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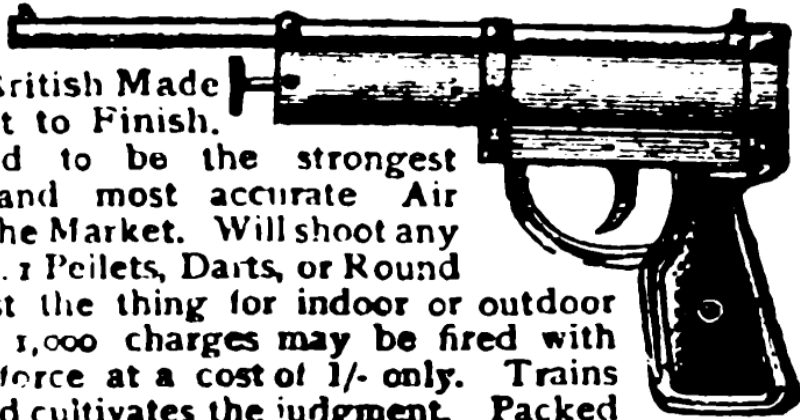
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CHAPTER I.

Sydney Bradford's Visitor—A Shock—The Meeting of the Combine.

MR. SYDNEY BRADFORD, the well-known solicitor, leaned back in his chair and glanced at the slip of pasteboard which had just been handed to him by his office secretary, Marshall.

"Oh, you may as well show Mr. Hathaway in, Marshall," said the solicitor, looking up. "Give him a hint, however, that I am rather busy, and that the interview cannot be longer than a few minutes."

"Very good, sir," said the secretary.

A few seconds later Sydney Bradford's door opened again, and a tallish, well-dressed man entered the private sanctum. He was clean-shaven, and was obviously of high birth, for he had that indescribable manner and method of carrying himself, which seems distinctive of the upper ten thousand. His age, perhaps, was between forty and forty-five.

Bradford glanced at the card before him.

"Mr. Jerrold Hathaway, I believe?" he said, by way of introduction.

"That is my name, Mr. Bradford," replied the visitor, in an easy, rather drawling voice. "Dooeed curious that I shouldn't have met you before, you being my pater's solicitor. However, better late than never."

"You have come to me on business, I presume?" said the solicitor questioningly.

"Well—yes. I suppose you would call it business," was Hathaway's answer. "But I'm hanged if I know how to express myself. It's rather a delicate subject, to tell the truth."

There was a short pause, and Bradford regarded his visitor with some amount of interest. For, although he had never seen Jerrold Hathaway before, he had heard quite a lot about him.

Hathaway, in fact, possessed a reputation which was, in plain language, decidedly unsavoury. In more than one respect Hathaway was popularly supposed to be unscrupulous and unprincipled. And Bradford knew that this reputation was well deserved. Jerrold Hathaway was not a man of honour, in any sense.

Yet he was the son of a distinguished baronet. Sir Warwick Hathaway's

name was as highly honoured as his son's was besmirched. Jerrold, nevertheless, had never openly committed any punishable crime. His sins were general, and his last mode of life was a bye-word among those who knew him.

And Sydney Bradford was interested; he had reason to be interested. For, in his own way, the solicitor was as much a scoundrel as his visitor. Indeed, of the two, Bradford was certainly the most villainous.

Accordingly, he wondered what delicate business matter could have brought Jerrold Hathaway to him. He half-suspected that its nature would be on the shady side—and Bradford was not far wrong in his surmise.

It was Hathaway who broke the silence.

"You have lately visited Hathaway Towers, I believe, Mr. Bradford?" he asked.

"That is so."

"You undertook the journey in order to see my father?"

"There was no secret on that point," replied Bradford smilingly.

"Er—no, I suppose not." Hathaway hesitated. "Hang it all, I detest talking in riddles," he went on half angrily. "Look here, Mr. Bradford, I take it for granted that we are quite private in this room?"

"Oh, yes," replied the solicitor curiously.

"Very well then. I know for a fact that you went down to Hathaway Towers in order to take the pater's last will and testament," said the visitor grimly. "That's so, isn't it? I want you to tell me exactly how Sir Warwick has disposed of his fortune and estates. That's the blunt truth."

Sydney Bradford leaned back and smiled.

"Quite so," he said—"quite so. I am very much afraid, however, that you will be disappointed, Mr. Hathaway. I cannot see my way clear to disclose the dispositions of Sir Warwick's will to you. Surely you will readily understand that such an action on my part would be a distinct breach of professional——"

Jerrold Hathaway snapped his fingers.

"Look here, Mr. Bradford," he exclaimed pointedly; "I want to come to an understanding with you at once. I did not come here to discuss professional etiquette. I came here to obtain information—and I am perfectly willing to pay for that information. Naturally, our little transaction will be confidential."

Bradford did not reply for a moment. He was thinking; and he was sizing up his companion. Until recently, Jerrold Hathaway had been the sole heir to Sir Warwick's fortune, under a will which had been drawn up ten years previously.

It had been an understood thing that Jerrold would inherit his father's entire estate upon the latter's death. Sir Warwick had been ill for some months, and the old baronet was now on the point of dying. His medical advisers had stated that he would certainly not last another three weeks.

Just a week since Sydney Bradford had been suddenly called to Hathaway Towers, the old country seat of the Hathaway family. His mission was not a secret; among those interested, it was public knowledge that the solicitor had undertaken the journey in order to assist Sir Warwick in the making of a new will.

Bradford had guessed at once, upon receiving the summons, what the object of his visit was to be. For several years, now, the old baronet had been estranged from his son—his only child. Jerrold was the next-of-kin, and, naturally, the sole heir. But Sir Warwick had quarrelled with his scapegrace son more times than either remembered—and the subject of each

quarrel was the same. Jerrold was an evil-liver, and a disgrace to the fine old family name.

For years Sir Warwick had known nothing of his son's scoundrelly mode of life, and those closely connected with the family had done their utmost to keep the truth from the old man. But, naturally enough, the truth had leaked out, and Sir Warwick had at last learned the painful facts.

For some time the baronet had taken no action. He had, however, used his best endeavours to bring Jerrold to a better understanding with him. Time after time Jerrold had been angrily told that unless he reformed he would be made to suffer.

And now Sir Warwick was dying. Almost as soon as he had been taken ill he had learned of a fresh act of scoundrelism on Jerrold's part. And the baronet had delayed action no further. Straight away Bradford had been summoned, and a fresh will had been drawn up.

Jerrold Hathaway had been in London at the time, and he had got to hear of the solicitor's visit to the old country seat. Now, apparently, he was anxious to discover how his father had dealt with him.

And he soon proved to Sydney Bradford that he was ready and willing to pay for the information he was so anxious to obtain. If Bradford had been an honourable man he would have ordered Hathaway out of his office. But it happened that the solicitor was very much the same type of man as Jerrold himself. And the pair came to a thorough understanding.

"Well, Mr. Hathaway," exclaimed Bradford seriously, "I am afraid you will receive an unpleasant shock——"

"I am prepared for one," interjected the other. "Confound the old man for the dunderheaded fool he is! Tell me the worst, Bradford. I suppose he has cut me off with about a third of his fortune?"

"Worse than that," said Bradford quietly.

"Worse!" echoed Jerrold, gritting his teeth. "A quarter, eh? My Heaven, that will leave me in a hole! I simply must have a substantial income; I am deeply involved in a score of different directions. Anything less than a third will mean utter ruin and disgrace. I have been counting upon inheriting the whole seven hundred thousand—that's about the size of the old man's fortune, isn't it?"

Bradford nodded.

"A trifle more," he replied. "But you are too optimistic, Mr. Hathaway. I will deliver my unpleasant news straight away. Sir Warwick has left you nothing whatever—nothing save Hathaway Towers and a trifling income to cover the expenses of the estate. The whole of the fortune is bequeathed to one of your cousins——"

Jerrold Hathaway rose to his feet, his face working strangely.

"Nothing!" he echoed. "Are you mad, Bradford?"

"I have merely told you the truth."

"It's a lie!" snarled the other, in an access of fury. "My father would never have cut me off without a penny! He threatened often enough to do so, but he has always been full of idle threats——"

"I am afraid that was no idle threat," interposed Bradford drily. "You imagined, I dare say, that you would receive, perhaps, a capital amount of about a quarter of a million?"

"Nothing less—nothing less!" said Jerrold, with heat. "More, Bradford more! My responsibilities are tremendous, man! I have been anticipating inheriting over half a million for years past—I have presumed upon that knowledge to the very fullest extent."

The solicitor looked grave.

"I am afraid your position, then, is precarious," he replied. "I will overlook your outburst of a moment ago, Mr. Hathaway—although I may tell you that I object very strongly to being characterised as a liar. I have merely complied with your request; and your disappointment is natural. The fact, however, is undeniable—you receive nothing whatever under your father's new will. The Hathaway estate is a mere trifle compared——"

"Who is the chief legatee?" demanded Jerrold huskily.

"Your cousin, Miss Lillian Noble."

"Great Heaven—that brat of a girl!" snarled the other. "She inherits the whole fortune? It—it is impossible!"

"It is, nevertheless, a fact," said Bradford quietly.

"And I, the only son, am to get nothing!" went on Jerrold. "I never dreamed that it would be as bad as that, Bradford. I am stunned. I cannot realise it. This will mean absolute disaster for me. All this week I have been anxious, but I never anticipated——"

He paused, at a loss for words. The shock was a terrible one for him. Knowing full well that his father had made a fresh will, Jerrold Hathaway had nevertheless fully relied upon inheriting a quarter of a million, at the very least.

"Lillian Noble!" he said bitterly. "A girl of twenty—a fool of a child. Sir Warwick must have been mad! Why, my cousin is practically a stranger to both my father and myself. She is nothing to us."

"So I was given to understand by Sir Warwick," replied Bradford. "But the old gentleman told me that he was pleased with the girl's pluck, and that it was better to leave his fortune to her than to his scoundrel of a son—those, you will understand, were Sir Warwick's words, not mine."

Hathaway smiled sourly; indeed, his face almost formed itself into a snarl. The colour had fled from his cheeks, and his eyes were glittering with bitter, savage realisation.

The fortune he had so long regarded as his own had slipped through his fingers at the last moment. His cousin, Miss Lillian Noble, would receive everything. She was a girl of nearly twenty, and he had not seen her for years. In fact, she was almost a stranger to the Hathaways. Even Sir Warwick had not seen the girl for over a year. Yet Jerrold remembered, now, that his father had always been rather fond of Lillian. She was, at least, his favourite niece.

Jerrold seemed to recollect, too, that there was some little romance concerning Lillian—something which had happened during the past few months. But he had never cared a snap of his fingers for his cousin, and so had taken no interest in her actions or movements.

"There's some sort of mystery about Miss Noble, isn't there?" he asked abruptly. "I somehow remember that something occurred, a few months back. She ran away from her home, didn't she?"

Bradford nodded.

"Yes; but there is no mystery," he replied. "Don't you know the facts?"

"No. I cared nothing for the child."

"It was merely a simple girlish act of impulsiveness," went on the solicitor. "She had always hankered after the stage, I understand. Her father, however, being in an excellent position, did not care for his daughter to adopt the stage as a career; he wanted her to lead a homely life."

"And she ran away?" growled Jerrold.

"Exactly. Some time ago she left her home without warning and disappeared. There was a bit of a mystery at first, and her parents feared that she had met with some terrible misadventure. Then they received a

letter from the girl, in which she said that she had accepted a position in a touring theatrical company. Mr. Noble was furious, and declared that the girl could go her own way."

"And she is still touring with this theatrical crowd?"

"I don't know whether it is the same crowd; probably not," replied Bradford. "But Miss Noble is certainly with some theatrical company or other. Her father—your uncle, of course—has remained firm, and has not sought to persuade her to return to her home."

"Then her whereabouts is unknown?"

"Oh, no. I, at least, know where the girl is."

"Indeed," said Jerrold, with sudden interest. "How do you know?"

"Well, it is surely obvious that I obtained my information from Sir Warwick," replied the solicitor. "Your father, it seems, took quite a favourable view of Miss Noble's conduct. He upheld her in her impulsive action——"

"Just like the old fool!" growled the other viciously.

"Sir Warwick was very greatly struck by Lillian's pluck and determination. He regarded the whole thing as excellent, and said that the girl deserved the highest commendation for her courage. Rather a curious view to take, I thought, but your father is somewhat strange in his fads and fancies."

"But where is the girl?"

"Sir Warwick, it seems," went on Bradford, "decided to leave his fortune to Miss Noble. The old gentleman told me that she is a splendid girl, and fully deserving of all that will go to her. At all events, it was better to leave it to her than to have it squandered by you. Again I am using Sir Warwick's own words."

Jerrold grunted, but made no comment.

"Accordingly, the baronet at once set to work to find his niece," said the solicitor. "How he accomplished the task I do not know. I fancy, however, that it was somewhat difficult, for the girl has assumed another name. In some way or other Sir Warwick learned Miss Noble's whereabouts, and he mentioned to me that the girl is playing the heroine in a second-rate drama called the 'Snares of London.'"

"Some rotten melodrama, I suppose," sneered Hathaway.

"Probably," replied Bradford. "The company is at present in—er—Melby, I think. Yes, this week the company is at Melby, at the Theatre Royal."

"Melby," said Jerrold. "That's a tin-pot town in the Midlands. By George! And to think that a girl in that penny-gaff theatrical company should be coming into a fortune of three-quarters of a million! A fortune, too, which is rightfully mine! It is enough to make a man commit murder!"

Bradford gave his companion a sharp look.

"It is a high stake, certainly," he said quietly.

"But why is the girl there?" went on Hathaway. "Does she know of her good fortune? Has she been told?"

"Not yet. This particular tour comes to an end at the end of the week, I believe, and Sir Warwick decided not to disturb the girl until then. A few days makes little difference, of course. It is better, perhaps, that Miss Noble should not know until the end of the week."

"Who will tell her then?"

"I have no idea. Sir Warwick merely informed me that he had made all arrangements in that direction. As a matter of fact, I was not particularly interested," said Sydney Bradford, taking out his cigar-case. "It is a fad

of your father's, I believe, to call the girl to his bedside just before the end, and tell her that he has bequeathed to her his great wealth."

The solicitor passed his cigar-case to the other.

"No, no! I can't smoke!" declared Hathaway restlessly. "Lillian knows nothing, eh? By thunder, what a situation! I suppose you will go to Melby on Saturday and tell my cousin——"

"No, I am not going. Sir Warwick, as I said, has made arrangements. He has an agent, I believe, with instructions all cut and dried. I do not know who the agent is; probably the man who discovered the girl's whereabouts."

Jerrold Hathaway paced up and down Bradford's private office, his eyes shining intensely, and his fingers twitching with nervous excitement. He seemed fully fifty years of age now. The news had added a clear five years to his age. His shoulders were bent, and his attitude drooping.

"You don't know what this means to me, Bradford!" he muttered tensely.

"You don't know what it means!"

"I think I can guess," said Bradford shrewdly.

"Absolute ruin—nothing less. Oh, to think of all my plans for the future!" exclaimed Jerrold, with sudden fierceness. "I have been waiting waiting! I have been eagerly looking forward to my father's death—yes. I will admit it! Why should I pretend otherwise? And now, at the eleventh hour, I learn that I am a pauper! Good heavens! And only a mere girl stands between——"

Jerrold Hathaway paused, and turned upon the solicitor. He fixed upon Bradford a gaze which was filled with hatred, desperation, and fury.

"I would give a quarter of my fortune to have that girl killed!" he said, almost in a whisper. "Do you hear, man? Do you understand me? A quarter of my fortune to have Lillian Noble killed! Close upon two hundred thousand pounds——"

Bradford tossed his cigar into the fire.

"You are talking wildly, Mr. Hathaway!" he said sharply.

"I mean it, Bradford! Before Heaven, I mean it!"

"I should advise you to curb your tongue," said the solicitor, struck, however, by his companion's earnest tone. "I well understand your state of mind, and keenly appreciate your terrible disappointment. But you must accept the situation calmly. No good will come of outbursts such as this."

Hathaway nodded dully.

"But I am in earnest!" he declared. "It's murder, I know, but I care nothing! I am in the last stage of desperation. Unless I obtain that fortune I shall destroy myself; and it is better to destroy another——"

"Stop!" exclaimed Bradford curtly. "That is quite enough!"

The solicitor's sharp tone had the desired effect, and Jerrold Hathaway broke off. His eyes were gleaming still, and when he took his departure a few minutes later he had quite recovered his composure. But there was no mistaking his seriousness. Unscrupulous to a degree, he would have even descended to murder to attain his ends. But the risks were too great.

Bradford sat for a full hour after Hathaway had gone. When he finally rose to his feet, the solicitor was looking thoughtful.

"Nearly two hundred thousand!" he muttered. "By Jove! It's a tempting stake! I must think this thing over. Hathaway was not bluffing; he meant every word of it. Nearly two hundred thousand!"

It was, indeed, a matter for serious consideration. For Sydney Bradford was not a man who shrank at violence. On more than one occasion he had taken part in affairs which included black, foul murder.

Bradford was a member of a private set of well-known men who called themselves "The Combine." This was no organised society, but merely a combination of powerful and influential City men who had banded themselves together for mutual gain. Nothing was too shady for them; nothing too crooked.

They had committed many crimes, and they were ready to commit more. But of late months disaster after disaster had overtaken the Combine. Many of the most important members had been either imprisoned, or they had died. Roger Haverfield was one of the chief rogues; he was still using his sinister powers of evil. And Haverfield was powerfully supported by Sydney Bradford, and many others—Ford Abbercorn, Herbert Vikerson, Stanton Roding, Lord Max Roper, Rufus Tollman, and one or two others among them. All were well-known men; all possessed names which had power and influence. Not a breath of suspicion surrounded them. But they were criminals, all—callous, murderous criminals. Their very high positions rendered them immune from discovery.

Others, however, equally as highly placed, had suffered the terrible penalty. The last member to go had been Mr. Melville J. Ross, a powerful man of American birth. Others who had paid the price included such famous names as Sir Ambrose Shore, Martin Hallton, Rudolph Stebbing, Jonathan Bridger, Sir Caleb Hurst, and Dr. Munro Taggart.

Thus, although many members of the Combine had suffered for their crimes, there were equally as many who still wielded their sinister influence. The Combine was not as strong as it had once been; but it was still dangerous, still a menace to decent society.

And who had caused this drastic series of disasters?

A girl—a mere girl of twenty!

Eileen Dare was that brave, resolute girl's name. She was small, she was dainty, and she was as pretty as a picture. But she possessed almost amazing detective ability, and her cleverness had been proved again and again.

But Eileen Dare was not working alone. Mr. Nelson Lee, the celebrated criminologist of Gray's Inn Road, was associated with the girl in all her difficult cases. Eileen preferred to call herself Nelson Lee's assistant,* but the great detective had more than once drily observed that it was he who rendered the assistance. Eileen Dare was often the prime mover in a particularly hazardous undertaking. Her courage was beyond question, and Nipper, Lee's youthful assistant, would have gone to the ends of the earth to serve the brave girl.

For both Nipper and Nelson Lee admired Eileen Dare greatly; they admired her for the singular ability she possessed. She could be trusted with almost any intricate task, and she would acquit herself splendidly. Nipper, as a general rule, disparaged all girls as silly and sentimental. But Eileen was different; she was a girl in a million.

And she was not pursuing her campaign purposelessly. The Combine, months before, had disgraced and murdered her father. And Eileen had vowed to make every member of the scoundrelly band pay the penalty for that most foul and horrible crime. Relentlessly, Eileen Dare had set about her task; and the list of names of those who had fallen was ample evidence of her success.

Many a time and oft Eileen had been near to death herself; the perilous nature of her work sometimes caused Nelson Lee to shake his head doubtfully. But he knew better than to breathe a word to Eileen. The girl was determined to press her campaign to the very end. These men had killed her father, and they should suffer—every one!

Yet, in herself, Eileen was the sweetest of girls. She possessed a wonderfully sunny nature, and was never tired of doing good. She lived with her aunt in a dear little flat near the riverside at Chelsea. And she was for ever on the look-out for an opportunity to strike at her enemies. When that opportunity came, Eileen would sternly set about the terrible task of exacting vengeance.

In reality, however, this campaign of Eileen's was no deliberately thought-out revenge. Justice was being done—nothing less. These scoundrels were beyond reach of the law, and so Eileen, with Nelson Lee's aid, was meting out the well-deserved punishment.

Sydney Bradford little imagined that the girl detective would soon be provided with another opportunity of displaying her amazing powers. But fate was shaping the course of events in a certain direction, and no power on earth would be able to intervene. It was just destiny.

Two days following the fateful conversation between Bradford and Jerrold Hathaway an unexpected piece of news came to hand. Sir Warwick Hathaway had passed into the Great Beyond! Quietly, in the night, the baronet had breathed his last.

It was early morning when Bradford received the news. And, as it happened, the scoundrelly solicitor was at the very time turning over a startling thought in his evil mind.

Sir Warwick was no more, and his son was now Sir Jerrold Hathaway, Bart.

Bradford ate no breakfast that morning. Instead he paced the library at his private house. The thoughts which were in his mind were sinister and as black as night itself.

Sir Warwick was dead, and Lillian Noble as yet knew nothing of the fortune which was to be hers.

And Jerrold Hathaway had offered the sum of two hundred thousand pounds if the girl was—murdered!

Within two hours Bradford was in close conference with the other members of the Combine. All were not present, but a representative number. And the men discussed, quietly and calmly, the many aspects of the case which Bradford placed before them. The one outstanding feature was intensely pleasing. For a comparatively simple crime the reward of nearly £200,000 was offered. It was a stupendous stake.

Action—if action was to be taken—must follow at once, while Lillian Noble was in ignorance of her good fortune, and while she stayed at Melby.

The Combine conference lasted three full hours; and then a decision was arrived at: The terrible task was to be attempted, and Mr. Herbert Vikerson had been chosen as the most suitable man for the work. Vikerson, if successful, was to receive the major share of the great spoils.

During the early afternoon Sydney Bradford sought out Sir Jerrold Hathaway. He found the new baronet in his own chambers, morose, sullen, and simmering with fury. The day had arrived at last; he had come into his own—and his own, he well knew, was practically nothing!

Bradford could not have discovered the baronet in a better mood. In plain, straightforward language the solicitor stated his mission. Sir Jerrold listened with flushed face and eager, evil eyes.

"If your offer still holds good," Bradford said eventually, "I am willing to understate the task. Before the end of this week Lillian Noble will meet with a fatal accident——"

"An accident!" muttered Sir Jerrold, catching his breath in. "You—you mean—— By Heaven, Bradford, it will mean all the difference in the world to me! But do you want me to take part——"

"No. You may remain in London, if you wish," interjected Bradford. "When we have arrived at an understanding you may leave everything else to me. I have reason to believe that you were serious in your offer——"

Sir Jerrold laughed harshly.

"Serious?" he echoed. "I was deadly so! When you arrived a few minutes ago I was turning over in my mind the best way in which to end my existence! You have no conception of my desperation, Bradford. I am at the end of my tether—I am utterly finished! Without my father's fortune—— But I shall have it!" he added with sudden triumph. "I shall have it, after all!"

"Three quarters of it, perhaps!" said Bradford pointedly.

Sir Jerrold took a deep breath.

"I offered you a quarter of the whole!" he exclaimed. "Yes, I will stick to that offer. Is it not worth it to me? As matters now stand I am a pauper. And if you undertake this—this task, it is right that you should be rewarded handsomely. For I, after all, will benefit the most. Yes, yes, Bradford, my offer holds good!"

"Excellent!" said the solicitor crisply. "We will talk business, Sir Jerrold!"

CHAPTER II.

Nelson Lee's Commission—Lillian Noble—The Revelation.

THAT very same afternoon three people were sitting in Nelson Lee's consulting-room at the great detective's apartments in Gray's Inn Road.

Those three people were Nelson Lee himself, Nipper, and Eileen Dare.

"I am glad you have decided to come, Miss Eileen," Lee was saying quietly. "Miss Noble will understand a girl's sympathy, and will be comforted. Moreover, the trip will be a change for you."

Eileen Dare nodded.

"It is a painful mission, Mr. Lee," she said, "but I am sure Miss Noble is a good girl, and I am hopeful of being able to persuade her to come back to London with us. When do you propose starting?"

"Almost at once. That is why I 'phoned for you," Lee replied.

Nipper glanced at the clock.

"We shall have to be making a move, guv'nor," he remarked casually. "I've looked up a good train——"

"We?" repeated the detective. "I did not understand that you were journeying to Melby, too, Nipper?"

"Oh, yes, sir, of course I am!" said Nipper promptly.

"Perhaps I shall have something to say in that matter," went on Nelson Lee, watching Nipper's dismayed face with some amusement. "In any case, why on earth should you waste your time in travelling to the Midlands? I have plenty of work for you to do here, my lad."

"Oh!" said Nipper blankly, looking at Eileen with the most miserable of expressions. "I—I thought that I might be useful, guv'nor," he added lamely. "Besides, Miss—Miss Eileen will very likely want somebody to—to look after her luggage——"

"I'm only taking my handbag, Nipper," smiled Eileen.

"I can get the tickets, too," went on Nipper desperately; "and there'll be a taxi to hire in Melby. And—and——"

"In other words, any excuse is better than none—eh?" interjected Lee blandly. "No, Nipper, you must remain in London. My dear lad, I may miss several most important cases unless I am represented here during my

absence. And who in all this world is a better substitute for myself than you?"

"Oh, well," began Nipper, somewhat mollified, "if you put it like that, guv'nor, I suppose——" Then Nipper caught sight of Eileen's pretty twinkling eyes. "Oh, don't be nasty, sir!" he went on. "If you let me come I'll——"

"Let him come with us, Mr. Lee," said Eileen laughingly.

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I suppose I shall have to consent, then," he exclaimed. "You must thank Miss Eileen, however, for the reversal of my decision, Nipper."

And Nipper, his face wreathed in smiles, thanked Eileen so effusively that Lee had to pack him off to get washed and brushed-up for the journey.

Thus Fate worked in curious paths.

It was only by a mere fluke that Nipper gained permission to accompany his master to Melby, for, in truth, there was no necessity for the lad to go. Yet, before London was reached again, Nipper was to be the sole means of saving Eileen Dare from a ghastly fate!

Very soon the trio were started on their journey, and, in spite of the sad nature of their mission, they were fairly bright and cheerful, for it was not a case of personal bereavement. After all, Sir Warwick Hathaway had been nothing to them in any way. Nipper and Eileen, in fact, had never seen the late baronet.

It was quite a simple affair, apparently.

There was not even the slightest prospect of excitement. Had they only known it, the events in Melby were to be extraordinary and startling to a degree. But, as yet, Lee had had no inkling of the villainies which were even then brewing.

The great detective was merely fulfilling the wishes of Sir Warwick Hathaway. He had undertaken a certain commission, and it was his duty to see the affair through.

But there was nothing of interest in it.

Nelson Lee considered it to be one of his very minor cases—a case which was certainly not worth recording. Later on, however, the detective would have ample cause to reverse his opinion.

When Sydney Bradford had related to Jerrold Hathaway the story of Lillian Noble, he had mentioned that Sir Warwick had obtained his information from a certain agent, the identity of whom Bradford did not know.

As a matter of fact, the agent was Nelson Lee.

The old baronet had sent for Lee, and had commissioned the detective to find the wilful girl who had set out to make a stage name for herself. Under ordinary circumstances, Lee would hardly have troubled to accept such a commission. But Sir Warwick's condition had been grave, and Nelson Lee had not hesitated a moment.

Systematically he had set to work, and within a few days he had succeeded in locating the baronet's niece in a small theatrical company which was touring in a drama called the "Snare of London." The detective did not approach the girl in any way; he merely made sure of his facts. Lillian Noble was appearing in the play under the stage name of "Lily Heathcote."

Lee had duly made his report to Sir Warwick, who had been highly pleased. The old baronet had further instructed Lee to journey to Melby on the Saturday night of this present week, and acquaint Miss Noble with the knowledge that she had been found. Lee was also to use all his persuasive powers to induce the girl to accompany him to Hathaway Towers.

The great detective knew nothing of the will; Sir Warwick had not

informed Lee as to the reason for all this searching. But the tour of the "Snarers of London" company ended at Melby, and Miss Noble was to be brought away.

And then, on this particular morning, news had come of Sir Warwick's death.

The baronet's sudden collapse had been unexpected; but the old man had prepared everything beforehand. Lee had instructions as to how he should act if Sir Warwick died suddenly.

The baronet had fully expected to live another two or three weeks, and he had therefore deemed it unnecessary to have Lillian brought to his side before the Saturday. Fate, however, had decided otherwise. Sir Warwick had passed away in his sleep, peaceful and at rest.

But the new will was made, and everything was in order.

Nelson Lee's instructions were simple. In the event of the baronet's premature death, he was to proceed to Melby without delay, and inform Lillian of her bereavement, if she did not know already. And Lee was to bring the girl away with him, and take her to her late uncle's town house in Melrose Street, Belgrave Square. Here a certain Mrs. Minton, an aged housekeeper, would care for Lillian until "certain other events took place."

Having delivered the girl into Mrs. Minton's charge, Lee's duties would be done. So his task was quite easy and simple. It was just a matter of delicate persuasion, and nothing further. He understood that Lillian was not to be taken to her own home, because of her father's unreasonable attitude regarding her action in running away to go upon the stage.

Of course, Nelson Lee fully realised that the whole thing might fall through. Lillian Noble might refuse to give up her chosen profession; if so, it would make no difference. The detective would have fulfilled his commission.

It was rather to be regretted that Sir Warwick had not taken Lee fully into his confidence, for the detective knew nothing whatever of the provisions of the new will, and was unaware of the fact that when Lillian went to the big house in Melrose Street, Belgrave Square, she would be entering her own home. For the mansion was now her own property; Jerrold Hathaway only inherited the country estates.

Let it be said, however, that Sir Warwick had never anticipated dying without seeing his niece. The old man had fully intended explaining to Lillian with his own lips that she was to inherit his fortune, and she was to have remained at Hathaway Towers until the end. And she would naturally have stayed until the funeral had taken place, and until the will had been read.

But in the present circumstances it was better that the girl should be taken to the London house. Mrs. Minton, the housekeeper, was well known to Lillian, for the old lady had been nurse to the girl during her childhood. Lillian would be quite comfortable. Moreover, Sir Warwick had intimated to Lee that Mrs. Minton would have certain instructions of her own.

To Nelson Lee it merely seemed that the baronet was taking a sympathetic interest in the girl; mainly because her own father was maintaining such a harsh attitude. It was a pure family affair, and Lee would be pleased to get it over.

It was unfortunate, too, that the detective did not know that Sir Warwick's family solicitor was none other than Mr. Sydney Bradford. The latter had been Sir Warwick's legal adviser since the death of the original family solicitor, five years previously. And, needless to say, the

baronet had trusted Bradford implicitly. For Bradford possessed a very good name in his profession.

Lee, however, was well acquainted with the solicitor's real character. And the detective would, perhaps, have been vaguely suspicious when certain subsequent events took place. As matters stood, however, Lee would have to piece the fragments together gradually.

The journey to Melby was quite enjoyable. It was not often that Nelson Lee and Nipper and Eileen travelled together, and Nipper was hugely pleased. He literally adored the girl, and was delighted to be in her company. Not that Nipper had any foolish notions in his shrewd brain. The lad was level-headed enough. He looked up to Eileen with genuine reverence; one hint from her was as good as a command. It must be said, however, that the lad's affection for his master was every bit as deep-rooted.

Melby was reached just before dusk.

The town proved to be fair-sized, and the Theatre Royal was a somewhat dingy building situated in the centre of the main street. Nelson Lee had been in Melby before, and knew his way about.

The posters which advertised the "Snarers of London" were rather highly coloured, and certainly melodramatic. Nipper and Eileen examined them casually, while Nelson Lee entered the main portico with the object of ascertaining if "Miss Heathcote" was on the premises.

The detective soon emerged with the information that the girl they sought was at her lodgings, at No. 25, Simleigh Grove. At least, the manager believed the girl to be there.

Simleigh Grove proved to be a respectable road five minutes' walk off. At No. 25, the callers were informed by a homely looking, buxom dame that "Miss Heathcote" was in her rooms, "gettin' ready for the play-actin' at the theayter."

Five minutes later Nelson Lee and Eileen were ushered into Lillian's sitting-room. Nipper remained below, in the landlady's front room.

"Lily Heathcote" was a good-looking girl, and her aristocratic upbringing was apparent at a glance. Fair and rather tall, she was in many ways the exact opposite to Eileen. She was, nevertheless, decidedly pretty, and her figure was graceful and well proportioned.

She looked at her visitors curiously, and with a certain tired expression in her deep-blue eyes. Her cheeks were wan and somewhat drawn. Obviously she had not improved in health during her stage career.

"Good evening!" she said hesitatingly.

"Good evening, Miss Heathcote," replied Nelson Lee, feeling, for once, somewhat awkward. "I have come to acquaint you with sad news. Your uncle, Sir Warwick Hathaway, passed away very early this morning, in his sleep, at Hathaway Towers."

The girl nodded wearily.

"I saw the report in the afternoon paper," she said. "It was a terrible——"

Suddenly she paused, realising the significance of the conversation. She had answered Lee's remark mechanically, forgetful of the fact that she was "Lily Heathcote"! She now turned pale, and her lower lip quivered a trifle.

"You—you know me?" she whispered.

"Yes, Miss Noble, we know who you are," said Eileen, slipping forward and taking the other girl's hand. "Please don't be frightened. We are friends, and have come to you——"

"From my father, I suppose?" interrupted Lillian, bitterly. "He has

told you to take me home? I will not go! Do you hear me? Oh, I will not return home to admit defeat and accept the ridicule of——"

But Eileen interrupted in turn, and quietly led the distraught girl to a chair. It was very obvious that the sudden knowledge that she was discovered, coming on top of the news of her uncle's death, had affected Lillian Noble to such an extent that she could now scarcely control herself.

She sank into the chair, sobbing quietly.

"Upon my soul!" murmured Lee. "I hardly know——"

Eileen Dare looked up at the detective expressively, and nodded towards the door. Lee understood at once, and he softly left the apartment. He was extremely glad to do so. And he was quite certain that Eileen would be able to handle the affair much more ably than he could have done.

"You've been jolly quick, guv'nor!" remarked Nipper, as Lee entered the lower room. "Have you seen Miss Noble?"

"She is in her room," replied Lee. "Miss Eileen is comforting her, I believe. The poor girl knew of Sir Warwick's death, and she is nearly hysterical. This sudden invasion of ours has doubtless had a trying effect."

Very shortly afterwards, however, Nelson Lee was pleasantly surprised to see Miss Noble walk into the room, smiling bravely, and looking at Lee through damp eyelashes.

"Miss Dare has explained everything to me, Mr. Lee," she exclaimed softly. "Oh, how I wish I could have seen my uncle before he died. But I will comply with his wish; that is the least I can do. I will go to London and live in my uncle's big house in Melrose Street. Old Mrs. Minton is a darling, and it will be such a relief, such a glorious change, after—after this!"

"You will not regret leaving the stage?"

"I shall breathe a sigh of thankfulness when I do so!" replied the girl fervently. "Perhaps I have only seen the harder side of it all, Mr. Lee. But I dared not admit defeat and go home. I chose this course, and I fully intended sticking to it until—until success came!"

"That would have been long delayed, perhaps?" suggested Lee.

"How long, Heaven only knows!" said Lillian. "Oh, I have been a foolish girl—I will acknowledge it to you, Mr. Lee. And I am thankful my poor uncle took this course. At least, I shall not be obliged to return home at once. I could not bear the sneers and laughs of everybody!"

She flushed a little at the thought.

"My silly dream is over," she went on. "And oh, how splendid it will be to leave this life. I had no engagement after this one, and I don't know what I should have done. Perhaps, before long, my father will forgive me for being so wilful."

"Your uncle, I believe, regarded your conduct as most praiseworthy," smiled Nelson Lee. "He considered that you had displayed splendid pluck and determination. I am very glad that you have taken this sensible course——"

"Oh, but I cannot leave Melby until Saturday," put in the girl quickly.

"Indeed?"

"I could not leave Mr. Dane in the lurch, could I?" she asked. "We have only another day or two here, and then the tour is finished. How thankful I am! Mr. Dane is the manager," she added. "I really must stay until Saturday."

There was a discussion, and Nelson Lee could see that Lillian Noble was only too pleased to finish her stage career; she was glad of almost any

excuse. She was run-down in health, and a complete rest was just what she required.

That night, at least, Nelson Lee and Nipper and Eileen would remain in Melby. Lee and Nipper would stay at one of the hotels, and Eileen would share Lillian's rooms. The two girls would get on well together, it was certain.

And it was decided that the visitors should witness the evening's performance of the "show."

To all appearances, the affair was over and done with.

Yet, as a matter of fact, the real events had not actually commenced.

Even while Lee was telling himself that nothing further remained to be done, certain things were happening which were destined to lead to amazing developments.

CHAPTER III.

The Man from the Dusk—A Curious Position—Vikerson's Startling Plan.

MR. HERBERT VIKERSON ensconced himself snugly into the cushions of the first-class compartment, made certain that his cigar was burning evenly, and then settled down to a deep reverie.

Vikerson's mission was one which would have caused many men to shudder.

He was travelling to Melby for the especial purpose of committing murder. Stated boldly thus, it has a terrible sound. But Vikerson had thoroughly considered every point and detail. He knew quite well that the odds were in his favour; and, to cap all, there was the prospect of securing an amount of money which was, in itself, a fortune.

Herbert Vikerson was a man of no particular profession. He was middle-aged, and had the free-and-easy air of a well-to-do man-about-town. He was known everywhere as a wealthy aristocrat. Who would suspect him, of all people, of killing a girl whom he had never spoken to, and did not even know?

His plans, too, would be so well carried out that he could not possibly be connected with the tragic affair when it did occur. The Combine had arranged everything, and Vikerson was the man chosen to do the actual work.

That it would be a delicate undertaking he well knew. But the stupendous reward smothered all doubts and difficulties. Moreover, Vikerson possessed iron nerves, and he was callous to a degree. The thought of the awful deed he contemplated did not weigh upon his mind in the least.

When the actual time came he would certainly feel emotion of some kind; but it would only be the fear of discovery. And even that emotion would be but slight. For Vikerson was convinced of his own ability to "pull the thing off" successfully.

One fact would have given him a turn if he could but have known it.

He was travelling to Melby by the afternoon train, and would arrive at about seven o'clock. And only eighty minutes before Nelson Lee and Eileen Dare had been whirled over the same route!

Nelson Lee and Eileen Dare!

Of all the people in the whole of Great Britain, Vikerson feared those two the most. If he had known that they were already in Melby he would have alighted at the first stopping place, and would have returned forthwith to London.

But he did not know—and so he went on.

The situation, in point of fact, was rather remarkable. He was unaware of Lee's activity, and Lee was certainly far from suspecting that one of Eileen Dare's principal enemies was bent on harming the very girl Lee had sought.

Vikerson relied solely upon his own cunning and ingenuity to carry him through the dreadful task successfully. First and foremost, it was absolutely necessary to kill the girl in such a way that it would appear to be an accident. Under no circumstances must there be the slightest suspicion of foul play.

Herbert Vikerson puffed at his cigar thoughtfully, and scarcely noticed the stops which the train made. It was an express, and he knew that after a famous junction had been passed there was no other halt until Melby was reached.

Rousing himself as a station was being left behind, Vikerson saw that it was the big junction. Outside all was dusk, and the lights of the train were already turned on.

"H'm! Not so long now," thought Vikerson. "About a thirty-mile straight run to Melby, with no intermediate stops. By Jove, if I could get the thing done to-night it would be splendid. But I haven't hope for that—and I must go cautiously. A slip in a game like this would mean the hangman's rope!"

He was under no false impression as to that point. A slip, however trivial, would lead to a death sentence. Vikerson was in no way disturbed by the thought, for he had not the slightest intention of making a slip.

He would have a clear field—and that was a great point.

At least, Vikerson fondly imagined he would have a clear field. And it is certain that if he had been allowed to go his own sinister way, Lillian Noble would have been done to death.

Even as matters stood, only a kindly Providence saved the girl.

For fate played right into Herbert Vikerson's hands. It seemed almost as though the Evil One himself had arranged matters especially for the scoundrel's benefit.

Vikerson sat forward in his seat as the train commenced slowing down. He knew that Melby was still twenty or thirty miles ahead, and yet the train was not scheduled to stop after passing through the junction.

Gazing into the semi-darkness, Vikerson saw that a lonely signal was set against the train. He raised the window-blind and leaned out. The train was now merely crawling at a snail's pace.

The signal went down with a clang, and a green light showed. In all directions lay open country, bare and desolate. Somehow, the evening seemed to be strangely lowering and threatening. Heavy clouds were collecting, and a stiff wind whistled through the hedges bordering the railway.

Just as the signal went down Vikerson heard a slight sound behind him. He was leaning out of the window, and so could not see into the compartment. He knew, however, that it was empty save for himself. Subconsciously, he concluded that the wind had blown one of the other window-blinds about.

The engine gave a short whistle, and the train quickly gained speed. Vikerson withdrew his head, allowed the blind to fall back into position, and then sat down. As he did so he uttered a sharp, startled ejaculation.

"Good heavens!"

In the opposite corner sat a man!

And it was not this fact alone which startled Vikerson; for he had strong nerves, and generally kept his head under the most trying circumstances

It was certainly surprising to turn back into an empty compartment to find it occupied!

But there was something else.

The man was sitting in a most singular attitude—a grotesque, unnatural attitude. It almost seemed as though he were about to spring forward, and was just gathering himself together for the effort. And his eyes were fixed upon Vikerson with a steady, unwavering glare which was disconcerting to the strongest nerves.

"How the name of all that's infernal did you get in here?" demanded Vikerson, finding his voice.

The stranger suddenly grinned hideously.

But he did not speak, and moved no other muscles save those of his face. He was fairly well dressed, but had no cap, and his hair was tousled and untidy. He seemed to be a young man of medium size, and well proportioned.

"How did you get in my friend?" repeated Vikerson curiously.

The stranger suddenly stood upright. He stepped forward a pace, the glare disappeared from his eyes, and he thrust out his hand. Vikerson took it mechanically. He could scarcely do anything else.

"Hallo!" said the newcomer mildly. "How are you, old man?"

"Well, I'm hanged!" ejaculated Vikerson. "What's the game? I shouldn't advise you to play any fool tricks, my man. All this rot is some dodge——"

He stopped speaking abruptly.

For, without warning, the stranger hunched his shoulders up and peered at Vikerson through mere slits of eyelids.

"No, you are all right!" he exclaimed in a hoarse, tense whisper, very different from his meek voice of a moment ago. "You are not my wife. I will find her, though; I will find her, the wretch! She shall suffer with her life! I am going to kill her—kill her—kill her!"

His voice rose to a scream as he reiterated the words, and Herbert Vikerson felt a curious shuddery sensation pass down his spine. Iron-nerved as he was, Vikerson blanched.

He realised now, in a moment, the startling truth.

The wild-looking man was stark mad!

To be shut up in a compartment of a railway-coach with a maniac is no pleasant situation, and Vikerson even felt nervous as the shock of the realisation came to him.

He watched his unpleasant companion closely, and felt round to his hip pocket. He carried a small revolver there, and he succeeded in grasping it without the madman interfering.

Vikerson suddenly jerked the weapon out.

"Now then!" he rapped out. "Stand back, you cur!"

He expected an immediate attack, but none came. The lunatic—as he certainly was—again assumed the mild expression, and looked at Vikerson with almost childish simplicity.

"I'm Fletcher," he said. "Tell me your name. I'm Fletcher. Yes, that's right, isn't it? I am Fletcher, aren't I? I—I forget sometimes, you know. Isn't it silly?"

Vikerson lowered his revolver, and took a deep breath.

"Phew!" he murmured. "You're a poser, my friend!"

"I'm Fletcher," repeated the madman.

"You mentioned that before," replied Vikerson, intending to humour his unwelcome companion. "Well, Fletcher, where did you spring from? How did you get into this carriage?"

The other made no reply, but looked dazed for a moment. Then, as if by magic, the insane look left his eyes, and he sat down and passed a hand over his brow. When he raised his head again he regarded Vikerson with astonishment.

"I didn't know you were here," he said.

"It's all right. Don't worry about me, my friend," exclaimed Vikerson, hardly knowing what to do. "How do you feel now? You are talking about your wife——"

The lunatic's lips parted in a snarl.

"My wife!" he echoed fiercely. "I am looking for her! I am going to kill her—do you hear? I am going to kill——"

"My dear chap, don't start again!" said Vikerson hastily.

"You don't understand," exclaimed the madman, turning upon his companion with a sudden look of despair and pain in his eyes. "My wife has treated me as though I were a dog, and I mean to kill her. I am going to search the whole country over, but I shall find her and end her miserable life! I don't mean to harm you——"

"That is a distinct comfort, at all events," interjected Vikerson, lighting a cigar. "Now, look here, my friend, just sit down and be calm. You don't intend to harm me, so I shall not molest you. We are just fellow-passengers, eh? Suppose we leave it at that?"

"I am going to find my wife!" said Fletcher dully.

Vikerson was quite calm and easy of mind now. He knew that his mad companion was not dangerous. Seemingly, Fletcher's animosity was centred entirely upon the unfortunate lady who happened to be his wife.

Vikerson had not had much experience of maniacs, but he knew, at least, that some demented unfortunates possess a grudge against everything in general, while others centre their attentions solely upon one particular individual.

This case, evidently, was of the latter variety. Fletcher, whoever he was, was filled with a mad determination to kill his wife. The poor fellow was possessed with that one mania. In all other respects, probably, he was comparatively sane. He did not attempt to molest Vikerson in any way, but sat on the opposite cushions alternately looking fierce and then childishly mild.

Presently, however, his mood changed, and he became almost rational. He accepted a cigar from Vikerson, and thanked the latter in quite ordinary terms. Then he sat smoking the weed comfortably and with evident enjoyment. Vikerson was rather amused now. It was pitiful, of course, to see such a hale and hearty young man in a condition of insanity. But Vikerson was a man with little pity in his soul, and other folks' troubles did not worry him in the least. He guessed that Fletcher had escaped from some lonely lunatic asylum close to the spot where the train had slowed down. Coming to the railway, the lunatic had boarded the train while it was nearly stationary. It was possible that keepers had been on his track. If so, the asylum authorities had certainly lost sight of their man by now.

Vikerson wondered if he should hand the poor fellow over to the authorities once Melby was reached. But he finally decided to do nothing of the kind. After all, there was no necessity to mix himself in an affair which was utterly no concern of his. Moreover, it might possibly lead to awkward delays.

"Where are we going?" asked the madman suddenly.

"Well, this train is bound for the midlands," replied Vikerson pleasantly. "Your destination, I suppose, is somewhat uncertain?"

"I—I don't know where I am going!" said the other dazedly. "But I

am looking for my wife! Do you hear? When I find her I shall kill her the very moment I set eyes——"

"Calm yourself, man—calm yourself," rapped out Vikerson sharply.

His tone had due effect, for Fletcher became calm at once, and lay back once more among the cushions puffing at his cigar.

"Seems sane enough in all respects save for that one particular mania," thought Vikerson musingly. "He is going to kill his wife, eh? Oh, well, it is no concern of mine. If the man likes to kill the first woman he sees it is not my trouble."

Quite suddenly a strange light appeared in Vikerson's eyes. He bent forward, and for fully five minutes remained tense, thinking deeply.

"It is possible!" he muttered to himself. "By Jove! The idea's daring, but there's something in it. I have a good mind to put it to the test, at all events. If the whole thing fails no harm will be done."

He looked up at Fletcher.

"The question is, how will the fellow take it?" ran on Vikerson's thoughts. "If he enters into the scheme I'll wager the idea will materialise. But is he sane enough to take the instructions? Will he be able to carry them out without exciting suspicion?"

Vikerson glanced at his watch, and saw that there was not much time to spare. Melby would be reached very shortly, and if this sudden idea was to be tested there would have to be no second's loss. Vikerson came to a sudden decision.

"After all," he told himself, "I shall not be implicated in any way whatever. The man's totally insane, and if he even should go to the length of pointing me out as the instigator of the plot it will be simple for me to deny the whole thing. And my word, of course, will weigh fifty times heavier than that of a lunatic. Oh, no, there's no risk—and it might succeed!"

It was, indeed, an ingenious idea which had found a place in Vikerson's cunning brain. It was an idea which most men would never have dreamed of adopting. But fate had placed this chance in the scoundrel's hands. Why should he not take advantage of it. No harm would be done if it failed, and then Vikerson's original plans could be carried out as previously arranged.

But if—and there was a decided "if"—this rapidly conceived plot bore fruit, Vikerson would have every cause to congratulate himself heartily.

He was travelling to Melby for the purpose of causing Lillian Noble's "accidental" death. It was a ticklish business. On no account must it be made apparent that the girl was murdered. She must die in such a manner that a verdict of accidental death will be brought in at the inquest.

And here, right before Vikerson, was a chance of having his work done by other hands—innocent hands. The jury's verdict at the inquest would not be "accidental," but "death by misadventure"—and that would suit the Combine's purpose even better.

Briefly, why should not Fletcher, the madman, kill Lillian Noble?

Why should not this man perform the delicate task which had brought Vikerson to Melby?

At all events, the Combine emissary determined to put his scheme into practice. As he had told himself, it all depends upon how Fletcher took the thing, and whether his disordered brain was capable of grasping the instructions he would receive.

"You are looking for your wife?" asked Vikerson suddenly. "No, no, don't get excited! Answer my question!"

"Yes, I am looking for my wife!" said the other fiercely. "I am going to kill her——"

"Exactly. Well, my friend, I happen to know where your wife is and precisely how you will be able to lay hands on her."

Fletcher sprang to his feet.

"You know where she is?" he repeated harshly. "Tell me! Do you hear—tell me!"

The man's frame quivered with intense emotion, and Vikerson was perfectly satisfied so far. Fletcher was quite sane enough, at least, to understand what was being said, and to engage in rational conversation. It was a good commencement.

"I'll tell you where your wife is if you will keep your temper in hand," Vikerson said smoothly. "Moreover, I'll give you a tip which might prove useful. You want to kill your wife, eh? I'll let you know how it can be done."

"Tell me—tell me!" said the other with terrible eagerness.

"Your wife is playing the principal feminine part in a play called the 'Snares of London,' at the Theatre Royal, Melby," continued Vikerson calmly. "Do you understand me? Can you grasp the meaning of what I say?"

Fletcher nodded rapidly.

"Of course—of course!" he panted. "Do you think I am mad? Of course I understand what you say. My wife is in Melby acting in some play—'Snares of London.' So that is where she ran off to! By heavens, I never suspected that she would join the stage. I'll go to Melby and——"

"Not so fast, my friend," interjected Vikerson, intensely pleased with the way things were going. "I am going to give you careful instructions, which you must memorise thoroughly. Your wife will make her first appearance on the stage attired in rags and tatters. Have you grasped that? The part she is playing in the drama makes it necessary for her to appear dressed as a poor slum girl, and when she first comes upon the stage she is dressed in rags."

"I understand—I understand," exclaimed the madman eagerly. "My wife will come upon the stage dressed in rags! Well—well."

Vikerson did not reply for a moment. He was meeting with far greater success than he had dared to hope for. Insane as Fletcher was on that point, he was quite capable of comprehending all that was said to him. There was nothing remarkable or unusual in this. Many inmates of lunatic asylums are perfectly sane except for one certain mania which has made it necessary for them to be placed under observation.

"You have no money, of course," went on Vikerson.

"Money? No—I—I don't think I have."

"Well, I am going to give you some," went on the scoundrel. "When we arrive in Melby in about ten minutes' time, you will at once part company with me, and when the Theatre Royal opens, you will purchase a seat in one of the front orchestra stalls. And I am going to give you my revolver—fully loaded—which you will use at the agreed time. You must make no mistake, Fletcher; you must carry out my order to the letter."

"I will do so!" said the madman tensely. "At last the day has come—the day I have been longing for! The treacherous hussy shall pay for her sins!"

Vikerson had fully debated in his own mind the wisdom of handing the madman his revolver. It was a new weapon, and if traced—as it probably might be—would lead the police nowhere. Vikerson had taken good care to have the revolver purchased by indirect means.

"I know what you mean," said Fletcher huskily. "I see it all. You are

a good friend to me—a splendid friend. I will sit in the stalls until my wife appears and then——”

Vikerson nodded sharply.

“Precisely,” he agreed. “But, remember, this is your affair solely, Fletcher. You will sit in your stall until your wife appears upon the stage. I have seen that particular play, and I know the part your wife is playing. She will appear from a central door, possibly, and will be directly in front of you. The very instant you see the girl appear in tattered garments you must rise in your seat and fire at her!”

“It is simple—wonderfully simple!” said the madman, chuckling with childish glee. “I may not be able to recognise her in her stage disguise, but she shall die—she shall die at once!”

“By James! I wonder if it will come off?” muttered Vikerson acutely.

He fully believed that the scheme would materialise. Fletcher had fallen in with the idea sanely and was obviously tremendously impressed. There was no fear that he would forget his instructions. But, rational though he appeared, he was undoubtedly mad.

And a madman does not stoop to inquire into details. Fletcher did not want to know how Vikerson knew of these things? He took it all for granted, and was now possessed with but one idea. That idea was to go to the Theatre Royal and kill his supposed wife.

For his part, Vikerson was rapidly becoming convinced that his plot would succeed. The madman would not wait for recognition. The very instant he saw the tattered figure of Lillian Noble he would rise in his seat and blaze away wildly. And one of his shots, at least, would accomplish the fatal work.

It was an extraordinary method of accomplishing murder. But the advantages were enormous. Fletcher, of course, would be seized at once, and in a very short time his identity would be established. Vikerson's scheme would not even harm the unfortunate madman; for Fletcher could not be blamed for his insane actions.

It was known at the asylum—supposing he had broken from an asylum—that his one obsession was to kill his wife. Therefore it would be regarded as a lamentable incident, and Lillian Noble would be killed without the slightest suspicion of foul play. The Combine's object would be achieved in the most perfect manner possible.

Herbert Vikerson was elated.

He was convinced that the plot would come to a successful issue. In all probability the unfortunate Fletcher was not married at all; but he was mad enough, and it was certain that he would do his utmost to carry out the terrible instructions he had received.

The evening performance of the “Snares of London” at the Theatre Royal, Melby, promised to be not only exciting, but tragic in the extreme.

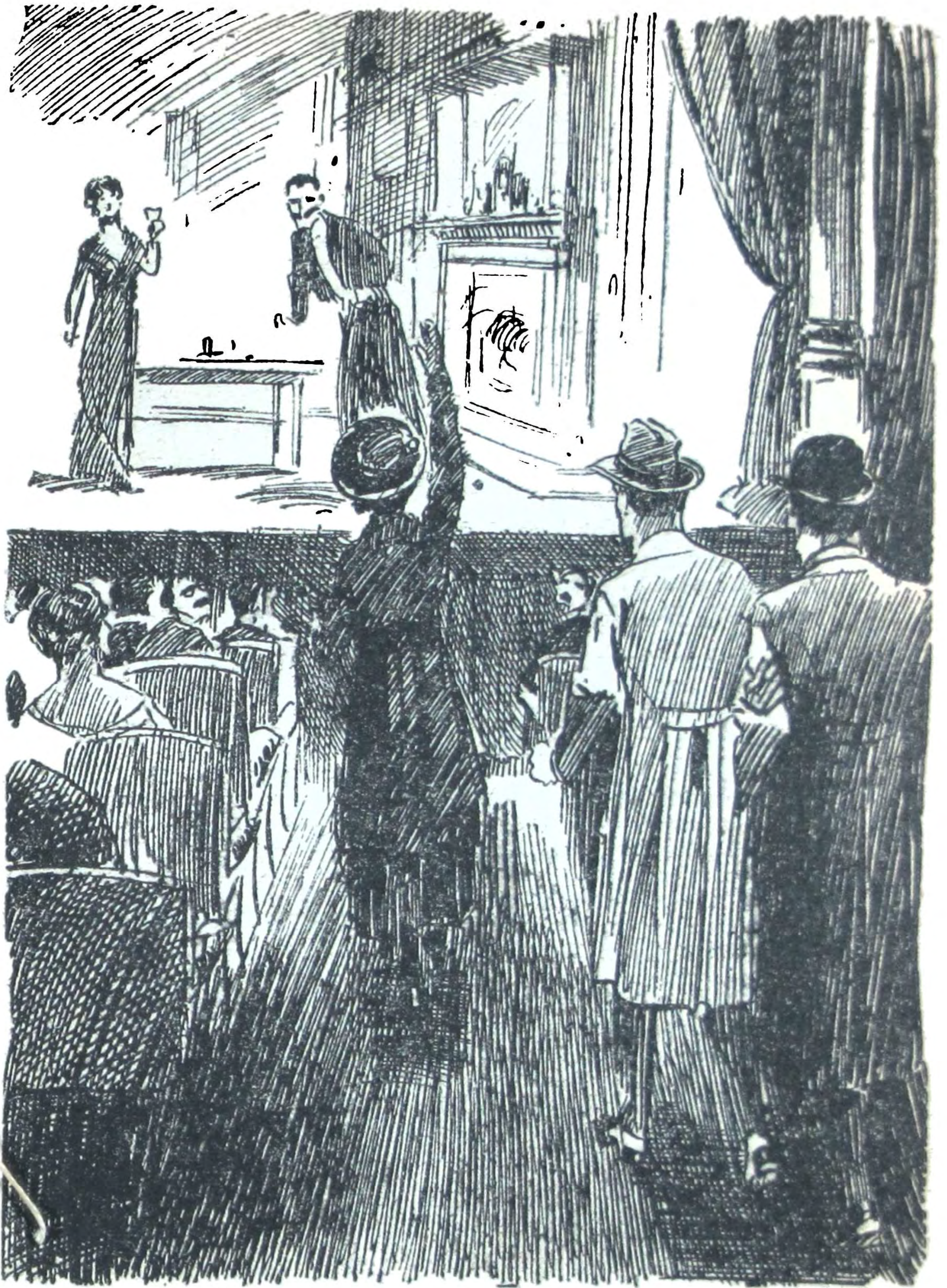
CHAPTER IV.

Vikerson's Anxiety—What Eileen Saw—A Happy Result.

THE Theatre Royal, Melby, was filling.

Whether it would fill completely was a matter which deeply concerned Mr. Dane, the manager of the “show,” and Mr. McKinnon, the proprietor of the theatre itself.

Judging from appearances at 7.30—fifteen minutes before the play commenced—the house wouldn't be so bad. The “Snares of London” was

**JUST IN TIME!**

"Don't drink!" shouted Eileen in alarm.
Startled at this dramatic interruption, Lillian Noble placed the glass down. — (See p. 38.)

doing pretty decent business, on the whole, and Mr. Dane was consequently well pleased.

Dingy outside, the Theatre Royal was dingy within. But it was a semi-modern play-house, and Mr. McKinnon was a go-ahead man. Although the theatre was comparatively small, he did everything in style. The electric lights were well arranged in the auditorium, and served to soften the dinginess of the decorations.

Occasionally first-rate companies would come to Melby, but as a rule the programme consisted of a third-class drama, such as the present play. Nevertheless, the richer class of people in Melby patronised the dress-circle and stalls, and to-night the house was comfortably filled.

Herbert Vikerson was in his seat in good time; for he intended witnessing the enactment of the real life drama he had planned in the train from London. And Vikerson was anxious.

Fletcher, the madman, had not yet appeared.

"Perhaps the fool won't turn up," thought Vikerson briefly. "In all probability he has been collared by the police. Oh, well, I'm not going to worry. I shall come to no harm, in any case."

Nevertheless, he did worry.

And he would have worried a good deal more if he had looked up at the "swell" box on the right-hand side of the auditorium. For in that box three people were seated, three people whom Vikerson well knew. They were Nelson Lee, Nipper, and Eileen Dare, and they were going to witness the performance.

But Vikerson was too busy to look up at the box. His eyes were kept upon the stalls entrance, watching for the arrival of his dupe. He began to fear that the scheme would fall to the ground.

The orchestra—mainly composed of ladies, and numbering eight all told—had struck up a lively air, and it was rendered quite creditably. Indeed, the Theatre Royal orchestra was a credit to the house.

Smoking was allowed, and Vikerson puffed at a cigar jerkily. Much depended upon Fletcher's arrival or non-arrival. If the lunatic accomplished the dread work, then Vikerson would have earned his money—a fortune in itself—absurdly easily.

Suddenly Vikerson's eyes narrowed, and he smiled with relief.

The tall, well-knit figure of the young man who had called himself Fletcher appeared in the doorway.

"Splendid!" muttered Vikerson.

He watched his dupe interestedly. The madman certainly appeared sane enough. Yet, to one who knew, his actions were somewhat eccentric. He passed along to his seat, in the front row, and his eyes gleamed with a wild light. Vikerson, who was sitting five rows back, could see this quite easily.

The Combine's emissary realised, however, that a scene might follow if Fletcher caught sight of him. So Vikerson lifted his programme and kept his face concealed from the other's view.

Fletcher took his seat, but did not settle down. His gaze roved backwards and forwards, and those who sat near him could not help noticing his strange appearance and actions. Now and again he thrust his hand in his coat pocket, and fingered something which lay within.

"The revolver!" thought Vikerson. "Is the fool going to give the game away before the time? Hang it! I mustn't grumble, though; he's a loony, and it's all a matter of chance——"

The lights suddenly went out, and Vikerson's anxiety was lessened. The play was just about to start, and Lillian would make her appearance

within seven minutes! Surely Fletcher would be able to control his madness for that short space of time?

Up in the box Nelson Lee and Nipper and Eileen Dare watched the stage with a fair amount of interest. They knew, of course, that the show was comparatively poor, but for Lillian's sake they were prepared to "stick it through," as Nipper eloquently remarked.

And they soon found that the company was quite a good one, and the play itself well worth seeing. There are melodramas and melodramas, and this was one of the better sort.

"Wonder how Miss Noble will act?" murmured Nipper.

"You won't have very long to wait, young 'un," whispered Lee. "But don't talk. This opening scene is rather good."

Within five minutes the audience had settled down quietly, and all were interested in the play. There was one man, however, who did not take any notice whatever of what was being said. That man was Herbert Vikerson.

He was watching Fletcher.

The latter sat in his stall, in the front row, obviously labouring under intense excitement. Within ten minutes, indeed, it was certain he would attract attention, and then he would probably be turned out.

But Lillian would make her appearance almost at once!

Vikerson was glad of this; the whole success of the plot depended upon the girl's quick entry. Fletcher, insane as he was, could not keep himself under control. Now and again he muttered audibly, and those who sat near him were already giving him suspicious glances.

Even Nelson Lee, up in the box, had observed the young man's curious behaviour, but the great detective thought nothing of it. He just glanced down into the stalls once or twice, but then centred his attention upon the stage.

"Hallo! Here's Miss Lillian!" murmured Nipper.

The "heroine" of the drama had appeared. She certainly did not look much of a heroine at the present moment. She was dressed in shabby rags, and a torn shawl was thrown across her shoulders.

As Herbert Vikerson had said, she made her entrance by a central door, and stood upon the stage, swaying slightly. In the play she was supposed to be sick and faint from want of food.

"My wife—my wife!" screamed a wild, terrible voice.

Lee and Eileen and Nipper turned their heads wonderingly; the voice had come from the stalls, and a man was standing up in the front row, frantically tearing at something which had become stuck in his pocket.

The whole audience was astonished; many people rose to their feet. And the next second something happened which nearly caused a panic. With a cry of triumph Fletcher freed the object from his pocket and flourished it in the air. It was a revolver!

"At last—at last!" screamed the madman. "You shall pay for your sins!"

Before anybody could stay his hand—before the attendants could reach him—he had levelled the deadly weapon.

Crack, crack, crack!

Three reports rang out in quick succession, followed by shrieks from all parts of the auditorium.

Lillian Noble staggered forward, her eyes opened wide with amazement and alarm. She knew well enough that the maniac was firing his weapon at her. Two bullets had whizzed past her, and the third had flown very wide.

"Hold him!" roared a dozen voices.

But Fletcher, mad and excited, was standing upon his seat now, and again he fired. Crack, crack! The revolver spat flame twice in quick succession. Lillian Noble swayed, and fell to the stage in a limp heap and lay dreadfully still.

The shrieks of the women in the audience were now terrible, and many fainted. Commotion reigned supreme for a moment, and panic seemed likely to ensue. The curtain came down with a rush, and all the lights in the theatre went up.

Nelson Lee and Nipper and Eileen Dare suddenly appeared in the stalls. They had acted without a second's loss of time. At the very first shot Lee and Eileen had made for the door of the box. They knew that a staircase just outside led down to the lower floor.

It was natural that they should take a hand in the affair. They would have done so even if Lillian Noble had been a complete stranger to them.

Nelson Lee reached Fletcher at the same time as two attendants, and the madman was grasped roughly. Lee wrenched the revolver from his grip, and was prepared to enter into a struggle.

But, now that it was all over, Fletcher was limp and dazed. He stared at Lee with child-like wonderment. Eileen Dare was beside the detective, and she saw Fletcher's eyes suddenly take on a look of intelligence. He was gazing straight past Eileen to a point further back in the stalls.

"You told me to do it!" muttered Fletcher dully.

Eileen only just caught the words, but they were very significant. Turning swiftly, she saw a man rising in his seat as if to make for the exit. He himself did not see the girl, and she suddenly caught her breath in very sharply.

"Herbert Vikerson!" she murmured in amazement.

A member of the Combine was in the theatre, and the madman had said that Vikerson told him to do it! It was indeed a startling surprise for Eileen, for it looked as though there was something behind this affair which was yet unfathomed.

Vikerson himself had seen neither Eileen Dare nor Nelson Lee—and this was not surprising. Or, at least, he had not noticed them. The scoundrel's sole attention had been centred upon Fletcher, and now that the dread work had been accomplished Vikerson thought it wise to leave the theatre. He would not be conspicuous in acting thus, for commotion was general, and many other people were leaving.

Lillian Noble had been shot!

That was the one thought which filled Vikerson's evil mind. He left the theatre with his eyes gleaming with triumph. He did not know that Fletcher had pointed him out, and that Eileen Dare had seen him; and if Vikerson had remained in the theatre he would have received a still further shock.

The uproar, which had promised to develop into a panic, subsided as it was seen that the maniac was seized. It was obvious to Nelson Lee—and to nearly everybody—that Fletcher was insane. There was no mistaking the wild look in his eyes.

But Fletcher was completely finished.

Immediately after he had seen Vikerson an expression of absolute horror entered his eyes. He seemed to realise, in that second, what he had done. And with a low cry he slipped to the floor in a dead swoon.

"Hold him up!" ordered Lee sharply, addressing the attendants. "Now, out with him as quickly as possible!"

The madman was removed and placed in the manager's office upon a soft couch. He was now deathly pale and quite unconscious. Mr. McKinnon

came rushing in from behind, and Lee at once saw that his expression was one of relief.

"Thank Heaven!" he exclaimed hoarsely to Lee. "Miss Heathcote is not injured. I thought she had been killed!"

"But she fell——"

"A faint—nothing more," replied the proprietor quickly. "I'm not surprised, either. It was enough to make the poor girl unfit for any more work. But she's recovering now, and is going on with her part as soon as possible!"

"That is very brave of her," said Lee approvingly. "I am intensely pleased to learn that none of the madman's shots took effect. I had feared the worst."

Lee left the manager's office at once, and went to Eileen Dare and Nipper who were outside in the vestibule. While he was telling them the good news an inspector of police and two constables arrived. Eileen was as pleased as Lee when she heard the welcome information.

It was, in all truth, excellent news.

Lillian Noble's escape had been a narrow one, and Herbert Vikerson was not to blame for the failure of his dastardly plot. The lunatic had carried out his instructions to the very letter, and only chance was responsible for the happy failure.

Fletcher had fired wildly and at random. Vikerson had almost reckoned on this, but the villain had assured himself that one or two of the shots at least would take effect. But all had flown wide. Two of the shots, Lillian afterwards declared, passed within three inches of her head; but the others, as was obvious by an examination of the scenery, had gone yards wide.

The audience had naturally concluded that the girl had been hit, for she had fallen, and then the curtain had descended. But Mr. McKinnon went before the curtain as soon as possible and assured the people that "Miss Heathcote" was quite uninjured, and would resume her part after a short rest. The madman who had fired the shots was now safely in the hands of the police.

There was great applause as the manager made this statement, and still greater applause a little later when Lillian again resumed her part. Upon the whole, Mr. McKinnon was rather pleased with the incident. He was quite certain that he would do good business during the remainder of the week.

He had told the audience that the madman's cry to the effect that the girl was his wife was, of course, the ravings of an insane mind. "Miss Heathcote" was unmarried, and had never before set eyes upon the stranger.

Nelson Lee and Eileen were quite relieved when they saw that Lillian was going through her part bravely and calmly, and she could act extremely well. Given better opportunities, she would have been able to acquit herself even more meritoriously.

During the interval Lee made inquiries, and found that Fletcher had been conveyed to the hospital, for it was obviously useless to take him to the police-station. And the detective learned the madman's real identity.

He was, it seemed, a young officer named Lieutenant Roland Fletcher. Thus, Fletcher had given Vikerson his real name. The young man had become insane two months previously owing to severe shell shock on the Somme front. He had not been bodily injured, but his mind had become completely deranged. It was a very pitiful story. Later on Lee was allowed to know more details. Fletcher, it seems, had been talking with a brother-officer just before the shell burst. The pair had been discussing the family

troubles of the second officer. His wife had left his home and gone away, and the poor fellow had been dreadfully upset. He had been pouring his woes into Fletcher's ears, and the very second before the shell exploded had passionately declared that when he got leave he would find his wife and kill her.

It was, perhaps, an idle threat, but it was the last word he was ever destined to utter, for the exploding shell killed him on the spot, and Lieutenant Fletcher was rendered insensible. When he recovered, his mind was unhinged owing to shock, and he was obsessed by the curious mania that his wife was untrue to him, and that he had sworn to kill her.

Yet Lieutenant Fletcher was a single man; but the doctors who had investigated his case had declared that there was nothing singular in the nature of his delusion.

Nelson Lee was informed that Fletcher had been recognised by the police almost at once, for that very afternoon he had broken away from a private nursing home and had completely eluded his pursuers.

And, as it turned out, an extremely happy result was to follow.

Herbert Vikerson's vile scheme was to bear fruit, after all.

But the result of the plot was very different to that which Vikerson had hoped for. Lillian Noble was still alive, and all the work would have to be recommenced. And Lieutenant Roland Fletcher recovered his normal senses.

The shock of the terrible affair had had a curious effect. In the hospital Fletcher recovered consciousness at about nine-thirty the same evening—an hour and a half after the incident. And he awoke to reason and sanity. His madness had left him and he was once more his own self.

CHAPTER V.

Vague Suspicions—A Mystery Somewhere—Lee is Worried.

EILEEN DARE was not in the least interested in the "Snare of London," when the play recommenced. She sat in the box with Lee and Nipper, very thoughtful, and when the interval came, and Lee went out to make inquiries, she sat quite still, and stared before her unseeingly.

Nipper attempted to converse, but he soon found that Eileen was too preoccupied; and when Lee came back, and brought the news that the madman had been Lieutenant Roland Fletcher, Eileen was still abstracted.

The play was just about to recommence, but Eileen motioned to her companions to draw their chairs back into the rear portion of the box.

The girl detective had said nothing, so far, about the incident she had witnessed at the time of the excitement. Neither Nelson Lee nor Nipper had seen Herbert Vikerson, and they wondered what Eileen could have to say.

"What is your opinion of this affair, Mr. Lee?" asked the girl.

"Merely a regrettable incident," replied Nelson Lee. "The lunatic was not to blame in the least. A madman is not responsible for his actions, and the police will be unable to do anything. The responsibility rests upon those who had charge of the poor fellow."

"Do you think he tried to kill Miss Noble?"

"In his madness? Yes. But it was merely chance which led him to fire at the girl," replied Lee. "He might have acted just the same with any one of the other actresses, or even with a member of the audience. It is wonderfully lucky that all his shots missed."

"Rather!" commented Nipper.

"I believe the man deliberately fired at Miss Noble, and I believe he fully intended to kill her," said Eileen Dare quietly. "I was a witness of something, Mr. Lee, which you completely missed. The affair was not so simple as you seem to imagine."

The detective looked at Eileen keenly.

"Tell me," he said simply.

"Just when Fletcher was captured he suddenly seemed to lose his mad expression," said Eileen. "He stared straight at a certain member of the audience, and muttered, almost in a whisper: 'You told me to do it!' Was that not strange?"

"I think not. It was merely another evidence of his deranged——"

"But I know the man who was pointed out. I know him to be a black-hearted scoundrel," interrupted Eileen. "Mr. Lee, the man was a member of the Combine! He was Herbert Vikerson!"

Nelson Lee whispered softly.

"Dear me! This alters matters considerably," he said. "I hardly know what to think now."

"Vikerson!" repeated Nipper. "Great Scott! And he told the madman to kill Miss Noble! What the dickens can it mean? Perhaps the fellow wasn't mad at all; perhaps that was just a fake——"

"Oh, no. Fletcher was mad right enough," interrupted Lee.

At this hour the detective did not know that Fletcher had recovered his wits; he would learn that later on. And Eileen's revelation was both surprising and startling.

What had Herbert Vikerson to do with the matter?

"What you have told me seems to imply that Vikerson instigated black murder," said Lee quietly. "But I cannot piece the facts together, Miss Eileen. Why should Vikerson want Lillian Noble to die? So far as I know, the two are complete and utter strangers."

"Besides," put in Nipper, "the rotter couldn't have told a madman to do any certain thing."

"That is a question for discussion and inquiry," replied Lee. "Fletcher, it seems, was insane in only one respect. Therefore it is probable that he was quite capable of taking instructions. Although mad, he carried out those instructions to the letter."

"But he only escaped, you told us," objected Nipper.

"H'm! That does not leave much time for plans and arrangements. I must admit," went on Lee. "But you are quite sure of this, Miss Eileen? I know you are thoroughly reliable in every way, but there is just a slim chance that you made a mistake. Men look very much alike——"

"The man was Herbert Vikerson—I will swear to it," interrupted Eileen quietly. "I have been thinking it all out, Mr. Lee. Perhaps Vikerson was on his way to Melby in the train, and Fletcher might have entered the same compartment. Surely that is a likely theory? The nursing home he escaped from is many miles from here, and he must have travelled by train to get here in the short time. Well, I have reasoned it out that Vikerson took advantage of the poor fellow's mania, and gave him orders accordingly. But that theory, of course, assumes that Vikerson had previously planned to kill Lillian Noble."

Lee nodded approvingly.

"That is very sound," he exclaimed. "Your line of reasoning is quite possible, and, indeed, probable. Certainly, the affair is not so simple as we first imagined. If Herbert Vikerson is mixed up in it, we can safely assume that some particularly sinister work is being engineered."

Eileen's theory was certainly ingenious, for it came remarkably near the

truth. The only stumbling-block was the total absence of motive. Why did Vikerson want Lillian Noble to die?

Nelson Lee, like Eileen, certainly lost all interest in the play. This fresh matter was breath to his nostrils. There was a mystery somewhere—a mystery which promised to be deep and intricate.

And the famous detective resolved to remain in Melby until the affair was quite cleared up. At first sight he had concluded that Fletcher's action was merely that of a maniac, and that no outside person had any hand in it whatever.

"We will take it for granted that Vikerson wants Miss Noble to die," said Lee thoughtfully. "Well, the plan of causing her death through the medium of a madman's wild actions is strikingly ingenious. Do you not think so?"

"I do," replied Eileen, "for if everything had been successful Lillian would have been killed and the coroner's inquest would have been satisfied that death had been due to misadventure. Murder would never have been suspected. Who would have believed that Vikerson had instilled into the madman's brain the idea which led to the crime? Lillian would have been killed and no suspicions of any sort would have arisen."

"We will certainly look into this business very thoroughly," declared Lee grimly. "I am curious and somewhat anxious. As soon as the performance is over we must question Miss Noble very closely. Once we can discover a motive everything will be clear."

Nelson Lee, it should be noted, was unaware of the fact that Sir Warwick Hathaway had bequeathed to his niece the whole of his fortune. If Lee had known that fact there would not have been such a complete absence of motive. At least, many suspicions would have arisen. But, as matters stood, there was a decided mystery.

It was during the next interval that Lee learned of Fletcher's recovery at the hospital, and he and Eileen and Nipper at once left the theatre and hastened to the hospital. They found a doctor and a nurse from the Home had arrived to take charge of their patient.

And within a very short time Lee and Eileen were allowed to visit Fletcher in one of the smaller wards. He had recovered completely from his swoon, and was in his normal senses. The doctor, with great satisfaction, declared that within a month the lieutenant would be hale and hearty.

The doctor introduced Nelson Lee and Eileen Dare, and Fletcher was pleased to meet them. They briefly explained that they had been in the theatre at the time of the exciting affair, and that they had witnessed all. The lieutenant was looking pale and just a little dazed, but he was obviously in possession of his wits.

"I thank Heaven for causing my aim to be wild, Mr. Lee," said Fletcher fervently. "I was not responsible for my actions, I know. But I should have been appalled if I had even injured the poor girl. Why I fired at her is a mystery to me; I have never seen her before in my life."

"We have come to you for a very definite reason," said Lee quietly. "We know, of course, that you are quite innocent. But a certain man is in Melby who is known to be a thorough scoundrel. We think, perhaps, that he may have influenced you while you were—well, demented."

Lieutenant Fletcher looked thoughtful.

"I have been trying to think," he murmured. "I have been trying to bring back all that passed. But it seems like a vague dream—a nightmare which I cannot call to mind. How did I get to Melby? Where did I get that infernal revolver from? It must have been given to me. And to think that I should have attempted to kill a poor——"

Fletcher stopped, and frowned.

"Dimly, in the back of my mind, I seem to remember that I was told to kill the girl," he went on. "I have a vague notion that a man—a stranger to me—bade me go to the theatre— Oh, but it's all hazy. Perhaps it is only imagination. Yet I must have got the revolver somewhere."

Eileen gave Lee a keen glance.

"I don't think it is imagination, Mr. Fletcher," she said quietly. "That 'vague notion' of yours is literal fact. You fired at Miss Heathcote at the instigation of another man—a man who was thoroughly in possession of his senses."

Fletcher could not tell his visitors much more. But they were satisfied. They were positive that Herbert Vikerson had persuaded Fletcher to commit the crime. If successful, the lieutenant would not have been blamed. The incident would have been regarded as a regrettable affair in which nobody was particularly at fault.

And, later, Lillian Noble was questioned by Eileen Dare. The girl was unable to supply the least item of knowledge. She had never heard of Vikerson, and was quite positive that nobody on earth would benefit in any way if she died.

Nelson Lee was interested, but he could not act. Although he was sure of Vikerson's guilt, there was not an atom of concrete proof. There was a mystery which at present could not be fathomed.

CHAPTER VI.

Eileen on the Track—A Fresh Plot—A Terrible Fall.

DURING the greater part of the next day Herbert Vikerson was in a state of fury and anxiety.

The Combine's emissary had soon learned that his precious plot had completely failed; that Fletcher's five shots had all missed their mark. Vikerson, who had left the theatre congratulating himself that his vile work was accomplished, realised that the situation was in no way improved.

On the contrary, it seemed, for a time, as though Vikerson himself was in danger. He did not know that Eileen Dare and Nelson Lee were in Melby. It was a comparatively small town, but quite large enough for Lee and the girl detective to move about freely without coming face to face with Herbert Vikerson.

Sooner or later, perhaps, he would know that they were there—and then his state of mind would certainly not be improved. When Vikerson learned that Fletcher had recovered his full senses and reason, the scoundrel was greatly upset. A dreadful fear possessed him that Lieutenant Fletcher would remember all that had passed in the train.

But by the evening of the day following Vikerson was satisfied that no unfortunate facts had been revealed. It had been a near thing, but he was safe. Purely by mischance the plot had failed.

Vikerson, however, had no intention of giving up the game.

It was absolutely essential that Lillian Noble should die. She must be killed before she concluded her engagement at Melby. For, soon after that, Sir Warwick Hathaway's will would be read, and she would know all.

And it would then be known to all and sundry, of course, that Sir Jerrold Hathaway had nothing whatever except Hathaway Towers. If the girl were murdered after the will had been read, suspicion would probably fall upon Sir Jerrold—and that was exactly what had to be avoided. Not a breath of

suspicion must fall upon the new baronet. And the only way of avoiding that was to kill the girl before the reading of the will.

To the world at large Sir Jerrold was now totally unaware of the fact that he was disinherited; he had obtained that information secretly and by villainy. Even if an element of foul play was discovered in the killing of Lillian Noble, Sir Jerrold would not be implicated, because there would be no motive. Not being aware of the dispositions of the will he would have no reason for wishing to get rid of his cousin.

Therefore, Vikerson knew that he would have to make a special effort.

He had wired to Sir Jerrold Hathaway the previous evening. Leaving the theatre immediately after the death of Lillian—as Vikerson had supposed—he had immediately telegraphed to Sir Jerrold, telling the baronet to come to Melby to meet him, thinking that the “job” was done.

But later, of course, Vikerson had discovered that he had been premature. And now, this evening, he was to meet Sir Jerrold at the station, where he would arrive from London by the evening train—the same train, in fact, that Vikerson had travelled by the previous evening. He would have unwelcome news to tell the baronet, but already a fresh scheme was being formulated in Vikerson’s evil brain.

He also realised, now, that it had been rather rash and impulsive of him to bring Sir Jerrold to Melby.

However, no harm had been done, and it would, perhaps, be just as well to discuss the projected plan with the baronet. Vikerson set out from his hotel, morose and discontented. He felt that he had been badly treated; that luck was against him.

It was nearly dark, and the streets of Melby were slushy and a slight drizzle had been falling an hour before. All the street lamps were darkened, and walking was by no means pleasant. It so happened that Vikerson’s journey to the station was to receive unwelcome attention from a still more unwelcome quarter.

Eileen Dare and Nipper were walking along the main street to the town, on their way to Lillian Noble’s apartments. Nelson Lee was at his hotel. The detective had seen Lieutenant Fletcher again that day, and he had been trying to get on the track of the mystery which he knew surrounded Lillian. But Lee’s inquiries had been fruitless. He could not fathom why Herbert Vikerson should be in the least interested in the girl. Lee was well aware that Vikerson was staying at a fairly large hotel; the rogue had made no secret of his movements, for he fully believed in doing everything open. No suspicions of any sort would be centred against him.

Eileen Dare, especially, was convinced that Vikerson’s mission in Melby was one which would not bear the light of day. For some reason he wished Lillian to die. At all events, it was an undoubted fact that he had incited Fletcher to commit the crime.

And, that being so, it was only a natural train of thought to suppose that Vikerson would not relinquish his task. He would, probably, set about his work in a different manner; having failed once he would make another attempt. And the fact that Vikerson remained in Melby was rather significant in itself.

Nelson Lee had taken good care to keep from Vikerson the knowledge that he and Eileen were in the town. And now, so it happened, Eileen and Nipper caught sight of Vikerson coming across the road towards them, his head bent down in deep thought.

Eileen walked quickly, so that when Vikerson reached the pavement he did not observe the pair who had just passed the spot. Very quickly, however, Eileen gripped Nipper’s arm.

"That was Vikerson!" she murmured softly. "I believe he is on the way to the station, Nipper. Perhaps it would be as well to follow him and ascertain whether he is leaving for London. If so, we shall know that it is useless our remaining in Melby. Perhaps he has learned that we are here and given up the game."

"Right-ho, miss!" said Nipper briskly. "I'll follow the rotter——"

"No, Nipper. You go on to Miss Noble's room and tell her that I will be there before long," interrupted Eileen. "I'll shadow Vikerson myself. You don't mind, do you?"

Nipper suppressed a grunt.

"Not—not at all, miss!" he exclaimed disappointedly. "That's all right. You'd better buzz off quickly or you'll miss him."

The pair parted, and Eileen, after walking rapidly for some little time, caught sight of Vikerson's form in the dimness ahead. She, herself, quickly pulled down a veil, quite a light affair and in no way conspicuous, for the evening was chilly. In daylight her features were distinctly visible through the veil, but at night it served as an excellent disguise—a disguise, moreover, which caused no comment.

Eileen was always ready for an emergency.

She followed Vikerson into the station, and when she was in the booking office she assumed a slight limp—slight, but quite apparent. She had no wish to give herself away to her enemy. And, as chance willed it, her precautions were to have excellent results.

Eileen soon discovered that her surmise as to Vikerson's movements was wrong. The Combine's emissary was not taking train for London himself. And the fact that an express was just about due told the girl detective that Vikerson's object in going to the station was to meet somebody.

The train steamed in to time, and Eileen, watching, saw Vikerson meet Sir Jerrold Hathaway. The two men shook hands and stood for some little time upon the platform chatting. Eileen did not know the identity of the new arrival, and she decided to seize the opportunity to gain a closer view of the man. He and Vikerson were standing right beneath one of the platform lights, and the newcomer had his back towards the girl.

Walking quietly, and still with the assumed limp, Eileen passed up the platform as though searching for somebody. And as she walked past the two men she heard a few words which Vikerson uttered. They were by no means private, and so Vikerson took no pains to lower his voice.

"Yes, we'll have a chat in the waiting-room," he exclaimed. "There's a big lounge there in a private corner, and we shall be quite alone. We can talk——"

Eileen heard no more, and when she turned she saw that the two men were walking slowly down the platform towards the booking-office. And the girl suddenly conceived a daring idea. She fully believed that Vikerson and the stranger were about to discuss something which was directly connected with the almost tragic affair of the theatre. And it was quite permissible to adopt any subterfuge in order to obtain positive information. Once the men reached the waiting-room Eileen would be helpless, there would be no manner in which she could overhear the suggested private conversation.

But Eileen's move was a smart one.

She arrived in the waiting-room first. She had already noticed the lounge referred to by Vikerson, and a wave of hope had passed over her as she thought of it. A moment later that hope was realised. For the lounge itself was set crosswise across the corner, thus leaving a perceptible space behind.

One swift glance round the waiting-room told Eileen that the apartment was empty. There was nothing whatever surprising in this, although the room was a public one. The train had just left, and those people who had been waiting for it had left also. Accordingly the room was empty.

There was no time for hesitation. Eileen always made up her mind rapidly, and now she skipped across the room with silent footsteps, and took a clean, neat leap over the lounge into the space behind. Crouching down, she found that she was able to sit there in perfect ease, and yet be totally hidden. It was a very astute ruse on her part. She was in the room before the enemy took their seats!

The wisdom of her action was very soon apparent. Vikerson and Sir Jerrold Hathaway entered the room, and after a swift glance round, settled themselves comfortably upon the lounge. A warm fire glowed in the grate, and the apartment was quite cosy. They little imagined that Eileen Dare was immediately behind them!

"You're right, Vikerson," remarked Sir Jerrold. "You couldn't have found a better spot than this for a private pow-wow. I thought it was a foolish notion when you suggested it, but I now see that you were right."

"Have a cigar, Sir Jerrold," said Vikerson. "Hotels are all very well, but they are filled with prying servants and boot boys. Here in this public room we shall be far more private than in apartments to ourselves in my hotel. Besides, it may be as well for you not to show yourself in the town. There's a train back to London, I believe, in about an hour's time. And now for the news. When I wired you I thought the job was done. But a hitch occurred, and spoilt everything."

Sir Jerrold grunted.

"Confound it, Vikerson, why did you drag me down here? I thought everything was all right. Well, go on. Remember the arrangement which was made between myself and Bradford. You'll scoop in a fair amount, you know, for this affair, if you handle it properly."

Eileen set her lips. The mention of Bradford's name was fairly conclusive proof that mischief was afoot.

"I know that well enough," replied Vikerson. "And I am certainly going to make a bold bid for the high stake. But the girl must be got rid of this week. She must be dead by the time the will is read. For you, at the present moment, know nothing of its contents. At least, so the world thinks."

"But what was the hitch you referred to?"

"I'll tell you briefly," Vikerson replied. "On my way down here last night I encountered a madman in the train. Rather startling, eh? Well, I'll admit I was a bit taken aback. But I soon found that the fellow's madness might prove useful to me."

And Vikerson, in as few words as possible, explained how he had arranged for the murder of Lillian Noble with Fletcher. Eileen listened with intense interest. She was becoming aware of the whole plot.

And, as the talk proceeded, she learned that Vikerson's companion was Sir Jerrold Hathaway. That was quite sufficient for her to build up the whole scheme from start to finish. Sir Jerrold Hathaway, of course, was Lillian's cousin, and it was obvious that the girl was to be murdered for the sake of gold. The old, old story, but in a new guise. Eileen Dare was horror-stricken at the callousness of the rogues who were talking so complacently and glibly of murder.

"Well, it seems that you have taken no step forward, Vikerson," said

A MYSTERY OF THE FOOTLIGHTS

Sir Jerrold rather testily, after a while. "In fact, the affair of last night might arouse suspicion."

"Not in the least," Vikerson assured him. "And I have already got a fresh scheme in mind, Sir Jerrold. As you are here, perhaps it would be as well to outline it. I mean to act to-night, and I shall just have time if I leave within fifteen minutes. The only thing I have to do is to find my way into the dressing-room of a man named Slade, at the theatre."

"Don't talk in riddles!" growled the other. "And that's a ticklish job. You'll be seen either leaving or entering——"

"That's quite a minor detail," interjected Vikerson. "It is the main plan which matters. Just listen to me carefully. As you know, it is essential that no suspicion should fall in your direction," continued Vikerson. "This plan of mine will throw positive guilt upon this fellow Slade. In fact, he will find it almost impossible to prove his innocence, and he'll either be hanged or sent to prison. We are not out on child's play, Hathaway. If this thing has to be done we must not care a jot if other people are implicated."

"Of course not," said the baronet callously. "Slade, as you call him, is nothing to me. If he is entangled in the net so much the worse for him."

Eileen was astonished at the terribly brutal nature of Sir Jerrold's utterance. These scoundrels, it seemed, were totally devoid of scruples. Even the conviction of an innocent man for murder did not weigh upon their conscience.

The foul plot was soon outlined in all its bald horror. In the play Lillian, in her part of the heroine, was supposed to be drugged by the villain. And the phial from which the latter poured the drug was certain to be in Slade's dressing-room. Slade was the man who played the villain's part, and in many respects he was not much better than the character portrayed. So, as Vikerson remarked, the world would not lose a valuable citizen if Reginald Slade perished by the hangman's rope.

"The phial in all probability contained nothing but a little coloured water, or ginger ale, or something of that kind," went on Vikerson. "Well, I propose to substitute that for a deadly poison. Oh, yes, I have got the stuff on me; it would be fatal to purchase poison in Melby. You see the idea? Slade, when he pours the drug into the girl's glass, will literally give her a sufficient dose to kill her in one second. On the stage, as you are aware, drugs are administered with a liberal hand, so that the audience may see that something is being poured into the glass. Slade will undoubtedly kill the girl, and—well, our object will be accomplished."

"It is clever—infernally clever!" exclaimed Sir Jerrold softly. "And if things go the right way Lillian won't have a second to live after she has swallowed the stuff. But what will happen afterwards?"

Vikerson threw his cigar across the room into the fire-grate.

"That need not concern us," he replied brutally. "Our object will be achieved, and we sha'n't need to worry ourselves. It happens that Slade is a drunken rascal, and he dislikes the girl cordially. I have learnt that to-day. It appears that he molested Lillian, and she complained to Dane, the manager. And Dane, who had secured Slade six months' engagement with another company, at once cancelled the job."

"Oh, I see," said Sir Jerrold. "That's rather good. The girl, therefore, deprived Slade of a certain six months' engagement. He is naturally angry with her."

"He hates the girl," said Vikerson—"he is as bitter as gall against her. And, mind you, all the others in the company know this. And when the girl is killed it will be assumed that he has poisoned her out of revenge. And he'll find it utterly impossible to establish his innocence. Probably he will

receive a little mercy under the plea that he was partially drunk at the time. I understand that he is nearly always under the influence of drink."

It was a terrible plot. Rascal though Slade may be, it was, nevertheless, a foul thing to place the crime of murder upon his innocent shoulders. But the evidence would be conclusive if the scheme succeeded.

Vikerson glanced at his watch as he finished talking.

"I shall have to go," he exclaimed crisply. "Well, Sir Jerrold, there's the idea. What do you think of it?"

"Excellent—if it can be accomplished."

"I mean to bring it off," declared the other, rising. "And you had better remain in Melby until you know exactly what has happened."

The pair left the waiting-room, and Eileen took a deep, deep breath.

"Oh, the scoundrels!" she murmured. "Thank Heaven I have been permitted to overhear that terrible plot. If it had not been for this ruse, Lillian Noble would surely have been killed to-night!"

Eileen nimbly rose to her feet and scrambled over the back of the lounge. The waiting-room was still deserted, and everything was very quiet. It was now raining outside, and the station itself was devoid of life. The door was fitted with a spring, and it had closed after Sir Jerrold and Vikerson had passed out. And then, in the very second of victory, came disaster!

Even as Eileen was crossing the lounge the door opened and Herbert Vikerson strode in. It was just one of those terribly unfortunate mischances which sometimes alter the whole course of events. Vikerson had left his gloves behind, and had come to fetch them. He stared at Eileen blankly, his ready brain at once grasped the fact that she had just emerged from behind the big seat. And Vikerson flew into a towering passion. He knew, in one moment, that his plan had been overheard and that the game was up. In three swift strides he reached Eileen's side. With one hand he tore at the veil, and with the other he gripped the girl's arm.

"By Heaven!" he snarled. "Eileen Dare! You—you——"

Words failed him. In a ghastly vision he saw the whole of his scheme tumbling about his ears. And all because of this girl's activity! Vikerson completely lost control of himself in that tense, mad moment. The window was just behind him, and with a curse he flung up the sash. He was not even responsible for his actions just then. In his fury he was even more insane than Lieutenant Fletcher had been before his recovery.

"You shall pay for your eavesdropping!" snarled the scoundrel passionately.

Eileen had no opportunity to call for help. Vikerson's hand was at her throat, choking the life out of her. And the next second the girl detective was lifted bodily and flung headlong out. Below a steep embankment led straight down to the permanent way. Eileen plunged down, and rolled swiftly through the coarse grass to the very bottom. She lay there, stunned, in the darkness.

And Herbert Vikerson, breathing forcedly, followed her down, but with more caution. It was dark as pitch, and the rain was pelting down. In a moment Vikerson had grasped the unconscious girl, and he placed her upon the track. He saw at a glance that a train was even then signalled.

The whole dreadful thing had occurred with amazing swiftness. Vikerson had acted in blind fury, and luck was with him. For he gained the waiting-room window again, closed it, passed through the room, and breathed freely once more.

His action had not been observed—and Eileen Dare would be killed in the darkness!

CHAPTER VII

Nipper Disobeys—Just In Time—Anxiety—The Climax—Conclusion.

NIPPER stood upon the pavement, watching Eileen Dare's retreating form discontentedly.

The lad did not care for the idea of Eileen shadowing Herbert Vikerson. Nipper knew well enough that Eileen was capable of doing the work thoroughly—there was no doubt as to that point.

But, vaguely, Nipper had an uneasy feeling that danger was abroad. He told himself that the girl was running into danger. Why he had this conviction he never could understand. But it was strong within him—and would not be denied.

"It's rotten!" he told himself disgustedly. "She's gone off, and left me here—like a fatheaded kid! 'Run along, and tell Miss Noble that I shall not be long'! Oh, rats! I'm jolly well not going!"

Nipper was rebellious.

As a rule he obeyed Eileen's orders with the greatest alacrity, especially if there was a spice of danger. But this was different. He was told to "run along," and it was Eileen who was going into the danger. That state of affairs seemed decidedly wrong from Nipper's point of view.

And the lad came to a quick decision. Careless of the consequences, he decided to shadow Eileen, in turn. Then, if anything untoward happened, he would be handy and on the spot.

Nipper little guessed what result his rebellious action was to have!

He followed Eileen easily, and chuckled with delight when he saw her draw her veil over her face and assume the limp.

"She's a ripper!" Nipper murmured. "I jolly well hope something does happen—then I shall be able to prove the wisdom of following on behind. She doesn't know I'm on her giddy track!"

Now that the die was cast Nipper was thoroughly enjoying the little comedy; for, so far, it was nothing else. The dramatic element would come later. The lad had no difficulty in keeping Eileen in sight while Vikerson met Sir Jerrold Hathaway.

But Nipper was surprised when he saw the girl detective hasten into the waiting-room. He had drawn back into the shadow, and wondered what was in the wind. And he was still more surprised when he saw that Vikerson and his companion passed into the waiting-room almost immediately after Eileen had entered.

Phew! What's the game?" thought Nipper gravely. "There's something on here. I'd better keep my peepers open. I don't like it a little bit."

He hung about for some time, until all the stragglers had cleared out of the station. It was dark now, and no other train was due for some time—Melby was only a comparatively small station. Until the time of the next train the place would be almost deserted.

Nipper was curious.

And, not only that, he was anxious. Eileen was in the waiting-room, and the two plotters were there also. It was a public room, of course, and Nipper half decided to enter—just to have a "squint" round.

But somehow he could not bring himself to do so. Eileen had not entered the apartment needlessly, he knew. She had some positive object. And surely she could not come to any harm in a railway waiting-room?

After cooling his heels for fully ten minutes, Nipper became still more concerned. He passed out into the station yard, and saw that the waiting-

room had no window on that side. The window, apparently, was overlooking the embankment of the railway.

If he could only take a peep into the room he would be able to see what was going on. He fully believed that Eileen had adopted some sort of ruse; but what was it? To enter boldly would probably spoil everything. But if he could only look in at the window he might be able to see something of interest.

It was an awkward position.

Although telling himself that everything was all right, he nevertheless had an uneasy feeling that peril was abroad. And, after a further five minutes' thought, he decided on a course of action.

Leaving the deserted booking office, he made his way down to the goods yard. This, of course, was closed for the night. Nipper leapt over the gate, and found himself on a slope which led down to the goods station. This was on a low level, for the passenger station was built well above the track.

Nipper did not go down the slope. He turned off, climbed a fence, and reached the embankment on which the waiting-room was built. This apartment was a separate little building, and one side of it was built upon stout wooden piles, so that it should be level. The window was seven feet above, and soft grass lay immediately beneath it.

It had taken Nipper some little time to reach the spot, and at first he was disappointed. The window seemed inaccessible. But a close inspection showed that the cross-pieces of wood made it quite easy to climb to the window-sill. The lad tightened his lips and grasped the woodwork.

Rain was coming down fairly heavily now.

Everything was dark, and not a soul within sight. This was beyond the station, as it were, and even the platform lights were not visible. Two signal lights, however, twinkled red through the rain.

Even as Nipper gathered himself for the climb he heard a sudden, subdued commotion above him. Being quite close, he could hear fairly distinctly. Wonderingly, he looked upwards—and then received a shock.

The window was suddenly thrust up!

In a flash Nipper dodged through the piles, and crouched concealed beneath the waiting-room. Then, as he watched, something fell before his eyes, struck the soft grass, and rolled down towards the permanent way.

A sickly fear came over Nipper. It was the form of Eileen Dare that had hurtled down! The lad was paralysed with sudden dread. And before he could act he saw Herbert Vikerson clamber rapidly down and then hurry to the gleaming rails below.

Nipper hesitated, and then noticed that one of the signals had changed to green. Vikerson came scrambling up the embankment, panting hoarsely, and he laboriously climbed the woodwork to the waiting-room window. The latter closed softly, and then all was silence.

Write to the Editor of

ANSWERS

if you are not getting your right PENSION

It had all happened so swiftly that Nipper could scarcely draw breath. What did it mean? It was not often that Nipper was startled so much, and as he slipped from between the wooden piles he heard a low, ever-increasing rumble.

A train was rapidly approaching!

In a second full realisation dawned upon the lad. He simply hurled himself down the embankment, and tore out his electric torch. Flashing it round, he saw a dim form lying across the rails right in front of him. And, round the gradual bend, two points of light were approaching swiftly!

"Good heavens!" panted Nipper, aghast.

He ran to the huddled form, and bent over it. Eileen Dare it was! And the girl was unconscious—lying helpless across the track. Nipper lifted the girl's limp form bodily, and staggered into safety.

Then—roar! Swish! Roar!

The train—a fast express—dashed past. In that tense second Nipper sent up a prayer to heaven. But for his presence Eileen would have been killed on the spot! It had been a terribly narrow escape for the brave girl.

Nelson Lee's face was a little haggard, and Nipper, with feverish eyes, stood beside his master.

The scene was Lillian Noble's little sitting-room, at her lodgings. Nipper had acted splendidly. Somehow he had carried Eileen round to the front of the station. Here a ramshackle cab had taken its stand, in readiness for the London train, when it came in.

Nipper had placed Eileen in the cab, explaining to the aged driver that the girl had met with an accident. And Eileen had been driven to Lillian's lodgings—where, by a fortunate chance, Nelson Lee was waiting. Lillian was at the theatre, dressing for the play.

Lee had called for Eileen and Nipper, and, failing to find them, had waited. He had been amazed to hear Nipper's startling story. Vikerson obviously had succeeded in getting away from the station unobserved, and he now thought that Eileen was crushed to death.

A brief examination told Nelson Lee that Eileen was not badly injured. She had struck her head upon a stone during her descent of the embankment; but this was the chief injury. Her arms and shoulders were bruised, but not badly.

And now Lee and Nipper were waiting for the girl to recover consciousness. Until she did they were not in a position to know exactly what had occurred. Nelson Lee was terribly grim. Vikerson should pay for his vile work!

No action could be taken until Eileen recovered. Nipper was not even positive that it had been Vikerson who had placed the girl upon the metals. Nipper was sure in his own mind, but could not swear to it.

And at the Theatre Royal the performance was already commencing.



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Herbert Vikerson was seated in the pit, feverishly telling himself that he was safe. He knew that the incident at the station had been unobserved, and the scoundrel had watched the express roar through the station yard. Here Sir Jerrold had been waiting, and Vikerson had not told the baronet of the tragedy. But Vikerson was positive that Eileen had perished. She was even now lying on the rails—and her death would remain a mystery.

And, further, Vikerson had accomplished his mission. He had succeeded in entering Reginald Slade's dressing-room. Wearing a false beard, Vikerson had presented himself at the stage door of the theatre with a plausible story that he had a parcel to deliver into the dressing-room of one of the other actors. By sheer bluff he had gained admittance, and had managed to enter Slade's dressing-room unknown to a soul. And there he had substituted deadly poison for the innocent "drug" which filled the phial. The latter, as Vikerson had expected, was standing in a handy position, ready for use in the second act.

It had been risky work, but Vikerson was clever, and he had accomplished the task well. Poor Slade, knowing nothing, would use the poison, and Lillian would be killed. And, as it happened, there was another point in favour of the plot. That evening Slade was partially intoxicated, and he would find it extremely difficult to clear himself of a charge of murder—in fact, almost impossible.

Vikerson witnessed the opening act impatiently, but at last it was over. He did not know that the last act in another drama—a real-life drama—was about to commence!

The curtain rose at last, and Vikerson sat watching with impatience and strange fears. He assured himself that everything was planned perfectly. But the knowledge of his crime at the station weighed upon him heavily. When all this excitement was over he promised himself a thorough rest in Spain or the United States. As it turned out, Vikerson was to take rest elsewhere!

At last the moment arrived.

Slade, acting the part of the stage villain, suddenly whipped out the little phial. With a deft movement he poured the contents of it into Lillian's glass. Vikerson's eyes gleamed as he watched. Slade had used every drop of the poison. The girl would die within five seconds!

"Successful!" thought Vikerson feverishly. "Success——"

And then a sudden commotion occurred. Vikerson, with a wild fear in his heart, stood up. Eileen Dare rushed into the stalls, and close behind her were Nelson Lee, Nipper, and Mr. McKinnon.

"Don't drink!" shouted Eileen in alarm. "Oh! Don't——"

Lillian had the glass in her hand. Startled at this dramatic interruption, she placed the glass down. And before the audience could recover from its surprise, another commotion took place—this time in the pit.

A man was frantically attempting to push his way out of the row of seats. Nelson Lee, turning, saw Herbert Vikerson. In a few quick strides the detective was on the spot.

"Hang you!" snarled the scoundrel wildly. "I—I——"

He almost foamed at the mouth in his terrible rage. And for a moment Lee had his hands full. But, a moment later, Vikerson collapsed completely, and lay dazed and limp across two of the pit seats.

Once again the audience at the Theatre Royal, Melby, had witnessed an unrehearsed drama, and the good people wondered what it could all mean.

And on the morrow they learned that "Miss Lily Heathcote" had been saved from certain death by a margin of a second.

Eileen had recovered just in time. And, weak and ill though she was, she insisted upon hurrying to the theatre. She knew how vital the issue was! And after the terrible tragedy had been averted Eileen suffered from the reaction, and was gently taken back to Lillian's apartments.

Two days later, however, Eileen Dare was almost herself again. And once again she had proved her sterling worth. Another of her enemies had paid his account, another member of the Combine had suffered ruin and disgrace.

For the whole story came out. Demoralised, Herbert Vikerson babbled out the absolute truth, and although most of it was kept from the public, Nelson Lee knew everything.

Vikerson was committed for trial, on the charge of attempted murder, and it was certain that his sentence would be heavy. And the rascally Sir Jerrold Hathaway escaped from the country. The facts of his disgrace were not made known, but in his efforts to gain riches he had suffered dire punishment. For he was banished from his native land; it would be impossible for him to set foot in England again.

Eileen Dare had won still another round in the great campaign.

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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 Olive 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 threw 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 STORBIN**, who warns 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. This points to the necessity of a stronghold, and the very day following its completion, Pedro Diego attacks. Meanwhile, the Doctor and Clive, with a small party, are exploring, and miss their way in the underground caverns. (Now read on.)

The Gold Water Again!

"**A**N ancient temple!" exclaimed the doctor, after peering round. "Yes, an underground temple! What a singular thing to find here—for this part of the island has been raised above the sea, you know; which would seem to imply that it was first of all above the sea level, then was plunged below, and now has been once more raised above it."

"See!" he continued, pointing to some curious-looking masses hanging from the side. "Here we have seaweeds and sea anemones—ay, and barnacles and other creatures, now dead, but still clinging to the rotten wall. And I see many other signs proving that this strange temple has lain deep in the sea for many years, and then has been raised above it!"

Strange and intensely interesting as this was, however, the travellers were more intent just then upon the question of finding a way out into the open air.

After a search in the dark recesses of the temple, they discovered another passage on the opposite side, and which they followed in its turn. Like the others they had passed through, the floor was mostly strewn with bare rock, with loose pieces lying about here and there.

Then, quite suddenly, they became aware that the nature of the floor had undergone a change. It was no longer bare, smooth rock, but was covered with sand and small pebbles and other gritty substances. In fact, they were evidently here again in the bed of a watercourse.

Clive uttered an ejaculation. Stooping down, he picked something up.

"See! See, doctor!" he cried excitedly, "see, Ben, what I have found!"

By the light of the lantern they saw something glistening in his hand. He had a handful of pebbles and shells, of which several had a coating of gold like those they had found near the underground lake.

But whereas the pebbles they had there picked up had been dull, with the coating almost worn off, these were comparatively fresh and bright.

Looking about further on the floor, they found many more glittering specimens.

"Why, these are by far the best we have come across!" the doctor declared. "It seems to me as though we must be really on the track of the gold water at last!"

"But where does all this come from?" Clive queried. "There must be another channel which has joined this. But where is it?"

It seemed rather a puzzle, for there was the sand underfoot, but nothing to show where it had come from or how it had got there. There was no branch or side passage to account for it.

Suddenly the doctor glanced up at the roof, and then the riddle was explained. Above their heads was a tunnel-like aperture going straight up into the darkness. Evidently what, amongst mountaineers, is technically known as a chimney.

"H'm! A stream of water at times comes running down that chimney," said Doctor Campbell, "bringing sand and pebbles, and runs along this gallery to some outlet beyond. We shall have to explore that chimney somehow if we want to follow the gold water up to its source. However, just now it is more important to find our way out. It begins to look as if these galleries are interminable. We're in a regular labyrinth."

But their patience and perseverance were not put to much further test. A few minutes later they caught sight of a glimmer of light in the distance, and soon saw enough to tell them they were coming out into the open air—and that near the sea.

But now, as they drew nearer and nearer to this outlet, they heard the sound of fighting and firing. There was the sharp cracking of rifles, and the booming of cannon, and mingled with it all were shouts and yells and screams.

The passage suddenly opened to right and left, and they emerged upon a sloping ledge or terrace, which had somewhat the appearance of being an old landslide.

Around, on the sloping ledge, rocks, stones, and boulders were piled and thrown about in wild confusion. Looking beyond these, they had a view over the sea and the shore below, and there they beheld an extraordinary scene.

To return to Alec and his companions on the rocky platform called the crow's nest. Just as the natives with him had started to descend the path to the shore the way was barred by two dark figures springing, rifles in hand, in their path. They were Menga and Kalma.

"Back, back!" the first-named shouted in their own language. "Are we men or are we foxes, that we should leave the young white chief who saved us from these men to be torn to pieces by his enemies? He fought bravely to set us free when we were held in bondage by these white devils. Shall we desert him like cowards at the time when he most needs our help in return? Shame be on those who desert him! We will carry their names to our king and shout them aloud before all the people! They will be

(Continued overleaf.)

accursed in the land, and their wives and children shall be ashamed of them!"

This exhortation and the splendid example set by the two staunch fighters themselves had the desired effect. The natives raised a cheer for the brave young white chief, and swore they were ready to stay and fight for him—and die for him if required.

Alec, though he did not understand the exact words of the speech, guessed its import even before he saw its effect. He went over to his two gallant "darkies," as he always called them, and solemnly shook hands with them before all. Then he turned again to Read, as he heard him utter some exclamations.

"What's up, Tom?" he asked.

"Why, look, sir!" he cried. "D'ye see them boats? They bain't makin' for the shore after all. They doan't seem to be thinkin' of us. I believe they be thinkin' uv the yacht an' goin' t' make fur her."

"Make for the yacht!" Alec repeated in astonishment. "Why—what—I don't understand."

No more did Tom. Till then they had both taken it for granted that the men were coming ashore in the boats to try to rush the crow's nest. It had certainly looked like it, and the filibusters had turned the cannon upon the place. But now there was an evident change. Whether it was that they had altered their minds, or that they had merely made a feint in order to keep the party at the camp quiet, it was certain that they were now giving their attention to the yacht.

But not—unfortunately for all their well-laid plans—in the way Captain Barron had expected. Instead of following the yacht, and either running on the reef or trying for the gap, the Hawk now lay to, and, uncovering another cannon, trained them both on the Valda.

At the same time the boats began to move off in orderly, determined fashion in the direction of the yacht. And what a lot of them there were—boats and canoes—and what a lot of men!

As Alec had said, he could not understand it. Was it that Diego was aware of the hidden reef, and knew too much to be caught that way? Still, even so, why in that case did he not make for the gap if he wished to come to close quarters with the yacht? He could scarcely know, at any rate, how well armed the party on the crow's nest were.

It seemed a bold, daring thing to attempt to capture the yacht with boats filled with boarders. It might succeed, of course—Alec thought with a shiver of all that that would mean!—but it certainly seemed a wild venture. And if that was the pirates' plan, what part precisely, Alec wondered, ought he to take in it? How could he best help the captain?

These speculations were interrupted by Read, who cried suddenly:

"Why, what be the matter wi' the yacht?"

Alec turned his glance from the Hawk, with its swarm of boats, to the Valda, and he certainly felt disconcerted at what he saw.

Instead, as one would have expected, of manœuvring to either get farther away from the boats, or prepare to face them and run them down, the yacht appeared to be drifting helplessly with the current, which was slowly, but pretty surely, carrying her towards the very reef which her skipper had planned should be the undoing of his adversary.

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