Captain Barron in it. The skipper made a sign that he wished to see him, and Alec sauntered down the beach to meet him.

Directly the boat's bow touched on the strand the skipper was on his feet. The next moment he had sprung lightly ashore, and then walked briskly towards Alec.

"Doctor gone, I s'pose?" he queried.

"Yes, captain. Been gone some time. Did you want to see him, captain?"

"Yes, I rather wanted to speak to him. I had intended to be here sooner, but got detained. Something has happened that I don't like."

Alec opened his eyes.

"Why, what's the idea, Captain Barron?"

The young fellow spoke lazily, and with a slight suggestion of banter in his tone. The skipper was regarded as a bit nervous in matters relating to the safety of his ship. He seemed to be always inventing some fresh precaution, adding some new item to his plan of defence. So much so, that the two young explorers sometimes thought he was overdoing it—a bit too anxious.

Later on they had reason to alter their opinion in this respect. But so it had been hitherto, and the fact influenced Alec in his remarks.

"I notice, by the way," he continued, "that you have steam still up. Rather later than usual, isn't it?"

Ever since Captain Barron had learned about Diego and his vessel he had had a fire lit under his boiler every night before sundown. The doctor himself was a little inclined to demur to this on the grounds that they had no coal to spare; but Captain Barron insisted. He was not going to allow himself to be caught by those pirates at night with no steam up. So he kept up the practice, letting the fires go out in the early morning shortly after dawn.

However, Alec, looking across at the yacht now, had seen that there was still a thin trace of smoke floating from the top of the smoke-stack.

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