

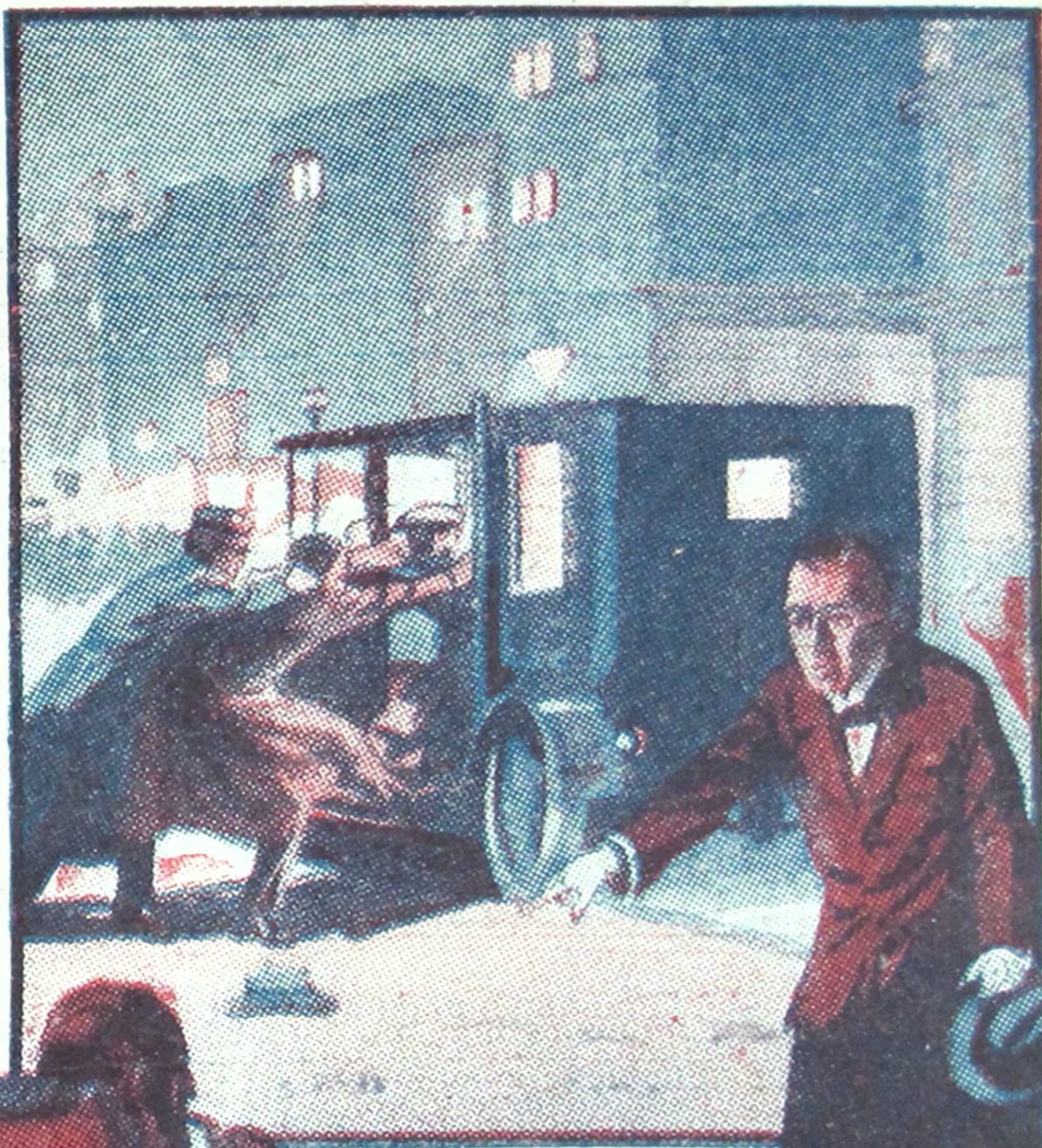
No. 95. DETECTIVE TALES FOR EVERYONE. 1^D.

Week ending
March 31, 1917.

THE SECRET OF CROOKED REEF

AN ADVENTURE
OF
EILEEN DARE,
NELSON LEE'S
LADY
ASSISTANT.
BY THE AUTHOR
OF "A MYSTERY
OF THE
FOOTLIGHTS, ETC"

1^D



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NELSON LEE
LIBRARY

INCORPORATING THE "BOYS' REALM."

IF YOU WANT Good Cheap Photographic Material or Camera, send postcard for Samples and Catalogue FREE.—S. E. HACKETT, July Road, Liverpool.

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A Magnificent little weapon. British Made from Start to Finish. Guaranteed to be the strongest shooting and most accurate Air Pistol on the Market. Will shoot any kind of No. 1 Pellets, Darts, or Round Shot. Just the thing for indoor or outdoor practice. 1,000 charges may be fired with 'Titanic' force at a cost of 1/- only. Trains the eye and cultivates the judgment. Packed in strong box with supply of Slugs and Darts. Price 12/6 each. Postage 6d. extra.

May be obtained from any Gunsmith or Ironmonger, or direct from the maker: **Frank Clarke, Gun Manufacturer, 6, Whittall Street, Birmingham.**

BLUSHING. This miserable complaint quickly, permanently cured. My simple remedy never fails. Send stamp for particulars. **July Edison, 87, Great George St., LEEDS.**

FUN FOR SIXPENCE. Sneezing Powder blown about sets everybody sneezing. One large sample packet and two other wonderful and laughable novelties, including Ventriloquist's Voice Instrument, lot 6d. (P.O.). Postage 2d. extra.—Ideal Novelty Dept., Clevedon.

WAR LOAN.—Lend your savings to the Government and buy your Boots, Clothing, etc., on monthly payments. Privately. Boots, Raincoats, Bedding, Blankets, Watches, Gold Rings, Cutlery, from 4/- monthly. State requirements. Price Lists Free.—**MASTERS, Ltd., 6, Hope Street, Rye. (Estd. 1860.)** P.S.—We take OLD WATCHES, etc., IN EXCHANGE.

80 MAGIC TRICKS, Illusions, etc., with Illustrations and Instructions. Also 40 Tricks with Cards. The lot post free 1/-.—**T. W. HARRISON, 239 Pentonville Road, London, N.**

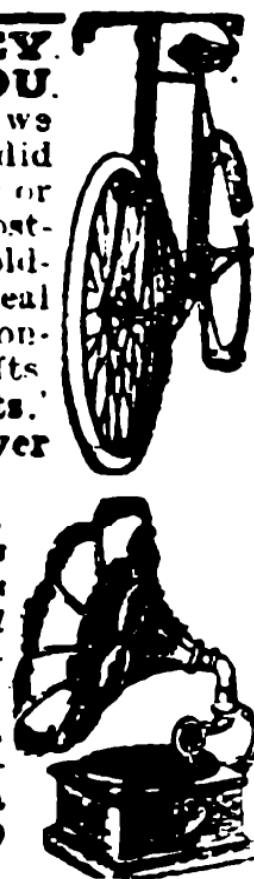
ARE YOU SHORT?

If so, let me help you to increase your height. My system requires only ten minutes morning and evening. Send three penny stamps for further particulars and my £100 Guarantee.—**ARTHUR GIRVAN, Dept. A.M.P., 17, Stroud Green Rd., London, N.**



FREE SEND NO MONEY. WE TRUST YOU.

As an advertisement we give every reader a splendid present **FREE** for sending or using 12 Beautiful Postcards at 1d. each. (Gold-mounted, Patriotic, Real Photos, etc.). Our list contains hundreds of free gifts including Ladies' & Gents' Cycles, Gold & Silver Watches, Fur Sets, Gramophones Air Guns, Tea Sets, etc. Send us your Name and Address (a postcard will do), and we will send you a selection of lovely cards to sell at 1d. each. When sold, send the money obtained, and we at once forward gift chosen according to the list we send you. Send a postcard now to: **THE ROYAL CARD CO. (Dept. 9), KEW, LONDON.**



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No. 373.—A Scrap of Paper.
Another Story of Martin Dale, Detective. By MAXWELL SCOTT.

No. 374.—Disaster Pit.
A Grand Coal-Mining Story. By the Author of "Warned Off," etc.

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A Thrilling Tale of Mystery. By T. C. BRIDGES.

Price 3d. Per Volume.

IN THIS WEEK'S

UNION JACK

**A Magnificent Story
of SEXTON BLAKE,
Detective, Entitled:**

**"The
Emerald Necklace;
Or, A Marked Man."**
By the Author of "YVONNE,"

**IN THE
UNION JACK-1^D.**

Out on Thursday!



THE SECRET OF CROOKED REEF

Or, THE GIRL TYPIST.

An Adventure of EILEEN DARE,
the Girl Detective.

By the Author of *"The House of Hazard," "Harlo, The Hypnotist,"*
"Millions at Stake," "A Mystery of the Footlights," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

The Advert. in the Newspaper—Engaged—Jimmy Fielder Arrives.

EILEEN DARE, the girl detective, sat rather moodily before the fire in her cosy little boudoir. It was not often that the sunny-tempered Eileen felt out of sorts, but this morning her pretty face was clouded.

It was quite early morning, and outside the neat Chelsea flat rain was descending in a fine, steady drizzle. It was undoubtedly a depressing morning, and perhaps this had something to do with Eileen Dare's unwonted dejection.

The girl had risen early in order to go for a long walk. But the rain had commenced, and she had given up the project. Her aunt, Miss Esther Gilbey, with whom she lived, had not yet risen, and there was still half an hour to spare before breakfast.

"Oh, I wish something would turn up!" murmured Eileen, leaning forward and placing her pretty chin in her hands. "How I long to be at work again! But there is no sign of anything at all!"

Truth to tell, the girl was tired of inactivity. For several weeks she had been idle—waiting for an opportunity to arise to strike another blow at her natural enemies, the Combine.

But lately, so it seemed, the Combine had been very quiet. At all events, neither Eileen Dare nor Nelson Lee had detected an opening through which they might strike home.

For Nelson Lee, the celebrated criminologist, was heart and soul with Eileen in her grim campaign against the scoundrels who privately called themselves the Combine. These men, well known in the City, and highly placed, had formed themselves into a kind of society of evil. There was nothing secret about it—nothing mysterious. The members of the Combine were banded together for mutual gain, and they had few scruples. Black murder, even, was not too great a crime for them to commit—provided the prize was substantial enough.

They had killed Eileen Dare's father, after blackening his name; they had branded him as a traitor and a spy, and the poor man had succumbed

to the terrible shock. And Eileen—dainty, pretty, and altogether lovable, had vowed that she would bring the scoundrels to justice.

Her oath had not been idle, for already many powerful members of the Combine had met with their just deserts. But there were others, equally as villainous, who still remained unpunished. Eileen was determined to continue her struggle until she had made every individual member of the Combine pay for his sins.

It had been a hard, strenuous struggle, but the girl was amazingly clever. Her detective ability was something to wonder at, and in many ways Eileen Dare was as astute and keen witted as Nelson Lee himself. The great detective was always the first to admit this singular fact.

He had done much to ensure the success of Eileen's efforts. She, in her turn, declared that without Lee's aid she would be powerless. At all events, Nelson Lee and Eileen Dare had worked together with signal success. They were just professional friends—nothing more—and Lee admired his fair companion's very apparent powers more than he could express. And Nipper, Lee's young assistant, would have gone through fire and water for her.

Eileen loved the work; she loved the excitement and perils. Inactivity was irksome and worrying to her. She longed to continue her self-imposed task. Yet the girl was not vindictive by nature.

She was altogether charming and sweet; her disposition was a delightful one, and she possessed singularly gentle charms which made her decidedly attractive. Small and dainty, with a trim, neat figure and delicately moulded features, Eileen Dare was a beautiful example of British girlhood. Her eyes were deep brown, and adorably frank.

And this sweet girl was waging a grim war against a band of powerful criminals!

It seemed almost absurd; but, Eileen possessed something else beside beauty. She was resolute and determined, and in that little head of hers was a keen—a very keen—brain. This was not vengeance she was meting out; it was justice. The Combine were beyond reach of the law, and so Eileen was taking matters into her own hands.

But for several weeks past she had been idle. There had been no opening for her activities since the memorable events in the Midland town of Melby—when Herbert Vikerson had met with downfall and disaster.

And now, on this particular morning, her spirits were lowered by the unseasonable, drizzly weather. The girl sat before the fire, thinking deeply. Breakfast would not be ready for half an hour—the hour was only just eight o'clock—and Aunt Esther had not yet appeared.

Eileen was pondering over the events of the past months. She had not been idle during that lapse of time. Just for the sake of something to do she reached over to a little table and took up a little writing-block and a fountain-pen. Then she placed the former upon her knee and commenced writing.

After a while she paused, and looked at what she had done. There was a list of names written upon the block, with a word or two against each. Every name there had, at one time, been well known and highly respected:

" MEMBERS OF THE COMBINE WHO HAVE PAID THE PENALTY:

- " SIR AMBROSE SHORE.—Died of apoplexy during trial.
- " MARTIN HALLTON.—Sentenced to penal servitude.
- " BASIL ILLINGFORD.—Sentenced to penal servitude.
- " JONATHAN BRIDGER.—Sentenced to penal servitude.
- " RUDOLPH STEBBING.—Died through accident while in panic.
- " RANSOME WILMORE.—Hopeless paralytic—shock of exposure.
- " SIR CALEB HURST, BART.—Sentenced to penal servitude.

"DR. MUNRO TAGGERT.—Killed by infuriated elephant.

"MELVILLE J. ROSS.—Sentenced to penal servitude.

"HERBERT VIKERSON.—Sentenced to penal servitude."

It was a formidable list, indeed!

Every man who was mentioned there had been a member of the scoundrelly Combine; and every man had suffered for his sins. Yet each individual rogue had been exposed separately, and no member of the general public—not even the police—guessed that they were all connected.

Lower down on the sheet of paper Eileen wrote the following:

MEMBERS OF THE COMBINE WHO HAVE STILL TO BE
DEALT WITH:

"ROGER HAVERFIELD.

"SYDNEY BRADFORD.

"FORD ABBERCORN.

"LORD MAX ROPER.

"STANTON ROADING.

"RUFUS TOLLMAN."

Eileen paused in her writing, and surveyed the list.

"I believe there are one or two more," she murmured to herself. "Mr. Lee will be able to jog my memory. There are two members, I think, who are in America. Perhaps they have severed their connection with the Combine. But even if they have, they shall be punished like the rest. Oh, dear! What a terrible list! But I have almost drawn their teeth, I believe!"

But, even as Eileen murmured the words, she realised that there was still a large amount of work to be done. And she had more than a suspicion that as the Combine was depleted of its members, so new blood was introduced. Rufus Tollman and Lord Max Roper, at least, had come to the fore fairly recently; they had, nevertheless, taken a certain part in the ruin of Eileen's father, and were even now participating in the profits which were being made from Mr. Dare's invention. For the Combine had murdered Eileen's father in order to steal a wonderful mechanical secret.

The girl tore the sheet of paper from the writing-block, screwed it up, and tossed it into the fire. Then she rose to her feet and crossed to the window.

The drizzle was still descending, and everything looked miserable and murky. Eileen turned again, and idly picked up the morning newspaper, which had been lying on the table.

For ten minutes or so she glanced over the morning's news without much interest. There was nothing particularly startling in the official war reports, and there was nothing else of note to record. Eileen, as a matter of fact, was merely passing the time until her aunt made her appearance.

But an expression of interest and animation came into her eyes quite suddenly, as she was glancing down the "Situations Vacant" column. There was one notice there which had claimed her attention at once—especially as the name which figured in the advertisement had been one of those which she had written upon the sheet of paper.

The notice was short, and of the usual type:

"WANTED.—Smart young lady shorthand-typist for secretarial work in private office. Must be thoroughly efficient. Apply between 10 a.m. and 11 a.m. Roading, 102, Southampton Lane, Strand."

Eileen read the advertisement twice, and then thoughtfully laid the paper down.

"So Mr. Stanton Roding is in need of a shorthand-typist for his private office," she murmured to herself. "I wonder if—oh, I wonder——"

The girl paused, rather startled by the thought which had suddenly come into her head. Her eyes were sparkling, and she quickly went over the possibilities in her mind.

Stanton Roding was a prominent member of the Combine, and one of the leading spirits. Exactly what his business was Eileen did not know. Possibly he transacted perfectly honourable business deals occasionally in order to keep up appearances, but he was a thorough rogue in every way.

His office in Southampton Lane, the girl detective knew, was a model of strict business life; everything there was above suspicion. If the police raided the place at any moment of the day or night they would find nothing incriminating. Stanton Roding performed his shady deals elsewhere.

"But something might happen there," thought Eileen. "Another member of the Combine might come to see him; or he may make a slip for once, and lay himself open to attack. Every criminal, no matter how clever, blunders sooner or later. Oh, I have a good mind to try! It will be something to do, at all events!"

For it had come into Eileen's head to apply for the situation!

She was an expert stenographer, and in the old days she had helped her father considerably. And, upon Nelson Lee's advice, she had learned typewriting. To a girl as clever as Eileen this was a simple task, and she could use a typewriter perfectly.

"But he will know me," her thoughts ran on. "Every member of the Combine knows me by sight—and they know, too, that I am their enemy. It will be dangerous for me to—oh, but I can—how splendid—how lovely!"

A sudden inspiration had come to her, and she clapped her hands with delight. In a moment her lassitude had vanished, and she was active and alert. There was not much time to waste, for it was necessary for her to be at Roding's office promptly on the stroke of ten. For there would probably be other applicants.

Eileen Dare had decided now. She was never long in making up her mind; and, having done so, she was full of activity. She made her way quickly into her pretty little bedroom, and then commenced her preparations.

First of all she donned a plain, but perfectly made, costume. Its lines were trim and formal, and were more suited to a woman of forty than to a dainty girl of Eileen's age.

Then she took down her beautiful wavy brown hair, and with some harmless preparation made it perfectly straight and ugly. Her next proceeding was to plaster the hair back over the head, and tie it in an unshapely bundle at the back. The change in the girl's appearance was astonishing.

But Eileen had not finished yet.

From a little attaché-case, which she called her "disguise-box," she produced something which appeared to be a set of false upper teeth. They had been specially made, and fitted comfortably in front of Eileen's own perfect teeth.

She fixed them in her mouth, and, although they felt extremely awkward for the first five minutes or so, she very soon grew accustomed to them, and after that experienced no discomfort whatever.

The effect was almost startling.

Eileen now possessed extremely prominent front teeth, and her natural beauty had vanished. She looked almost ugly, indeed. And those teeth possessed still another advantage: they altered the tone of her voice, for when she spoke each word was accompanied by a slight—but not unpleasant—hissing sound.

Finally, the girl-detective donned a pair of prim-looking pince-nez, and then surveyed herself in the glass. She gazed upon a stiff-looking woman of about thirty-five, small, but cold and formal.

The general effect—caused by the dress, the plastered-back hair, the teeth and the glasses—was most gratifying. Eileen seemed to be a stranger to herself. And she used no “make-up” whatever! It was a wonderfully clever disguise, and all the more efficient because of its extreme simplicity.

It was certain that Stanton Roding would not recognise her; the whole Combine, in fact, might have gazed upon her for hours without knowing that she was the girl who had been fighting them for so long.

Donning a plain hat and jacket, Eileen left her bedroom, and walked into the little hall of the flat. She encountered the comfortable figure of her aunt, and for a moment neither spoke. Aunt Esther stared at the girl suspiciously.

“Who are you, my good woman?” she demanded. “What were you doing in Miss Dare’s bedroom? I suppose——”

“Splendid!” cried Eileen delightedly. “Even you didn’t know me, auntie! Isn’t it a good disguise?”

The old lady started back.

“Eileen!” she gasped breathlessly. “Is—is it really you, child? Good gracious me! What will the girl be up to next, I wonder? You look terrible, Eileen—hideous!”

“Oh, auntie, not so bad as that!” protested the girl. “Plain, but not hideous!”

“Is it a joke, you little hussy?” asked Miss Gilbey reprovingly.

“No; it’s really serious, aunt dear. And I haven’t much time to explain,” said Eileen. “Is breakfast ready? Yes? Then I’ll just tell you what I am going to do while I snatch a mouthful.”

She did so, and Aunt Esther, who was well accustomed to her niece’s escapades, shook her head doubtfully, but made no attempt to persuade the girl from her purpose. After all, there would be no danger in the enterprise, and it was quite possible that Eileen would not get the post.

However, she was determined to be at Roding’s office in good time, in order to stand a good chance. When she had completed her hasty breakfast she found that the time was not yet nine, so she had a clear hour.

This was better than she had expected, and as soon as she was out in the morning’s drizzle she smiled inwardly, and boarded a motor-bus which was bound for the City. In Holborn she alighted, and walked quickly along Gray’s Inn Road.

Arriving at Nelson Lee’s doorway, she rang the electric-bell urgently, and it was answered by Mrs. Jones, Lee’s housekeeper. The good lady regarded the visitor inquiringly. She knew Eileen well, but there was no sign of recognition in her look.

“I must see Mr. Lee at once,” said Eileen quickly. “It is all right; I will go straight up. He will know me——”

“Mr. Lee’s at breakfast, ma’am,” interrupted the housekeeper curtly. “You can’t go hup to ’im now——”

With a little laugh, Eileen nimbly dodged Mrs. Jones, and tripped lightly up the stairs. She tapped upon the door of the famous detective’s dining-room, and then entered.

Nelson Lee and Nipper were seated at breakfast, and were “doing themselves well,” by the look of the table. Lee was comfortably attired in dressing-gown and slippers, and was certainly not dressed to receive a stranger. Nipper, with his mouth full of dry toast and marmalade, stared at the intruder wonderingly.

"Well, of all the lazy people!" exclaimed Eileen, standing in the doorway. "You ought to have done your breakfast long ago! And you shouldn't stuff your mouth so full, Nipper; it isn't gentlemanly!"

"Well, of all the nerve!" Nipper spluttered.

Nelson Lee rose gracefully to his feet, and laid his serviette aside.

"You will pardon me, madam, I am sure," he exclaimed smoothly, "but may I suggest that your manners are not irreproachable? This is a private apartment, and I have no recollection of tendering you an invitation to enter."

"Jolly free with my name, too!" growled Nipper, glaring.

"Surely you don't object, Nipper?" asked the visitor sweetly.

"I do object——"

"By James! Is it possible?" ejaculated Nelson Lee, suddenly starting forward, with understanding dawning in his eyes. "Why, good gracious, you took me in splendidly, Miss Eileen. I never dreamed it was you!"

"Miss Eileen!" yelled Nipper, jumping up with such violence that he sent his cup of coffee pouring over the snowy-white tablecloth.

Eileen Dare laughed.

"Am I forgiven?" she asked, her eyes twinkling merrily.

It was her eyes, indeed, which had given Lee the first inkling of the truth. Eileen had purposely allowed the detective to see that roguish twinkle, for she thought it rather unkind to prolong the comedy. Her purpose had been served, for since Nelson Lee had not penetrated the disguise without a direct clue, it was certain that her enemies would never detect her real identity—when she was fully on her guard.

"Miss Eileen!" gasped Nipper again. "Well, I'm jiggered! Oh, miss, take those horrible teeth out; they spoil you completely! We can't see your—your own pretty——"

"But I want my appearance to be spoilt, as you call it, Nipper," said Eileen, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece. "I've just come round to tell you of a new idea, Mr. Lee. I've only got a few minutes."

Nelson Lee resumed his seat. Eileen was a very favoured visitor indeed, and she was welcome at all times. The great criminologist looked rather serious now. He guessed that Eileen was getting to work again.

She soon told her friends of her scheme, and they both realised that the girl was rushing into no danger. And there was a chance that good might come of her ruse, provided she obtained the situation.

"I am afraid, however," said Lee, "that your time will be wasted, Miss Eileen. I do not think Mr. Roding will provide you with the opportunity you are anxious to grasp. In his Southampton Lane office Roding is strictly honest."

"But he may possibly make a slip, or perhaps I shall be able to get on the track of something by other means," said the girl. "At all events, I am going to try the game for a week or two."

When she left Gray's Inn Road she promised to keep Lee well informed of her movements, and she would report occasionally. Nipper was feeling somewhat depressed. He hated to see Eileen so terribly changed. It was a sin and a shame, he declared, for such a pretty girl to go and spoil all her charms as Eileen had done!

At ten o'clock Eileen Dare presented herself at Stanton Roding's office. It was a suite of three rooms on the first floor, and they were well appointed. There was an outer office, Roding's private office, and then an inner sanctum.

Rather to the girl's surprise she obtained the situation with singular ease. Roding was in his office, and, owing to Eileen's promptness, she was

the first applicant. Perhaps there was nothing astonishing in the fact that she was engaged straight away, for she was a perfect stenographer, and she handled the typewriter with superb skill.

Roding was a medium-sized man, with a clean-shaven face and rather thick lips. He wore heavy glasses before his pale-blue, unpleasant eyes. After several difficult tests, he informed "Miss Higgs"—as Eileen called herself—that the post was hers. Roding was struck by "Miss Higgs's" calm, business-like way of doing things, and cared nothing for the fact that she was strikingly plain. As he explained, it was efficiency he wanted, not good looks.

Eileen commenced her duties at once, and the manner in which she fell into the routine of the office caused Roding to congratulate himself upon his "find." For there were not many shorthand-typists as thoroughly satisfactory as Eileen proved to be.

She gathered that her predecessor had met with an accident the previous day, and Roding had at once advertised for a substitute. He found that "Miss Higgs" was far more efficient than the previous girl had been, and Roding, in consequence, was highly satisfied.

But Eileen, on the other hand, soon began to grow restless.

The day passed smoothly, and so did the following day. Nothing happened that does not usually happen in business offices. Stanton Roding was occupying his time solely with honest business. It seemed as though he was steering clear of the questionable road.

And the days lengthened into weeks. Over a fortnight elapsed, and everything was still the same. Eileen almost resolved to give up the project and return to her usual life.

She was tired of waiting; she was keenly disappointed.

And then, one day, Jimmy Fielder walked into the private office. From that very moment the aspect of things changed, and events began to move.



CHAPTER II.

The Cripple—The Story of Crooked Reef—The Combine's Decision.

JIMMY FIELDER arrived while Stanton Roding was dictating a letter to Eileen. Roding had been out for several hours, and was now anxious to get through the pile of correspondence. For Eileen had found that Roding's business was not so very insignificant, after all. It was, in fact, quite extensive, and, even apart from his shady Combine transactions, he certainly made a deal of money.

"I think we'll take those Manchester letters now, Miss Higgs," said Roding briskly, reaching over his desk for a little notebook. "It is important that they should go to-day, you know. There are one or two which require special— Come in! Come in!"

Roding uttered the invitation rather testily, for he disliked being disturbed while at work. Upon the whole, Eileen had found him to be easy to get on with—but then, of course, the girl had always performed her work perfectly, thus leaving her employer no chance of complaining.

"Come in!" called Roding again.

And Jimmy Fielder entered. Eileen, looking up, saw a fairly young man with a tanned, weather-lined face. He was dressed in clothes which were obviously made abroad, and there was a certain careless manner in which he wore them that told of outdoor life in other climes.

And when the newcomer walked in Eileen saw that he was a cripple. He

"So Mr. Stanton Roding is in need of a shorthand-typist for his private office," she murmured to herself. "I wonder if—oh, I wonder——"

The girl paused, rather startled by the thought which had suddenly come into her head. Her eyes were sparkling, and she quickly went over the possibilities in her mind.

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She did so, and Aunt Esther, who was well accustomed to her nieces’s escapades, shook her head doubtfully, but made no attempt to persuade the girl from her purpose. After all, there would be no danger in the enterprise, and it was quite possible that Eileen would not get the post.

However, she was determined to be at Roding’s office in good time, in order to stand a good chance. When she had completed her hasty breakfast she found that the time was not yet nine, so she had a clear hour.

This was better than she had expected, and as soon as she was out in the morning’s drizzle she smiled inwardly, and boarded a motor-bus which was bound for the City. In Holborn she alighted, and walked quickly along Gray’s Inn Road.

Arriving at Nelson Lee’s doorway, she rang the electric-bell urgently, and it was answered by Mrs. Jones, Lee’s housekeeper. The good lady regarded the visitor inquiringly. She knew Eileen well, but there was no sign of recognition in her look.

“I must see Mr. Lee at once,” said Eileen quickly. “It is all right; I will go straight up. He will know me——”

“Mr. Lee’s at breakfast, ma’am,” interrupted the housekeeper curtly. “You can’t go hup to ‘im now——”

With a little laugh, Eileen nimbly dodged Mrs. Jones, and tripped lightly up the stairs. She tapped upon the door of the famous detective’s dining-room, and then entered.

Nelson Lee and Nipper were seated at breakfast, and were “doing themselves well,” by the look of the table. Lee was comfortably attired in dressing-gown and slippers, and was certainly not dressed to receive a stranger. Nipper, with his mouth full of dry toast and marmalade, stared at the intruder wonderingly.

"Well, of all the lazy people!" exclaimed Eileen, standing in the doorway. "You ought to have done your breakfast long ago! And you shouldn't stuff your mouth so full, Nipper; it isn't gentlemanly!"

"Well, of all the nerve!" Nipper spluttered.

Nelson Lee rose gracefully to his feet, and laid his serviette aside.

"You will pardon me, madam, I am sure," he exclaimed smoothly, "but may I suggest that your manners are not irreproachable? This is a private apartment, and I have no recollection of tendering you an invitation to enter."

"Jolly free with my name, too!" growled Nipper, glaring.

"Surely you don't object, Nipper?" asked the visitor sweetly.

"I do object——"

"By James! Is it possible?" ejaculated Nelson Lee, suddenly starting forward, with understanding dawning in his eyes. "Why, good gracious, you took me in splendidly, Miss Eileen. I never dreamed it was you!"

"Miss Eileen!" yelled Nipper, jumping up with such violence that he sent his cup of coffee pouring over the snowy-white tablecloth.

Eileen Dare laughed.

"Am I forgiven?" she asked, her eyes twinkling merrily.

It was her eyes, indeed, which had given Lee the first inkling of the truth. Eileen had purposely allowed the detective to see that roguish twinkle, for she thought it rather unkind to prolong the comedy. Her purpose had been served, for since Nelson Lee had not penetrated the disguise without a direct clue, it was certain that her enemies would never detect her real identity—when she was fully on her guard.

"Miss Eileen!" gasped Nipper again. "Well, I'm jiggered! Oh, miss, take those horrible teeth out; they spoil you completely! We can't see your—your own pretty——"

"But I want my appearance to be spoilt, as you call it, Nipper," said Eileen, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece. "I've just come round to tell you of a new idea, Mr. Lee. I've only got a few minutes."

Nelson Lee resumed his seat. Eileen was a very favoured visitor indeed, and she was welcome at all times. The great criminologist looked rather serious now. He guessed that Eileen was getting to work again.

She soon told her friends of her scheme, and they both realised that the girl was rushing into no danger. And there was a chance that good might come of her ruse, provided she obtained the situation.

"I am afraid, however," said Lee, "that your time will be wasted, Miss Eileen. I do not think Mr. Roding will provide you with the opportunity you are anxious to grasp. In his Southampton Lane office Roding is strictly honest."

"But he may possibly make a slip, or perhaps I shall be able to get on the track of something by other means," said the girl. "At all events, I am going to try the game for a week or two."

When she left Gray's Inn Road she promised to keep Lee well informed of her movements, and she would report occasionally. Nipper was feeling somewhat depressed. He hated to see Eileen so terribly changed. It was a sin and a shame, he declared, for such a pretty girl to go and spoil all her charms as Eileen had done!

At ten o'clock Eileen Dare presented herself at Stanton Roding's office. It was a suite of three rooms on the first floor, and they were well appointed. There was an outer office, Roding's private office, and then an inner sanctum.

Rather to the girl's surprise she obtained the situation with singular ease. Roding was in his office, and, owing to Eileen's promptness, she was

the first applicant. Perhaps there was nothing astonishing in the fact that she was engaged straight away, for she was a perfect stenographer, and she handled the typewriter with superb skill.

Roding was a medium-sized man, with a clean-shaven face and rather thick lips. He wore heavy glasses before his pale-blue, unpleasant eyes. After several difficult tests, he informed "Miss Higgs"—as Eileen called herself—that the post was hers. Roding was struck by "Miss Higgs's" calm, business-like way of doing things, and cared nothing for the fact that she was strikingly plain. As he explained, it was efficiency he wanted, not good looks.

Eileen commenced her duties at once, and the manner in which she fell into the routine of the office caused Roding to congratulate himself upon his "find." For there were not many shorthand-typists as thoroughly satisfactory as Eileen proved to be.

She gathered that her predecessor had met with an accident the previous day, and Roding had at once advertised for a substitute. He found that "Miss Higgs" was far more efficient than the previous girl had been, and Roding, in consequence, was highly satisfied.

But Eileen, on the other hand, soon began to grow restless.

The day passed smoothly, and so did the following day. Nothing happened that does not usually happen in business offices. Stanton Roding was occupying his time solely with honest business. It seemed as though he was steering clear of the questionable road.

And the days lengthened into weeks. Over a fortnight elapsed, and everything was still the same. Eileen almost resolved to give up the project and return to her usual life.

She was tired of waiting; she was keenly disappointed.

And then, one day, Jimmy Fielder walked into the private office. From that very moment the aspect of things changed, and events began to move.

CHAPTER II.

The Cripple—The Story of Crooked Reef—The Combine's Decision.

JIMMY FIELDER arrived while Stanton Roding was dictating a letter to Eileen. Roding had been out for several hours, and was now anxious to get through the pile of correspondence. For Eileen had found that Roding's business was not so very insignificant, after all. It was, in fact, quite extensive, and, even apart from his shady Combine transactions, he certainly made a deal of money.

"I think we'll take those Manchester letters now, Miss Higgs," said Roding briskly, reaching over his desk for a little notebook. "It is important that they should go to-day, you know. There are one or two which require special— Come in! Come in!"

Roding uttered the invitation rather testily, for he disliked being disturbed while at work. Upon the whole, Eileen had found him to be easy to get on with—but then, of course, the girl had always performed her work perfectly, thus leaving her employer no chance of complaining.

"Come in!" called Roding again.

And Jimmy Fielder entered. Eileen, looking up, saw a fairly young man with a tanned, weather-lined face. He was dressed in clothes which were obviously made abroad, and there was a certain careless manner in which he wore them that told of outdoor life in other climes.

And when the newcomer walked in Eileen saw that he was a cripple. He

hobbled considerably, for his left leg was shorter than his right, and badly deformed. His eyes lit up as he saw Stanton Roding.

"Why, this is bully!" he exclaimed heartily. "Ain't you glad to see me, Mr. Roding? It's four years and over since——"

"Who are you?" interjected Roding curtly. "I gave orders to my chief clerk to admit nobody, and I may as well inform you that you are intruding. I am very busy——"

"Say, don't you recognise me, boss?" exclaimed the other, in disappointed tones. "I am Fielder—Jimmy Fielder, you know. I used to be one of your clerks——"

"Oh, Fielder!" interjected Roding, leaning back in his chair. "Of course—of course! How are you, Fielder? I certainly did not recognise you for the moment. What in the name of heaven have you been doing to your leg?"

"Accident," was the visitor's reply. "Well, if you are busy, I guess I'll vamoose and call around some other time. As it happens, though, this isn't exactly a friendly call, Mr. Roding. I am here on business, too, and I want your advice. But if you're up to your eyes in work I won't hang around. I'm staying at the Fleet Palace Hotel——"

"One moment, Fielder—one moment."

Stanton Roding turned to Eileen.

"You've quite enough shorthand to occupy your time for ten minutes or so, Miss Higgs," he exclaimed. "You'd better get those letters completed while I have a chat with my friend here."

Eileen nodded and at once commenced transcribing the letters. Jimmy Fielder came across the room and took a seat in the chair opposite to Roding's. Eileen had heard everything that had passed, of course, and she guessed that at the time of Jimmy Fielder's employment Roding had not commenced his alliance with the Combine.

Eileen was a keen judge of character, and she believed that Fielder was a thoroughly good fellow; there was something frank and open about his eyes—something which spoke of resolution and force of will. And he evidently had no suspicions regarding Stanton Roding. As the girl detective surmised, he was merely a former employee in this very same office, where everything was strictly businesslike and above board. Fielder probably knew nothing whatever regarding the hidden side of Roding's character.

"Well, Fielder, you seem to have changed a great deal," said Roding pleasantly. "I have just got a few moments to spare. You've got quite an American accent, I notice. Been out there for some time, no doubt?"

"For two years, Mr. Roding," replied the other. "Well over two years, in fact. I've really come to you with a selfish motive; I want your advice regarding a certain business matter."

"I'll do my best for you."

"Thanks. After all, it's not much," said Jimmy Fielder, accepting a cigar. "I am anxious to be introduced to a real live, capable, honest mining engineer. I guess you've got me? The genuine article, you understand—the real goods. A man who knows his business from A to Z, and can be trusted right through. You being a keen business man, Mr. Roding, I thought, perhaps, you'd be able to help me."

Stanton Roding nodded slowly.

"I think I can, Fielder," he replied. "But what is the nature of your business? Is it anything big?"

"Say, it's about the biggest thing that's ever happened," declared Fielder quietly. "Oh, that isn't bluff. I'm serious to the last word. There's a

whole pile of money in the job, and that's why I came to you for advice. I don't want to be let down by going to a man I can't trust."

Although Eileen was typewriting, she had heard every word that had passed. True, there was nothing whatever private or confidential about the conversation, but it was of interest to Eileen, nevertheless. She smiled rather grimly inwardly, as she heard Fielder's words. He had come to Roding because he wanted a man he could trust! Stanton Roding was not likely to fill that bill satisfactorily!

"A big job, eh?" mused Roding. "Well, see here, Fielder, I'll do what I can for you. My friend, Mr. Rufus Tollman, is a mining engineer of more than usual ability. If you care to wait a few minutes I'll take you round to Mr. Tollman straight away."

"Good business!" exclaimed the other. "I'm your man, Mr. Roding."

There was a gleam in Roding's eyes as he turned to "Miss Higgs" again. Eileen did not fail to notice that gleam. The girl guessed that her employer's cupidity was aroused. Fielder had mentioned that there was a pile of money in his proposition, and Eileen suspected at once that at last her patience was to be rewarded. Rufus Tollman was another member of the Combine, and a scoundrel to his finger tips. If this crippled young man fell into his clutches he would very soon be fleeced.

Eileen feared that trouble was brewing, although she knew nothing whatever of the facts. All that had been said seemed to be of no consequence. But it had given Eileen the tip, as it were, and she determined to be fully on the alert.

Roding's important letters did not seem to be so very urgent, after all, for he merely set Eileen a certain amount of work, and then announced the fact that he was going out. The letters, he declared, could stand over until the morrow. Obviously, Roding deemed this fresh affair of paramount importance.

Within twenty minutes Mr. James Fielder was introduced to Rufus Tollman, mining engineer. The latter had a splendid office in the neighbourhood of Charing Cross Road, and he was, indeed, an engineer of some experience. Like Roding, he added to his income by occasionally taking part in transactions which were far from questionable.

Tollman was a small thin, weedy man, with weak and watery eyes. Nevertheless, he was muscular and agile, although one would not have thought so to judge by appearances. His smile was extremely pleasant, and there was an air of geniality about him which at once set his intended victims at their ease. Rufus Tollman had perpetrated many a fraud during the last year or two, and had thereby accumulated quite a considerable fortune. But he was far from satisfied.

Jimmy Fielder liked Tollman at once. During the short taxi ride from Southampton Lane Roding had given his companion a few facts regarding the mining engineer. Tollman was rich, and was quite prepared to speculate large sums if he saw a fair opening. This was welcome news to Fielder, and he consequently felt quite pleased with himself. He was even more pleased when he had been formally introduced to Mr. Rufus Tollman.

He little guessed that this man would soon be drawing him into a snare from which escape would be difficult. Eileen Dare's surmise was correct. Fielder had been employed by Roding two or three years before, and at that time the Combine had not been formed. Stanton Roding, indeed, had been a comparatively honest man in those days, and had treated Fielder well.

The young man was not to know that with the passage of time his former employer had sunken low as regards scruples. Fielder thought that Road-

ing was a gentleman to his finger tips, and naturally assumed that Rufus Tollman was also a man of unimpeachable character.

There was certainly not a breath of suspicion against either of the two men, and Jimmy Fielder considered that he had fallen "right on his feet" into something good.

The mining engineer's office was rather palatial, and this evidence of prosperity was much to Fielder's liking. He and Roding conversed idly for a moment or two with Tollman, and then Roding reached for his hat.

"Well, I'll be going," he exclaimed. "I've introduced your prospective client, Mr. Tollman, and I daresay he has private business to discuss——"

"No, not at all!" Fielder interjected. "At least, it isn't private from you, Mr. Roding. I know I can trust you two gentlemen implicitly, and my yarn's a queer one, I guess. Maybe you'll both be interested. I wouldn't breathe a word if I wasn't fully satisfied as to your integrity."

Roding laid his hat down again and smiled to himself. He had had no intention of taking his departure, but it was as well to keep up appearances. He had an idea that a lamb had been caught, and it would be the Combine's task to fleece him.

"Well, suppose you tell us all about it, eh?" said Rufus Tollman genially. "You have made me curious, Mr. Fielder."

The cripple produced from an inner pocket a small canvas bag. Untying the cord which fastened it, he tilted the bag up and several curious-looking pebbles rolled out upon Tollman's desk. There were four altogether—three very small, and the other slightly larger.

"Just have a look at these, gentlemen," said Fielder quietly.

The mining engineer picked up one of the pebbles quickly, and then switched on an electric table-lamp which stood by his side. By the brilliant light of this he examined the pebble closely.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed in startled tones. "This is a diamond!"

Jimmy Fielder nodded.

"A good one too, I believe," he observed.

"A good one!" echoed Tollman. "Why, upon my soul, it is a superb stone—small, but of the purest quality."

Stanton Roding was greatly interested.

"Diamonds, eh?" he exclaimed in a casual tone. "You seem to have been doing well, Fielder. There must be quite a large amount of money upon the table."

The young man laughed.

"This lot?" he exclaimed, almost contemptuously. "I guess this is a very poor sample, gentlemen. I know of a spot where these diamonds sort of grow wild! The only thing is, they are hard to get. But they're there right enough—thousands of them. Heaps a sight larger than these, too!"

"Dear me—dear me!" exclaimed Rufus Tollman, endeavouring to still the quiver of excitement in his voice. "These diamonds are remarkably fine, Mr. Fielder. In fact, I might say that they are almost perfect, although small. But you say they are difficult to obtain?"

Jimmy Fielder nodded.

"At present," he agreed. "But when the proper plant is laid down I guess it'll be a dead easy job. You figure, of course, that these stones came from the United States? Well, that's quite true—one of the loneliest spots in a desolate state."

"How did you come to discover them?" inquired Tollman.

"Well, I reckon it was an accident," was Fielder's reply. "I had been located at a one-horse township for several months, and I got kind of fed-up with the life. So I hit the trail for the hills, intending to do a little

prospecting out in a spot that's well-nigh deserted by mankind. Folks around those parts calculate that the ground's dead—that it ain't worth a red cent. They're wrong, as you'll understand."

"You went prospecting, you say?"

"Sure. Prospecting for gold, as a matter of fact. I hadn't any high-flown ideas about diamonds at that time," replied the cripple. "Well, I got right out in a spot where no other man is seen for months on end. I lived in my little shack and did a whole heap of prospecting. But there wasn't a thimbleful of gold in the whole landscape. When I was just about tired of the game I hit upon these little fellows."

"Did you know what they were?"

"Yes. I'd seen a good few uncut diamonds a year or two previously."

"You were pleased with your find, no doubt?"

"Pleased!" Fielder laughed. "Say, Mr. Tollman, I guess I went mad for about two days. I prospected the whole show, so to speak, and I reckon that there's a reef out there worth millions. I'm not just telling you a yarn; I know something about the business. And these little pebbles here will convince you even if my words can't."

"They're splendid stones, at all events," remarked Tollman.

"After a couple of weeks I came to the conclusion that I was about as helpless as a baby, on my own," continued the young man. "On account of the peculiar formation of the ground I nicknamed the place 'Crooked Reef'; and, believe me, gentlemen, Crooked Reef is worth a dozen gold mines lumped into one. But I guessed, right off, that I should require a large amount of capital. An extensive plant must be hiked out there to begin with."

"I begin to understand," said Tollman thoughtfully. "You came to England with the intention of raising the necessary money?"

"In a way that's right enough," replied Jimmy Fielder. "I left the hills and moved down to the township as fast as I could carry myself. But I reckon I was too eager; I had had so much luck that I got kind of careless. For I had not entered the outskirts of the town before I was bowled over by an auto!"

"That was indeed unfortunate," commented Roding.

"You're putting it mildly, Mr. Roding," said Fielder. "As you can guess, it was my intention to annex that piece of ground for myself straight off—to lay my claim and get Crooked Reef fairly and squarely. I had intended going straight to the office the very first thing I did."

"Why didn't you go?" asked Tollman.

Jimmy Fielder looked down bitterly at his contorted leg.

"I reckon that auto had a spite against me," he exclaimed quietly. "Just when I was triumphant the blamed thing came along and fairly knocked me into a wreck. I was smashed up completely, gentlemen. The doctors told me afterwards that I had a constitution of steel, or I shouldn't have pulled through. I hope this yarn of mine isn't boring you?"

His companions assured him that they were keenly interested, and they were speaking from their hearts, for they were more than interested. There were possibilities here which struck them very forcibly.

"That accident wasn't like being knocked over by a kid's mailcart," went on Jimmy Fielder grimly. "I was unconscious for ten days, gentlemen, and when I recovered I found myself in a city eighty miles away from the township. I had been taken there to die—for they reckoned I was a goner. I was in hospital nigh on dead."

"Your leg was broken, of course?"

"Shattered in about five different places," declared Fielder quietly.

"That leg has cost me some thousands of dollars, you can take it from me! But my head was split, too, my left arm broken, and two of my ribs were caved in. Sounds pretty, eh? I tell you, it was some accident!"

"It is a wonder you lived!" remarked Roding.

"I've been puzzling myself for weeks on that subject," said the other with a smile. "If any man ought to have died, I reckon that was me. But I was as hearty as a mule, and pulled round. I mended very quickly—except for this leg of mine. The doctors decided that it would have to be removed. They had a foolish notion that I could get on just as well without it."

Fielder tapped the limb affectionately.

"Those doctors were mugs," he went on. "This leg has been a great pal of mine all my life, and I didn't feel up to saying good-bye to him. I thought he was more use to me than to those fool doctors. He's a bit knocked about, I'll admit, but he's there—and mighty useful, too."

"How did you manage to save it?"

"Well, I had a bag full of these diamonds, and I lay in bed figuring things out," was the young man's reply. "If I let my leg go I couldn't get another, could I? But if I let some of the diamonds go I knew very well that it would only be a matter of time before I got heaps more. And so I offered those doctors about five thousand dollars' worth of diamonds to preserve my leg."

"You were very wise," declared Tollman.

"I don't reckon you're far wrong," said Fielder with a smile. "Those doctors had me shifted on a swell, slap-up railroad car right away east to New York. Say, it was some dandy affair—a travelling hospital ward, I guess. Well, in New York a thousand-guinea specialist operated, and my leg was saved, although, as you see, I'm a bit crippled. At last I recovered sufficiently to get out and about, and then I began to think."

"Weeks had passed since you had made your discovery?" asked Tollman. "You naturally wondered what you should do regarding Crooked Reef, as you call it."

Jimmy Fielder nodded.

"That's about the size of it," he replied. "I was in New York—well over a thousand miles from the reef. I wanted capital, and I thought it as well to settle the matter before going back west. A liner happened to be leaving for England straight away, and so I booked a passage—and I've been back in the old country exactly three days."

"But weren't you afraid of your diamond reef being discovered by another man?" asked Roding curiously. "Surely it was unwise——"

"I reckoned a week or two wouldn't make much difference," interjected Fielder. "I was in New York, and you can bet I shall get back there the very instant I fix things up. Say, I didn't want American capital in the thing. I'm British, and I decided that my uncle should have the first chance."

"And he pool-pooed the idea, I imagine?" suggested Tollman.

A faint smile appeared on Fielder's face.

"Poor old Uncle Ned didn't have the chance," he replied. "He was my only relative, so far as I know, and I found that he hit the long trail well over eighteen months ago. He died, gentlemen, and left his money to charity. So I found myself in Queer Street. I was in England without a relative to go to and without a friend. The man I had relied upon to advance the capital I required was dead. So what did I do? I thought I'd better seek the advice of a gentleman who could be trusted."

"That was your wisest plan, my dear Fielder," said Stanton Roding softly. "You came to me?"

"Exactly. I remembered my former employer," said Jimmy Fielder. "I thought perhaps that you would be able to help me. And I've got an idea that Mr. Tollman and I will fix things up good and proper. I'm real obliged to you, Mr. Roding, for giving me this introduction."

"I am only too pleased to be of service to you, my dear fellow," said Roding magnanimously. "But there's one point you didn't make clear. Was it not an act of folly on your part to leave America without staking your claim?"

"I guess I did the best thing, Mr. Roding," was Fielder's reply. "I was so far east that running across to England didn't make much difference. Crooked Reef is in a spot which isn't likely to be visited for months on end. Owing to my accident I couldn't safeguard my claim, and the first man who gets to the spot will have the first right to it. But you need not have any fears on that point, gentlemen. Not a soul in the whole State has any notion that diamonds exist out there, and I could remain in England for six months without feeling uncomfortable."

Rufus Tollman nodded.

"Since you have adopted this course it is obvious that you are satisfied regarding the safety of this visit," he said. "Nevertheless, I should advise you to return to America as quickly as possible. I understand that you require capital?"

"Big capital," said Jimmy Fielder promptly. "The reef is a difficult one to work, and a very large sum of money is required to find the necessary plant. I haven't got it. These diamonds wouldn't fetch a tenth of the amount. That biggest one you handled just now is the only valuable stone. Besides, I want to do the thing properly. It will require something like fifty thousand to do the thing in the correct style."

"Pounds or dollars?" inquired Tollman.

"Pounds, of course," declared Fielder quietly. "These diamonds of mine will help, of course, but they're no good alone. I want somebody to enter into partnership with me and supply the money. He needn't go into the thing blindfold, for he can come out to the States with me and examine the reef with his own eyes. It's all fair and square."

Rufus Tollman lay back in his chair.

"I am greatly struck by your story, Mr. Fielder," he exclaimed pleasantly. "We shall, of course, have to go into matters far more thoroughly. I am disposed to take up this affair seriously, and to co-operate with you."

"Good man!" said Fielder, thrusting out his hand. "I'm a fellow who doesn't let grass grow under his feet. Suppose we meet again to-night, at nine o'clock?"

"That will suit me splendidly," said Tollman.

And so it was arranged.

But at four o'clock in the afternoon there was another meeting. Tollman and Roding called the Combine together, and a decision was come to. The secret of Crooked Reef was to be obtained from Jimmy Fielder: the cripple was to be swindled out of that which he had worked so hard to obtain.

The Combine saw no reason why they should not have the diamond reef entirely to themselves.

CHAPTER III.

Eileen's Suspicions—Nelson Lee Talks Straight—The Result.

WHEN Eileen Dare finished work that evening at five-thirty she was as cold and businesslike as usual. In her character of "Miss Higgs" she was an ideal employee.

Stanton Roding was more than satisfied with her. She was capable and highly efficient, and was always perfectly precise and thorough. Never once had Roding had cause to find fault with her work.

And the rogue had no inkling that his shorthand-typist was the girl who had done so much to wreck the Combine. To Roding and to every other employee at the office Eileen was merely the prim and cold Miss Higgs.

But as soon as Eileen had finished for the day she rode home to Chelsea by motor-'bus, and then removed the disguise. Within a very short time she was herself again—dainty, delightful, and extremely pretty.

But the girl was worried.

The events of the day had been strange—and sinister. At last, Eileen believed, her long days of waiting were to be rewarded. The coming of Mr. James Fielder had brought about a decided change in the aspect of things.

Those few words which the girl had overheard in the office told her that something of importance was in the wind. Fielder had mentioned that there was "big money" in the business he had to discuss, and Roding had at once decided to leave his letters—which were really important—and take Fielder round to Rufus Tollman.

And Tollman was a mining engineer. The cripple had said that he was anxious to be introduced to a mining engineer; and that in itself was suggestive. But Eileen was not judging by these simple facts alone.

She had other evidence to go upon.

When Roding had returned to the office, after escorting Fielder to Tollman, his mood was strangely altered. There was a gleam in his eyes which Eileen did not fail to observe; it was a gleam of evil satisfaction.

His mind was occupied on a matter other than his business, for he neglected almost everything he had arranged to accomplish. Several important business affairs were allowed to rest, and at three-thirty Roding again left the office.

Although Eileen was unaware of the fact, he had gone off to attend the meeting of the Combine—which was being held in Tollman's office. It was twenty minutes past five when Stanton Roding returned, and Eileen was preparing to depart.

She again noticed that evil gleam in her employer's eyes; but now it was more apparent, and the girl was positive that Roding had been out on some mission connected with Jimmy Fielder—some mission which would lead to villainy.

But how was Eileen to discover the truth? How could she get on the track? For some little time she pondered over the matter. Jimmy Fielder had struck her as being a straightforward, gentlemanly young fellow, and she shuddered when she thought of him being in the cruel clutches of the Combine.

She knew that he was staying at the Fleet Palace Hotel, for she had heard him mention the name. But it was obviously impossible for her to go there and give Fielder the warning he needed.

And so Eileen's thoughts turned to Nelson Lee.

The famous detective had been busily engaged lately upon a knotty case, and had only just returned from a visit to the West of England. The

affair upon which he had been engaged had ended satisfactorily, and for the time being, Eileen knew, Lee was taking things easily.

Coming to a quick decision, the girl rang up her famous friend, and said that she was journeying to Gray's Inn Road at once. When she arrived she found Nelson Lee and Nipper waiting to receive her.

"Ah, that's better, miss!" said Nipper brightly. "You're yourself now, right enough! I hope you've finished with that rotten disguise."

Eileen looked grave.

"I don't know, Nipper," she replied. "Perhaps I shall have to continue the role of 'Miss Higgs' for some little time yet. It all depends upon how events shape themselves. I believe I have hit upon something important."

"You believe?" repeated Nelson Lee questioningly.

"Well, I am not certain," was Eileen's reply. "There is only the faintest suspicion of roguery at the present moment. Perhaps I am quite wrong in my conclusions, but I thought it as well to seek your advice, Mr. Lee."

"Please tell me what has happened."

"That is just it—nothing has happened," replied the girl.

And in a few brief sentences she told Nelson Lee of the events of the day. Nothing had happened, she declared—but by that she meant that nothing of note had taken place. Lee, however, thought otherwise.

"It looks to me as though something definite has taken place," he remarked shrewdly. "Obviously, Roding was satisfied with the result of Fielder's introduction to Rufus Tollman. Fielder is an American, I think you said?"

"No, he's British, but he speaks with a strong American accent," replied the girl. "Some people get into the habit sooner than others, I suppose. I honestly believe he is a good fellow, with a complete ignorance of Roding's real character. Even if he is keen-witted and cautious, those blackguards will delude him."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"That is almost certain," he replied. "It all depends upon the prospect. If there is money in the game the Combine will certainly do their utmost to rob him of it. Of course, we know nothing as yet."

"Fielder told Roding that 'it was the biggest thing that had ever happened,'" said Eileen quietly. "And that 'there was a pile of money in the job.' Roding at once became interested. And it was his expression of cunning satisfaction, when he came into the office at about twenty-past-five, which aroused my strongest suspicions."

Nelson Lee lay back in his chair, and pulled thoughtfully at his cigarette.

"H'm! It is rather interesting," he remarked. "We shall have to see what can be done. What is the time? Just ten minutes to seven. The most positive way in which to warn Fielder would be to send him a note——"

"Anonymous?" put in Nipper.

"No, decidedly not," said Lee sharply. "Anonymous letters are detestable in every shape and form. You ought to know that as well as I, Nipper. Unless I can sign my name to a letter I do not write at all. Send Fielder a note, I say, requesting him to pay me a visit at once."

"Do you think he would come?" asked Eileen doubtfully.

"We can, at least, see what effect such a note would have," replied Lee. "To talk to him here, in my own consulting-room, would be far better than my paying him a visit at his hotel. He would probably assume that I was spying. You will taxi to the Fleet Palace Hotel, Nipper, and bring Fielder back, if possible."

Lee picked up his pen, and wrote a few lines upon a sheet of notepaper.

The words were merely to the effect that it would be greatly to Mr. James Fielder's advantage if he would pay Nelson Lee a call at the earliest possible moment.

Nipper was soon off, and he was back in a surprisingly short space of time. And, with him, he brought Jimmy Fielder. There was a look of wonder upon the young man's bronzed face as he entered the consulting-room. Needless to say, he did not know that he had seen Eileen Dare before that day.

"I am glad that you have come, Mr. Fielder," said Nelson Lee, waving his hand towards an easy chair. "You are, of course, curious to know why I should have brought you to my rooms?"

"I'm dead curious, Mr. Lee," replied Fielder frankly. "I've heard of you, of course. You're the well-known private detective, I believe? Even out West, your name is familiar."

"I had no idea my fame had spread so far afield," laughed Nelson Lee. "But to be serious, Mr. Fielder, I wish you to understand that my intentions are solely and absolutely for your own good."

Jimmy Fielder gazed from Lee to Eileen Dare perplexedly.

"I guess I'm puzzled," he declared.

"And, to tell the truth, I am puzzled, too," went on Lee. "I hardly know how to frame my words, Mr. Fielder. It is a somewhat delicate task I have taken upon myself. But I rely upon your commonsense; I rely upon you to take what I am going to say in a spirit of friendliness."

"You're sure muddling me up, Mr. Lee," confessed the cripple. "What do you know about me, anyway? And why should it be to my advantage to see you? I gathered that you were going to tell me something about my uncle—my late uncle."

Lee shook his head.

"I will beat about the bush no longer," he said. "I know nothing whatever about you, Mr. Fielder, and if you do not choose to enlighten me, I shall not press you in the slightest way. I am an honest man, like yourself, and I wish to warn you against two men with whom you are acquainted."

Jimmy Fielder sat up.

"Two men? I guess——"

"My dear sir, please do not guess," interjected Lee smoothly. "Pray hear me out. It has come to my knowledge that you visited Mr. Stanton Roading to-day; and, later, Mr. Rufus Tollman."

"That's true enough."

Lee hesitated.

"Would it be impertinent if I asked the object of your visit to Mr. Tollman?" he suggested, after a moment. "I do not press you at all. If your business was of a private nature——"

"It was, in a way."

"Then, perhaps, you had better not refer to your interview," said Lee quietly. "I have no desire to probe into personal matters, Mr. Fielder. But I leave it, of course, to your discretion."

The cripple rubbed his chin wonderingly.

"There's no harm in my telling you why I went to Mr. Tollman," he replied. "I guess I sha'n't be revealing a secret. Mr. Roading introduced me to Tollman, and I have every reason to believe that we are going to do business."

"They've trapped him already!" thought Eileen bitterly.

"Out in the States I discovered a rich deposit of diamonds," went on Fielder candidly. "But I am without capital, and so Mr. Tollman and I

are going to enter into the business together. That's the long and the short of it, Mr. Lee."

"Your interests are, of course, protected?"

"I guess I don't quite follow."

"I mean, this diamond property in America is safe from usurpers?" asked Lee. "Supposing I, for example, learned the secret of its whereabouts, could I go out to America and claim it?"

"That's just it—you could."

"Oh!" murmured Eileen.

She exchanged a quick glance with Nelson Lee. They both began to see light. There had been good reason, evidently, for Stanton Roding's satisfaction. It was painfully obvious that the Combine intended elbowing Fielder out of the way, once they had obtained his secret.

"I have no wish to put further questions to you, Mr. Fielder," said Nelson Lee. "But there is one I should like answering. Have you told your friends any detail regarding these diamonds you refer to?"

"No exact details."

"They couldn't find the spot?"

"Well, seeing that I haven't mentioned it to them, I don't very well see how they could," answered Fielder drily. "But what's the idea, Mr. Lee? I guess I don't catch on at all."

Nelson Lee faced his visitor squarely.

"I am going to talk to you straight, Mr. Fielder," he said. "Perhaps you will be offended; I hope not. Perhaps you will think that I am interfering in a matter which does not concern me in the least; again I hope not. For this warning I am giving you is not interference, and I am seriously concerned. What you have just told me is excellent news. You have not revealed your secret."

"Not to a soul."

"Then take my advice, my dear sir, and don't breathe another word to either Tollman or Roding," went on Lee. "I realise that I am treading on delicate ground, for you do not understand matters as I do."

Jimmy Fielder stared angrily.

"Do you mean to suggest——"

"I am not suggesting anything," interrupted Lee quietly. "I am merely making a statement of fact. Mr. Stanton Roding and Mr. Rufus Tollman are a pair of unscrupulous rogues, and you will act wisely if you see neither of them again."

"And is this why you brought me here?" said Fielder, breathing hard.

"Yes."

"To issue insults against two honourable men——"

"Pardon me. I have done nothing of the sort," put in Lee quickly. "I have issued no insults. I was afraid that you would misunderstand me, and I regret it exceedingly. My motive is an excellent one, for it is painful to see even a stranger caught in the snare of scoundrelly tricksters."

Jimmy Fielder rose to his feet abruptly.

"I guess the trickster is right here, before me," he exclaimed heatedly. "You tricked me into paying you this visit, Mr. Lee, and that's plain! I always understood that you were a square, honest man——"

"I hope this interview has not altered that opinion," put in Nelson Lee, taking the cripple's arm. "I am acting for your good, believe me. I merely wish to warn you, Mr. Fielder. I do not even ask you to believe my statements regarding the characters of the two men I mentioned. All I want you to do is to be prepared for villainy. Be on your guard, and you

will very soon find out for yourself that I have not made a false statement."

Fielder's lip curled.

"There's something behind this," he said bitterly. "I guess you'll be trying to wheedle the secret out of me next——"

"Come, come! You do not mean that," said Lee sharply. "I am pained to see this exhibition of temper. I had hoped that you would see eye for eye with me in this matter. Perhaps it is not too late for me to convince you of my sincerity? I have no axe to grind, Mr. Fielder; what I am doing is solely for your own benefit. All I say is—be on your guard."

"You've called my friends rogues!" said Fielder angrily. "I guess that's not to be stood, Mr. Lee. I worked for Mr. Roding some years ago, and I always respected him and honoured him. He never did a criminal action in his life. And Mr. Tollman is his friend; I reckon that's good enough for me!"

Lee shrugged his shoulders.

"Then further conversation is useless," he said regretfully. "I have done my best. One day, perhaps, you will remember this interview, Mr. Fielder. Personally, I am convinced that villainy is afoot, and I wish I could bring you to reason. Tollman and Roding are blackguards——"

"That's a foul lie!" cried Fielder hotly.

For a moment Nelson Lee's eyes flashed dangerously. Then he smiled quietly to himself. After all, the young man was only hot-headed, and it would be absurd to enter into a quarrel with him.

"You will live to regret those words, Mr. Fielder," was all Lee said.

"And you are the blackguard, if anybody is!" continued the cripple, with rising fury. "I guess you'd better mind your own business, Mr. Lee! You'd better confine yourself to matters which concern you——"

Eileen Dare stepped forward impulsively.

"Please, please!" she exclaimed, speaking for the first time. "Oh, why don't you understand, Mr. Fielder? It was I who asked Mr. Lee to warn you. We are friends; we wish to help you. Those men mean to defraud you. They mean to gain possession of your secret, and then cast you aside. And you will have no redress whatever, for they will be clever enough to safeguard themselves. Won't you believe what we say? We only want you to test our statements."

Fielder was nonplussed for a moment. His bronzed face had turned ruddy with anger, but with Eileen before him he scarcely knew what to do. The girl's pretty face was earnest and full of concern. At that particular moment, Eileen looked her prettiest. There was something wonderfully appealing in her expression.

"I—I guess——" stammered Jimmy Fielder.

Then he shook himself abruptly, and backed away.

"This is all part of the game, I figure?" he said thickly. "You're trying to get round me with your pretty face and soft-soap words? You're trying to make me believe that my friends are scoundrels! Well, I guess you won't—you won't! They are as honest as the day."

Eileen clenched her little hands despairingly.

"Oh, please don't get angry!" she exclaimed. "Compose yourself, Mr. Fielder, and listen——"

"I've listened too long already!" snapped the other, reaching for his hat. "Maybe you'll try other dodges if I stay longer!" he added furiously. "I'm going right from here to Mr. Tollman's house in Hammer-smith. I shall see both Mr. Tollman and Mr. Roding. By heck! They shall know what you've said about 'em—every word! Don't make any mistake about that!"

And Jimmy Fielder, now white with anger, hobbled to the door.

"Please," cried Eileen urgently, "come back—— Oh!"

The girl uttered the exclamation as Fielder slammed the consulting-room door with tremendous force. There ~~was~~ a moment's tense silence, and the cripple's uneven footstep could be heard descending the stairs.

"Oh, what a pity," said Eileen—"what a pity!"

Nipper snorted.

"Don't waste any pity on that rotter!" he said warmly. "The absolute ruffian! Insulting you like that, Miss Eileen! He's not worth worrying about—that's what I say. The chap's a first-class bounder!"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"No, Nipper. I really believe that Fielder is a splendid fellow at heart," he said quietly. "But he is hot-headed, and would not listen calmly. It seems that we have done more harm than good, Miss Eileen. It is a great pity, as you say."

"What can we do now?" asked the girl distressfully.

"I have a notion in my head," replied Lee. "Perhaps it is not too late for action, after all. We must see what can be done."

Meanwhile, Jimmy Fielder was hobbling down Gray's Inn Road, his mind in a whirl. The cool air calmed him, however, and he began to think over what had passed in the famous detective's consulting-room.

It was a pack of lies, he decided angrily.

Tollman and Roding were as honest as the day. The more Fielder looked at the matter, the more absurd it seemed. Both his business friends were well-known gentlemen, and their names were honoured and respected by all.

It was preposterous to suppose that they could enter into any conspiracy to defraud him. He trusted Roding and Tollman absolutely, for his eyes were still unopened. Nelson Lee's warning had had just the opposite effect to what was intended. Fielder was even more determined to trust his friends to the very last.

But by the time he reached his hotel he had calmed down.

And he decided, after all, to tell Roding and Tollman nothing of the incident. It would only cause bother perhaps. A libel action might even result; and Fielder did not want any absurd delays.

The young man was wise in adopting that course, as it turned out.

For the strange events of the evening were far from over.

CHAPTER IV.

Misplaced Trust—The Secret Revealed—A Startling Incident.

RUFUS TOLLMAN'S residence at Hammersmith was quite small; it was, in fact, a bachelor flat. But it was sumptuously furnished, and was handily situated. Tollman was a man who liked company, and very frequently he held small card-parties. And, as a general rule, there was nearly always somebody or other in or out for a game of billiards, or a smoke and a chat.

Tollman bore an excellent name. His real character was quite unknown among the bulk of his friends. He was so genial and frank and open that people would have laughed outright at the thought of Rufus Tollman being mixed up in anything that was not strictly honest.

One of his regular visitors had always been Stanton Roding, and other members of the Combine sometimes dropped in. It was not often that Tollman's flat was used as a place for the discussion of business.

But to-night it was thought best, under the circumstances. So, at nine-thirty, Tollman's cosy little smoking-room was hazy-blue with cigar-smoke. The fire glowed warmly, and the electric-lights gleamed down upon the luxurious chairs.

Roading and Tollman and Jimmy Fielder had been talking for nearly half an hour. The cripple had arrived on the stroke of nine, and the men had got straight to business.

This was no everyday chat. It was a serious financial discussion. Fielder had made no mention of his visit to Nelson Lee's rooms, and the two rogues had no idea that an attempt had been made to open their victim's eyes.

If they had known they would have been consoled by the fact that Fielder did not believe the "libels" against his friends. In spite of the earnest warning, he trusted Tollman and Roading implicitly.

And, upon the whole, was Jimmy Fielder to blame?

He had worked for Roading, some years before, and at that time Roading had been comparatively honest. It was only of late years, since he had become connected with the Combine, that his true unscrupulous character came to the fore. And, once having started upon a secret career of crime, it was difficult to draw a line. And Roading had no wish to draw a line. The profits from his "Combine deals" were far greater than his legitimate profits—as may well be supposed.

But this was all secret; the world knew nothing of it. Jimmy Fielder, once a chief clerk in Roading's office, looked up to his former "guv'nor," and it was only natural that he should place perfect trust in him.

The same applied to Rufus Tollman. He was Roading's friend—and that, in itself, was a recommendation in Fielder's eyes. Then, again, Tollman possessed an excellent reputation in the mining world, and was certainly a capable mining engineer. And his cheery, genial manner disarmed suspicion at once.

How could Fielder credit Nelson Lee's statement?

How could he believe that these men were bent on betraying him? The cripple scoffed at the very idea, and was fully determined to go right ahead with the business. Moreover, Fielder had never met Lee before, and a notion found a place in his mind that the detective had some grudge against Tollman, and had acted solely for the purpose of harming him. Fielder did not realise that Nelson Lee was not capable of such petty spite.

The painful fact could not be denied.

Fielder was caught in the meshes, and although he had been warned, he believed more strongly than ever in the men who were really his deadly enemies. After all, Jimmy was a trustful, unsuspecting fellow, and was as clay in the hands of the experienced rogues.

Rufus Tollman was going into a business scheme which sounded very rosy. But it had merely been evolved for Fielder's benefit. Tollman did not intend to carry the idea out. Its object was to draw from Fielder the secret he held. Apparently, Tollman was ready and willing to enter into an agreement which was overwhelmingly in the young man's favour.

It was a ruse, of course. The cunning scoundrel, by placing absolute faith in Fielder, hoped that the cripple would return the compliment. Everything seemed so straightforward that Fielder was almost compelled to be frank, in his turn.

The whole thing was nothing but an elaborate confidence trick.

"I think I have explained the scheme clearly, Mr. Fielder," said Toll-



Eileen had heard every word that had passed. Fielding had come to Roding because he wanted "a man he could trust."—(See p. 9.)

man, at last, tossing his cigar-end into the fire. "What do you say, Roding?"

"I have followed you keenly, and with great interest," said Roding smoothly.

"Seems to me I get the best of the deal, anyway," laughed Jimmy Fielder. "You're treating me square, Mr. Tollman, and I like a square man. I'll treat you square in return."

Tollman laughed lightly.

"Of course—of course!" he exclaimed. "We understand one another perfectly, my dear Fielder. Before we go any further, however, I should like to hear a little more about this reef—Crooked Reef, as you have called it."

"Sure. As I told you this afternoon, the reef is rich—maybe a heap richer than I know of," said Fielder. "But it's situated right away in the hills, far from railroads and townships."

"That is what I wish to get at," went on Tollman softly. "We must think of every point, Fielder. How will the plant be installed? I can foresee many great difficulties confronting us."

"I guess difficulties were made to overcome," said the cripple. "I've had a good few in my time, and I've generally managed to fall on my feet. But you want to hear about the reef?"

"Well, I should like a few details, certainly."

Fielder nodded quietly.

"I'm going to trust you, gentlemen," he said, looking from one to the other. "I reckon we're in this affair together, and it don't do to have secrets. I'm going to tell you the secret of Crooked Reef right now."

"Can you trust us with that secret?" smiled Roding.

"Right through, boss. If there's one thing in the world that's real certain, it's the knowledge that you wouldn't attempt to elbow me out of the way," said Jimmy Fielder calmly. "You're gentlemen both, and I place all my faith in your good keeping."

Rufus Tollman nodded genially.

"You couldn't do better, my dear Fielder," he exclaimed. "Of course, it is essential that we should know the precise whereabouts of the reef sooner or later. But if you do not feel justified in speaking out at this moment——"

"Say, I allow you're wasting words, Mr. Tollman," interjected the young man. "I've already said that I trust you both, and so we'll go into details right now. The precise geographical position of Crooked Reef is in my head as clearly as though it were stamped upon paper. I can name all the figures right off; the exact number of miles to the nearest township in either direction. And there are certain landmarks among the hills which will locate the reef precisely to anybody who gets round that quarter with the knowledge."

And without further ado Jimmy Fielder provided his companion with the very item of information they were most anxious to know.

He told them just where the diamonds were to be found; he told them how the spot could be reached, and how the reef could be located with practically little or no difficulty.

Within fifteen minutes Rufus Tollman and Stanton Roding were in possession of the cripple's secret. They knew the exact position of the diamond reef to the very last detail.

And, secretly, they were jubilant.

But to all appearances Fielder's confidence had been quite expected and

was taken as a matter of course. The two rogues, however, knew perfectly well that their victim was now shorn of his fleece.

Roading and Tollman were the only two men in the wide world who knew the secret excepting Fielder himself. And the simplicity of this affair was almost absurd. Fielder was placing a blind trust in his companions which was disastrous for himself, and profitable for his enemies.

"Well, the next step is to visit a mutual friend of ours, who lives in chambers, just off Piccadilly," exclaimed Rufus Tollman crisply. "I am referring to Lord Max Roper, Mr. Fielder. He will be pleased to meet you."

The cripple raised his eyebrows.

"A real, live lord, eh?" he laughed.

"Exactly. It happens that he can be of the utmost service to us," replied Tollman. "It is still comparatively early, and if we go at once we shall just catch him alone. Lord Roper is a bachelor, you know."

Fielder frowned a trifle.

"Say, we don't want a whole crowd in this affair," he remarked. "I didn't understand that a fourth party was to be——"

"My dear fellow, Lord Max Roper will know nothing whatever," interrupted Stanton Roading lightly. "He will want to know nothing, either. We are merely going to make use of him in another way. You will understand very soon."

"You're not going to put him wise regarding Crooked Reef?"

"We shall not mention the diamonds at all," replied Tollman.

"Then why the thunder see the feller at all?"

"Because it so happens that Lord Roper owns a private steam-yacht: because his lordship is even now preparing to leave England for a cruise abroad," replied Stanton Roading. "That is why we should see him, my dear Fielder. Roper is a great friend of mine, and——"

"Say, I'm ready to leave," interjected Fielder. "I guess I didn't quite gather the hang of things before. Gee! If this lord takes us across the pond in his swell yacht, we'll do the trip in record time."

Roading nodded.

"That is precisely the idea," he replied quickly. "The sooner you get back to the States the better, Fielder. Everything is going to be fixed up almost immediately, and we cannot wait for the usual passenger boats."

Very shortly afterwards the trio left Tollman's flat, and engaged a taxi just against Hammersmith Broadway. They were soon bowling towards Piccadilly, and were at last deposited upon the pavement opposite the splendid block of chambers where Lord Max Roper resided.

The road was a quiet one, just behind Piccadilly. It was a kind of back-water, and very select. All street lights were shaded and dimmed, and it seemed incredible that one of London's greatest and most famous arteries throbbed with life and activity only a minute's walk away.

The chambers were expensive and exclusive. Lord Max Roper's set of apartments were on the second floor, and, in answer to Tollman's ring, the door was opened by a quiet-looking man in the attire of a butler.

"Hello, Welton," said Roading genially. "His lordship at home?"

"Yes, sir. Will you come in?"

The manservant stood aside, and the three visitors entered. They were soon within a cosy smoking-room, facing the rather languid-looking Lord Max. His lordship was good-looking, and he affected a rather careless attitude at all times.

Yet he was as great a scoundrel as any of his fellow-rogues.

In his younger days Roper had been a "black sheep." He had been a

spendthrift and an evil-liver, and when he had succeeded into the title he had been far from home—in Australia, in fact. He had been sent out there by his father, who had been disgraced by his heir's infamous doings.

Upon coming into the title and property—which did not amount to a great lot—Lord Max had forthwith journeyed to England, and had almost at once become acquainted with Rudolph Stebbing, Sydney Bradford, and several other members of the Combine. And in the end his lordship had played a part in a particularly shady deal.

That affair had increased his banking account considerably, and Lord Max Roper had since been living in comfort and luxury. Without scruples, he had no objection to taking a hand in any fraud, so long as he "raked in" a good haul for himself.

In this particular business he had been well primed for his part. The Combine was working together, and meant to make a great success of the thing. Capital was required, but that was a simple matter. The profits would be stupendous, for Rufus Tollman was quite satisfied as to the wonderful value of Crooked Reef.

Jimmy Fielder was introduced to Lord Max, and he instantly took to the peer. Here, again, was further evidence—or apparent evidence—that everything was perfectly straightforward and above board.

It was preposterous to suppose that Lord Roper was conspiring with these two men, as Nelson Lee had intimated. True, the detective had not mentioned Roper, but since his lordship was associated with Roding and Tollman, it could be assumed that Lee would have included Lord Max.

Jimmy Fielder was more convinced than ever that he had acted wisely in going straight ahead with the scheme.

Tollman's proposals were more than fair, and all the plans seemed to be maturing with astonishing ease and swiftness. Fielder little guessed the truth! He little imagined that all this had been previously prepared and rehearsed!

In a few words Rufus Tollman opened the conversation.

"This young gentleman is my client, Roper," he explained. "I am working on his behalf. There's no necessity for me to go into details regarding the nature of Mr. Fielder's business. I know you wouldn't be interested, in any case. Business was never one of your strong points, was it?"

"Great Scott, no!" exclaimed Lord Max Roper, with a yawn. "Hate the very sound of the word, my good Tollman. To tell you the honest truth, I'm bored to death with London after having been home for a couple of months. At this time of the year I like to be further south, you know. That's one advantage of owning a yacht: I can dodge off just when I like, and go just where I choose."

Tollman nodded.

"Exactly," he exclaimed. "It was about your yacht that I came to see you. The Mayflower, I believe, is leaving these shores within a day or two. That's so, isn't it?"

"Quite correct."

"When do you mean to start?"

"Just as soon as the boat's ready," replied Lord Max. "I'm ready this very minute, if it comes to that. But these yachts are a beastly nuisance, you know. They have to be provisioned and coaled, and all sorts of other silly things. However, I think my skipper will be ready either to-morrow or the day after.

"Jove, that's splendid, Fielder!" exclaimed Tollman, glancing at the cripple. "We sha'n't be losing much time if Lord Roper falls in with our suggestions."

"What suggestions are those, anyhow?" demanded his lordship.

"First of all, what port did you intend making for?" asked Tollman.

"You're going for a cruise, I understand. Where?"

"Anywhere!"

"Well, that's rather a wide statement," smiled the mining engineer. "However, it suits my book down to the ground. What do you say to the idea of crossing the Atlantic, and making for the Gulf of Mexico—New Orleans, to be exact?"

"Gee!" exclaimed Fielder animatedly. "That'll be bully, Mr. Tollman. From New Orleans we can slip north-west through Arkansas and Oklahoma, and be right at our destination in double-slick time—miles better than going up north to New York."

"That was our idea all along," put in Stanton Roding. "Perhaps you will understand now why we paid this visit to Lord Roper. It rests entirely with him whether this plan can be carried out."

"You want me to go to New Orleans?" asked Lord Max thoughtfully. "Well, that's a warm spot, at all events. It will suit me as well as any other. Just as you like, my dear fellows. I'm willing enough. The Mayflower shall make tracks for the Mexican Gulf, if that will suit your requirements."

Tollman slapped his thigh.

"Excellent!" he exclaimed. "You are a good chap, Roper. You see, I am going across to the States with Mr. Fielder on a certain mining expedition, and it is necessary that we should get there as quickly as possible. And to travel in your private yacht will be delightful in the extreme—and, incidentally, less expensive."

They all laughed, and Fielder congratulated himself upon the way things were shaping themselves. Then and there details were entered into, and the cripple was hugely satisfied with everything in general.

And so were the tricksters!

Their victim was playing directly into their hands, had he only known it!

And at the expiration of another hour James Fielder rose to take his departure, in order to return to the Fleet Palace Hotel. Roding and Tollman elected to stay behind with Lord Roper for another half-hour. Although Fielder did not know it, they were anxious to make some final arrangements, of which the cripple must be left in ignorance.

Fielder decided to stroll into Piccadilly, and there to mount a 'bus which would put him down immediately opposite his hotel. But, after walking a hundred yards, a startling thing happened.

A large closed motor-car glided up almost noiselessly. Two dim figures sprang from it, and Jimmy Fielder was bundled inside before he could utter a cry.

Then the car gathered speed and vanished into the darkness.

Events were moving apace indeed.

Fielder had been kidnapped in the open street!

What could it mean?

CHAPTER V.

A Strange Awakening—Fielder is Convinced—Turning the Tables.

WHEN Jimmy Fielder recovered his wits he was aware of a delightful feeling of languor and comfort. He seemed to be reclining in a gloriously easy chair, before a gloriously blazing fire.

Then, gradually, memory came back to him.

And he knew that something startling had happened. Without moving or opening his eyes, he recollected being pushed violently into the closed motor-car. Fielder lay quite still, trying to bring everything to mind.

But there was a blank somewhere.

He remembered entering the automobile, and he remembered the vehicle starting off with a jerk. Two men had seized him, and were holding him tightly. But beyond that point everything was utterly blank.

Of course, he had been drugged. But the drug was obviously harmless, for he was now in possession of his wits again, and he experienced no ill effects. His head was becoming clearer every moment, and he was in no pain.

But the impression of being in an easy-chair was, of course, absurd.

Where was he?

Jimmy Fielder opened his eyes slowly, half-fearful as to what he should see. Wild ideas had been in his head. Perhaps he had been kidnapped by some scoundrels who wished to force his secret from him. Perhaps it was the diamonds he carried——

"Gee whiz!" gasped Fielder faintly.

He saw, with amazed eyes, that he was in a luxurious easy-chair, and that a glorious fire was blazing before him!

It had been no false impression.

The cripple stared dully for a few moments, without moving an inch. He was trying to recall where he had seen that fireplace. It was familiar, somehow. And the mantelpiece, too, with its litter of pipes, cigarette-boxes, tobacco-jar, etc. That was familiar.

Where had he seen them?

Why, good heavens! It was Nelson Lee's consulting-room, in Gray's Inn Road! Jimmy Fielder sat bolt upright and twisted round.

Three silent figures were watching him.

They were Nelson Lee, Nipper, and Eileen Dare!

"Say!" stammered Fielder weakly. "I—I guess I'm kinder dreaming——"

He paused, too startled to continue. Could it be possible that he had been kidnapped in the open street by Nelson Lee? Was it conceivable that the famous criminologist had resorted to open violence? Although Fielder did not know much about Nelson Lee he thought it impossible that the detective should have performed this amazing act.

But it was no dream!

"You have come round splendidly, Mr. Fielder," Nelson Lee's soft voice exclaimed. "I just calculated correctly. The drug has done you no harm, and it allowed Nipper and myself to smuggle you up here without being observed."

And then, in a moment, the cripple awoke to full activity.

He jumped to his feet, holding on to the back of the chair. His eyes were blazing, his lips quivering with sudden fury.

"You scoundrel!" he cried hotly. "So you did that trick, did you? I always thought that you were a decent citizen, Mr. Lee. But now I find you are no better than a common footpad. By George! The police shall know of this——"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"Nonsense!" he said smoothly. "Please be calm, Mr. Fielder——"

"Be calm!" roared the other. "Haven't you deliberately kidnapped me?"

"To be frank—yes."

"And you expect me to be calm?" asked Fielder angrily.

"No, I do not expect you to be," was the detective's reply. "On the contrary, I fully anticipated this outburst. Under the circumstances, it was to be expected. Nevertheless, it will be ever so much better if you get your temper under control. You are not harmed, and will not be harmed."

The detective's words seemed to have a calming effect upon Jimmy Fielder, and he took a deep breath. In his anger and excitement he had spoken almost ordinary English, with very little of the American twang which usually characterised his conversation. Now, however, he dropped back into the style of talk he had grown accustomed to during his sojourn "out West."

"Say, boss, I give you best!" he panted, staring from Lee to Nipper, and then to Eileen Dare. "What the thunder does it mean, anyway? I guess I'm puzzled a whole heap. Detectives don't make a habit of this kidnapping stunt, do they?"

Nelson Lee again laughed.

"By no means," he replied. "I can assure you, Mr. Fielder, that matters have to be very serious indeed before I resort to such a step as that which was taken to-night. Needless to say, I acted very drastically."

"Everything went as smooth as glass," declared Nipper, with a grin. "Not a giddy soul saw the horrid abduction. Guv'nor, you and I would make a pretty 'cute pair of kidnappers!"

Fielder set his teeth.

"Well, you've got me here, I guess," he said. "Got me here by foul, dastardly means. Now, I suppose, you are going to force me to obey you? I'm helpless—one against three. I guess you could tackle me alone, miss," he added, glaring at Eileen. "I'm a cripple, anyway, and——"

Eileen stepped forward.

"We have acted solely for your own good, Mr. Fielder," she said softly. "Don't be angry. Mr. Lee will tell you everything, and I am sure you will see the affair in the right light. Do we look like bad people?"

"Well, I guess not," confessed Fielder, nonplussed by the direct question. "I was rude to you earlier in the evening, miss, and I'm sorry. I was wild, then. You don't seem to be the wrong sort, anyway. I'm hanged if I can get hold of the right end of this business!"

"Now that you are calm, I will explain," said Nelson Lee, offering Fielder a cigar. "Please take one—they are splendidly mild, and contain no drug," he added, as the cripple hesitated. "My dear fellow, when I have told you all you will take my hand warmly and thank me for having played this trick."

"I guess not," growled Fielder, taking the cigar.

"You silly chump!" burst out Nipper impulsively. "Why can't you be sensible? The guv'nor's been to a terrific lot of trouble over you, and you can't realise it! I reckon you don't deserve——"

"Miss Eileen, kindly gag Nipper!" interjected Lee calmly.

One severe look from Eileen was quite sufficient. Nipper subsided instantly, and looked rather shamefaced. To earn Eileen's displeasure was an awful thing, from Nipper's point of view. He froze up with surprising abruptness.

"Now, Mr. Fielder, I am going to rely upon you to listen quietly and calmly to what I have to say," exclaimed Nelson Lee. "That is all I ask. When I have finished, you may walk out without a word, if you wish. The door is unlocked, and we shall not attempt to stop you. Indeed, even if you shouted for help now, attention would be attracted at once. Will you hear me out?"

Jimmy Fielder looked round him uncertainly.

"Yes," he said at last. "You can go ahead, Mr. Lee."

"Very well. To begin with, I was very concerned when you flung yourself out of this room at the conclusion of your previous visit," said Lee. "You intimated then that you were going straight to Mr. Tollman's flat at Hammersmith."

"I went there."

"Yes, I know that. Did you carry out your threat?"

"What threat?"

"Did you tell him that you had seen me——"

"No, I thought it wasn't necessary," interjected Fielder, smiling for the first time. "I was angry when I said that, Mr. Lee. I guess I calmed down some on the trip to Hammersmith. When I saw Mr. Tollman and Mr. Roding I didn't mention what had taken place in this apartment."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" murmured Eileen brightly.

"But I'll tell them of this!" began the cripple heatedly. "I'll tell——"

Nelson Lee snapped his fingers.

"Dear me! What an extremely excitable young man you are, Mr. Fielder!" he protested. "Sit still and listen to me. I acted upon the information you gave me, and sent Nipper to watch Tollman's flat. He saw you all three come out—you and Tollman and Roding. You drove straight to Lord Max Roper's chambers off Piccadilly."

"Guess you know my movements pretty thoroughly!" growled Jimmy Fielder.

"As soon as you had entered Roper's flat," proceeded Lee, "Nipper reported to me by telephone. I was gravely concerned, and decided that the time had come for serious action."

"Why were you concerned?"

"Because Lord Roper is even a greater scoundrel than Roding and Tollman," replied the detective quietly. "Now, now, Mr. Fielder! You promised to hear me out! Please don't fly into another temper. Lord Roper is a thorough rogue, and I knew that a conspiracy was afoot to entrap you. Therefore I arranged the little comedy which took place when you left the flat."

"Comedy! Gee, that's rich!"

"Well, it certainly was a comedy," smiled Lee. "You have come to no harm, at all events. And you surely understand why I took such a drastic step? Suppose I had waited until you arrived at your hotel? Would you have seen me if I had sent my card up to you?"

"No, I don't reckon so."

"And I don't reckon so, either," said Nelson Lee drily. "After the heated interview in this apartment you would have sent me away from the hotel without giving me a moment's hearing. Yet it was absolutely essential that I should have a long, quiet talk with you. Accordingly, I took the bull by the horns, and acted in a manner which was both distasteful to me and which involved trouble with the police if the plan miscarried. However, all went smoothly, and here you are."

"Yes, here I am," said Fielder. "And now, Mr. Lee, you're going to hear me——"

"Oh, no. Not yet," put in Lee calmly. "Not yet, my dear fellow. Please let me finish. Having been to so much trouble to get you here a second time, I am not going to let you slip away without putting you fully in possession of certain facts. On the previous occasion you were too angry to listen attentively, and you forced your way out before you calmed down. Now things are different. You must remain calm—quite calm."

Jimmy Fielder jerked the ash from his cigar.

"You're a queer fish, Mr. Lee," he said frankly.

"That is a somewhat doubtful compliment, I am afraid," smiled Nelson Lee. "Now, first of all, I am going to repeat my former statement. The men you have been associating with are rogues—— Now, then! Temper again, upon my word!" added the detective sharply. "I shall get angry myself before long. Miss Dare and I have decided to save you, Mr. Fielder. We have decided that you are a victim of peculiar circumstances, and it is our duty to set things right."

And then, in clear sentences, Nelson Lee told Jimmy Fielder exactly how he had been duped. On the occasion of Fielder's previous visit the detective had been unable to produce proofs; partly because none were handy, and mainly because the cripple had rushed off so hurriedly.

Now, however, things were different.

Lee had ample evidence to convince a dozen men that Rufus Tollman, at least, was a rogue. Lord Roper's character, too, was laid bare before Fielder. and the young man sat quite still, listening. Gradually he was becoming convinced.

Before he could comment on Lee's remarks, Eileen Dare told him of the murder of her father. The girl detective, in very quiet tones, related everything in connection with that dreadful crime, and then briefly outlined her campaign against the Combine.

She named the men who had been punished—Stebbing and Bridger and Wilmore and Taggert, and the rest. And Fielder, with fully opened eyes at last, listened with spell-bound attention. His face was flushed now, and there was a glint of grim anger in his eyes.

Under the exceptional circumstances, Nelson Lee and Eileen had decided that it would be better to tell Fielder the absolute truth; it was the only way in which to win him over from the men who were bent on victimising him.

"You went to Roding because you had known him years ago," concluded Eileen seriously. "But he is a scoundrel, Mr. Fielder. You are in the clutches of a gang of murderous rogues, who have no scruples and no mercy. The Combine is after the diamonds you referred to. We do not know much about your business, because you have not told us much. But the Combine is evidently making strenuous efforts to entrap you. Don't you realise that we have only acted in your best interests? Can't you understand that Mr. Lee is your friend?"

"You've had proof enough, anyhow!" grunted Nipper, from the background.

Jimmy Fielder took a deep breath.

"Yes, I've had proof enough, sure," he exclaimed huskily. "Great snakes! And I thought you were yarning to me at first, Miss Dare! I'm capable of seeing things in the right light now. I've been a darned fool!"

"Perhaps it would be more correct to say that you have been hot-headed," smiled Nelson Lee. "You are no fool, Mr. Fielder. And I am more glad than I can say to see you reasonable at last. You can understand now why I was so anxious to get hold of you?"

"Sure thing. And that kidnapping dodge was right smart, Mr. Lee. I deserved such treatment, if any man did," confessed Jimmy penitently. "I've been an obstinate, pig-headed idiot. While you and this sweet young lady have been doing your best for me I've been fooling around like a—like a—— Say, if it wasn't for your presence, Miss Dare, I guess there'd be a whole heap of language flying around this apartment!" added Fielder frankly.

Eileen laughed softly.

"Then it is a good thing I am present," she smiled. "But now that we have made friends with you, will you return the compliment, and tell us what Tollman and Roding have been arranging with you? Of course," Eileen added quickly, "we do not wish to pry into your business——"

"Say, I'm going to tell you everything," interrupted Fielder quietly. "I'm going to be as open as the day. I'll tell you why I am in London, and why I went to Stanton Roding."

And the cripple related to the trio the story of Crooked Reef.

"H'm! I am not surprised that the Combine have been making strenuous efforts to get you into their clutches," commented Nelson Lee, when he had heard all. "Your tale is a remarkable one, Mr. Fielder. This reef you speak of is evidently of stupendous value, and it seems that the first man to reach it—to 'discover' it, as it were—will become the owner."

"Sure."

"Supposing Tollman tricked you, and got to the spot a week ahead of you?" asked Eileen. "Would the property become his?"

"Yes. I didn't lay any claim, you see?" replied Fielder, biting his lip. "But Tollman couldn't get there——"

He paused abruptly.

"Have you revealed the secret to these men?" asked Lee. "Surely not? You would not have been so rash, I am sure. Did you tell them the position of Crooked Reef? Did you explain how the spot could be reached?"

Jimmy Fielder stared thoughtfully into the fire.

"Yes!" he said, at last, in a low voice.

Nelson Lee and Eileen Dare exchanged quick glances.

"Good gracious! You told them?" said Lee sharply.

"Everything, I guess. The exact geographical position of the reef," admitted Fielder reluctantly. "But there's no harm done, is there? See here, Mr. Lee, I'll explain what occurred to-night; I'll tell you of the arrangements."

He did so.

"Quick work," remarked Nelson Lee, when Fielder had done. "So Roper's yacht is to sail the day after to-morrow?"

"At sunset."

"And she is to make for New Orleans," went on Lee. "H'm! The plot is becoming quite clear to me. I took this step only just in time, it appears. Once on board Lord Roper's yacht, and out to sea, you would never have lived to see the other side of the Atlantic!"

"You think they meant to kill me?" asked Fielder, startled.

"I am afraid so," put in Eileen. "I can follow Mr. Lee's train of thought exactly. You would have been quietly dropped overboard in the Atlantic, Mr. Fielder—deliberately murdered, in fact. Then the scoundrels would have had everything their own way. Knowing your secret, they would have obtained possession of the reef."

A faint smile appeared on Fielder's face.

"They'll be left in the cart properly now, anyhow," he remarked. "But what do you propose to do, Mr. Lee? Strikes me I'm causing a pile of trouble, one way and another. How are you going to get me out of this fix? I guess you'll go ahead with the thing? I'll pay you well——"

"Tut—tut!" snapped Lee. "For goodness sake don't speak of payment, my dear chap. I entered upon this adventure with the intention of helping Miss Dare; for if Rufus Tollman can be unmasked for the scoundrel he is, Miss Dare will have scored another triumph. You are merely an indident,

to tell the truth—the stepping stone to the finish of another evil career. It is high time Tollman's wings were clipped."

Eileen looked up eagerly.

"I have a plan," she said. "It is necessary to keep the Combine in complete ignorance of all this. They must think that their plans are progressing apace. You, Mr. Fielder, must see Tollman again to-morrow, and pretend that everything is perfectly all right."

"Say, what's the idea, Miss Dare?"

"We must hoodwink the enemy; we must turn the tables," said Eileen quietly. "Even if Tollman is not exposed, it is necessary to frustrate his scoundrelly designs. Nipper will play an important part in the affair, if my scheme is adopted."

"What-ho!" said Nipper heartily. "I'm game for any old thing, miss!"

Eileen Dare then explained her idea.

Lord Roper's yacht, the Mayflower, was to start from Tilbury at sunset, two days hence. The boat would proceed down channel and call at Plymouth before making for the open Atlantic.

"Could you undertake an impersonation, Nipper?" went on the girl detective keenly. "You and Mr. Fielder are about the same size, and——"

"My hat! You mean me to take Mr. Fielder's place?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"Yes. But could it be done?"

"I reckon that's a tall order," said Jimmy doubtfully.

"But not so difficult as you imagine," put in Nelson Lee. "We could manage it all right, I believe. But we don't want Nipper thrown into the Atlantic, Miss Eileen. If he takes Mr. Fielder's place——"

Eileen laughed.

"Nipper will travel to Plymouth in the yacht," she said. "We can be sure that nothing will happen during that short trip. The enemy will wait until the open sea is reached before putting their plans into operation. So Nipper will be in no danger, will he? At Plymouth he will go ashore on some pretext—and remain ashore."

"I must confess that I am unable to follow your reasoning," said Lee.

"The day after to-morrow," said Eileen slowly, "a big liner leaves Liverpool for New York. I was reading about it this morning. She is a new boat; and a fast one. The liner will reach America a week before Roper's yacht sights the American continent. You must travel by that boat, Mr. Lee, and take Mr. Fielder with you. Can you see the plan now?"

Nelson Lee nodded at once.

"Very clearly," he replied with enthusiasm. "And I must compliment you upon the smartness of the idea, Miss Eileen. Mr. Fielder and myself will reach the diamond reef many days ahead of the enemy. We shall therefore be able to establish Mr. Fielder's ownership, and thus outwit the Combine. For Tollman will arrive to find us in possession—and he, himself, will be arrested on several serious charges, provided we can supply the evidence. The Combine will have no inkling of this scheme, for by the time Nipper steps ashore at Plymouth the liner will be on its way across the Atlantic. The Combine will be fooled completely!"

"Gee! It's a great wheeze!" gasped Jimmy Fielder delightedly. "But perhaps I had better tell you—— No, I guess I'll let things stand," he added. "What I was going to say will wait for a bit."

And the daring idea which Eileen Dare had so quickly conceived was discussed thoroughly and completely. All details were entered into, and when Jimmy Fielder took his departure everything was cut and dried.

The Combine would know nothing—yet.

Tollman and Roding would believe that things were going smoothly, and their fury and chagrin would be great when the truth was revealed to them; when they discovered that they had carried an impostor to Plymouth, while the real Jimmy Fielder started for America by a different route!

But the game was not finished yet!

CHAPTER VI.

Something Wrong—In Liverpool—The Shock—Fielder's Surprise—Finis.

NIPPER'S adventures on board the Mayflower turned out to be quite tame and uninteresting.

The youngster had been well primed for the part he had to play, and his disguise was a masterpiece of Nelson Lee's art. The great detective had spent hours upon the work and Nipper was the very personification of Jimmy Fielder. The crippled leg had been an advantage rather than a drawback, for it enabled Nipper to keep up the pretence with greater ease than otherwise would have been the case.

The day following the momentous happenings in Nelson Lee's rooms, Fielder had met his "friends" at Tollman's flat, and had given them no inkling that his eyes had been opened to the truth. For it was of the utmost importance that the Combine should be thoroughly bluffed.

Fielder had affected a slight cold which, he declared, would probably get much worse. Thus, when Nipper stepped into Fielder's shoes, the lad was able to wear a thick woollen muffler and to speak in a hoarse, husky voice which would cause no comment.

Eileen Dare had, of course, continued her work in Roding's office, in the character of "Miss Higga." But this was to be her last day at the work, for there was nothing further to be gained by remaining in the post.

Fielder arranged to arrive at Tilbury just at sunset—an hour before the Mayflower slipped her moorings. But when that time came Jimmy Fielder was safely on his way to Liverpool, and it was Nipper who travelled to Tilbury. The lad half anticipated meeting with some sort of excitement.

But nothing of an eventful nature occurred.

Nipper found that the Mayflower was a small but well equipped steam yacht, with a smart appearance. Everything was in order, and the boat was ready to leave at once. The necessary formalities for departing from English shores had been gone through. And, by means of high influence in certain quarters Lord Roper and "Fielder" were provided with passports. Roper was above military age, and Jimmy Fielder, of course, was unfit for military service, owing to his leg.

The yacht intended making straight for Plymouth—a direct trip. And Nipper, of course, intended going ashore there, in accordance with Eileen's plan. Rather to the lad's surprise, he found that Rufus Tollman was not on board.

Lord Max Roper greeted him heartily, and had no suspicion of the truth. Perhaps it was as well that Tollman was absent, Nipper thought. Lord Max had only met Fielder about twice, and Nipper's position was therefore more secure. The captain, officers, and crew of the yacht were, of course, all decent men. They knew nothing of their employer's villainy. Indeed, as a rule, Roper used the vessel for pleasure purposes only. This was the first occasion on which the Mayflower had been brought into a shady Combine affair.

Nipper was somewhat puzzled, but he did not ask questions. Probably Tollman would join the vessel at Plymouth. And by that time, of course, Eileen's plans would have materialised; for the Atlantic liner, Morantic, would be on its way to New York.

From the very outset the voyage was harassing. Lord Roper allowed "Fielder" to roam about at will, and did not seem inclined for companionship. Nipper had been allotted a splendid cabin, and Lord Max told him that he could do just as he liked.

But things went wrong, somehow.

While steaming down Channel the yacht came to a stop, and remained stationery for two or three hours. Then she proceeded again at a snail's pace for a few fathoms, and then gradually came to another stop.

Nipper could not make it out at all. Lord Roper offered no explanation, and Nipper did not think it wise to question any of the officers. Obviously, however, something was amiss with the machinery.

At last, after further delays, the Mayflower put in to Weymouth. Nipper was in no way worried, for by this time, of course, the Morantic had commenced her voyage—carrying Nelson Lee and the real Jimmy Fielder. This delay was all the better for Eileen's plan.

Once the anchor was dropped, Nipper announced that he would like to go ashore. To his surprise, Lord Roper offered no objection, and Nipper was very soon on solid land again.

He at once hurried to the station, and boarded a train for London. While on his way up he removed his disguise, and became himself once more. So far so good. The Combine had been "dished," of course. Leo and Fielder were now well on their way, Nipper thought.

The lad would have been startled, could he have known what had been taking place in Liverpool!

The Morantic was due to leave port in the evening, well after dark. Nelson Lee and Fielder arrived in good time, and Eileen Dare accompanied them, to see them off. There was a good hour before it was necessary to go on board, but the trio made their way to the docks straight away. It would be as well to get on board without delay.

All three were in the best of spirits.

"Nipper is safely on board the Mayflower by this time," commented Nelson Lee, as the docks were reached. "By adopting this ruse, Fielder, you have been in no danger. If we had acted openly the Combine would have made strenuous efforts to keep you in England—perhaps they would have tried to kill you."

"I guess they're bamboozled right enough," said Jimmy comfortably.

"Exactly. They think that everything is going smoothly——"

Lee paused as a man in uniform approached. The trio were nearing the ship, which was alive with activity and bustle. The uniformed man looked searchingly at Nelson Lee, and halted.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir," he said. "Are you Mr. Lee?"

"That is my name," replied the detective.

"I've been instructed to hand you this telegram, sir," said the man. "It's just come through, and may be important. The clerk at the office pointed you out to me, but I wasn't quite sure."

Lee and Fielder had just visited the shipping-office, so there was nothing out of the way in the man's statement. Nelson Lee took the telegram, and the fellow went back. Lee paused beneath an electric arc and tore open the brown envelope.

"By James!" he exclaimed, a moment later. "Something has gone wrong."

"Oh! What do you mean?" asked Eileen anxiously.

"This wire is from Nipper—and Nipper ought to have been on board Roper's yacht by this time!" replied Lee quickly. "Listen. The telegram was handed in near Euston, and runs: 'Everything spoilt. There is danger. Am coming to Liverpool by boat express. Meet me at train, and bring Fielder and Miss Dare. Very urgent. NIPPER.'"

"Dear me, this is most annoying!" added Lee concernedly.

"Just when we were congratulating ourselves, too," said Eileen. "Oh, what do you think has occurred, Mr. Lee?"

Lee glanced at his watch.

"I will not attempt to hazard a guess," he replied swiftly. "We have just time to get to the station and back. The boat-train is already in, and Nipper is, of course, waiting for us. We must rush."

"Say, we'll miss the blamed packet!" gasped Fielder.

"Not if we look sharp!" was Lee's quick reply. "The Morantic will not lift her gangways for another three-quarters-of-an-hour. It is of the utmost importance that we should hear Nipper's news."

Nelson Lee commenced walking hurriedly towards a dark, narrow street which would lead him directly into a main thoroughfare. If the great detective had had a little time to think he would, perhaps, have been suspicious of that wire. But there was not a second to lose. And, anyway, it was necessary to make sure.

The trio, with mixed feelings, hastened through the short, narrow street. It was deserted, and pitchy dark. Fielder and Eileen did not know where they were going; but Lee, who had often been in Liverpool, knew his way about. He was well acquainted with all the short cuts.

And then a strange thing occurred.

As though from nowhere a dozen rough men appeared—regular dock loungers, and ruffians of the worst type. Nelson Lee and Eileen Dare and Jimmy Fielder were surrounded and hustled about violently.

Before they realised what was in the wind, the three of them were seized and forced bodily through a narrow doorway. Lee fought furiously, realisation dawning upon him with stunning abruptness. But the detective was helpless against the three great brutes who had grasped him.

Within three minutes Lee and Fielder and Eileen were within a dark cellar. In spite of the excitement, Nelson Lee had seen that the doorway through which they had been forced belonged to an old warehouse.

Hustled through the darkness, he and his companions had been thrust into the cellar. The door slammed and was bolted. Quite unhurt, but angry and alarmed, the prisoners were left to themselves.

"Say!" gasped Fielder. "What in thunder has happened?"

"We have been tricked!" said Eileen bitterly.

"Tricked at the last moment!" echoed Nelson Lee. "Upon my soul, I must have been asleep! What a terrible state of affairs. That telegram, of course, was a fake—deliberately forged in order to entrap us."

"Oh, gee!" said Fielder blankly.

It was only too obvious. The wire from Nipper was a false one. Lee's brain worked swiftly, and he at once guessed the reason for this startling outrage. In some way or another the Combine had got wind of the new plans, and had acted at the eleventh hour. The roughs had been hired to hustle the trio into the cellar, and there leave them.

And, meanwhile, the Morantic was on the point of leaving!

Jerking out his electric-torch, Nelson Lee examined the cellar. There was only one door, and that was securely bolted. If it had only been locked

Lee would have blown the lock to pieces with his revolver. But he could not hope to smash the door down, for it was solidly built.

But, by working at fever heat, Lee and Fielder managed to cut a clean circle out of one of the door-panels. The detective's pocket-knife—a huge thing—contained a miniature key-hole saw. And with this the circle of wood was removed.

But it had necessarily been a long, arduous task. At last the piece of wood was removed. And even then Lee was only able to push back the lower bolt. The one at the top was completely out of reach.

A succession of furious charges at last sent the door crashing back.

The prisoners rushed out, half-expecting to meet with opposition. But the warehouse was empty and deserted, and after a further delay, the open street was reached.

But Nelson Lee had already guessed the startling truth.

The Morantic had warped out of dock!

To travel by the liner was impossible. The delay, short as it had been, had prevented the detective and Fielder getting on board. And it was with this object, of course, that the outrage had been performed.

Full of suspicion, Nelson Lee hastened to the shipping-office.

And here his fears were confirmed. Among the saloon passengers was the name of Rufus Tollman!

The mining engineer had apparently seen his enemies, and had guessed their intentions. In all probability, he had spotted them at Euston, and had at once taken steps to frustrate them.

And Tollman had succeeded!

It was a double shock for Nelson Lee. For the detective realised, in a stunning flash, that he and Fielder and Eileen had been tricked! The Combine had scored! And Lee had been telling himself that the tables were turned.

In truth, the tables were turned—but the wrong way!

The Combine's plans had apparently been quite different to those which Fielder had been informed of. Tollman and Roding had adopted a daring ruse, and it had been successful. Fielder's life never had been in danger, and the Mayflower, probably, never intended crossing the Atlantic!

The real scheme was for Tollman to cross to America on board the Morantic, while Fielder was delayed on Lord Roper's yacht. The true cunning of the plot came to Nelson Lee with terrible bitterness.

The Combine had scored. Tollman would arrive at Crooked Reef, and would claim it as his own. Nelson Lee could not cable to New York to have the mining engineer detained, for there was no evidence of guilt against him. There was utterly no proof of villainy which would remedy matters. Rufus Tollman would win the game, and there would be no redress for Jimmy Fielder.

Write to the Editor of

ANSWERS

if you are not getting your right PENSION

Lee and Eileen and the cripple discussed the matter just outside the shipping-office, and the two former were dejected and angry. After all their trouble this was the result! The whole thing was appalling.

"Tollman knows the exact position of the reef," declared Lee grimly. "He knows the locality to an inch——"

"Say," interjected Fielder serenely, "I guess I'll just tell you a rather funny thing, Mr. Lee. I was going to speak out in your office, you remember, but I reckoned I'd save it until later. I'm satisfied now, anyway."

"What do you mean?" asked Nelson Lee, surprised by the other's tone.

"Well, it so happens that it is Mr. Rufus Tollman who will be dished and diddled," replied Fielder blandly. "We ain't on the wrong side—not by any means! Say, you remember that first interview in your rooms, when I got a heap wild?"

"Yes—yes, of course."

"I reckon I profited by your words of advice, Mr. Lee—although I didn't believe your statements," went on the young man. "I was cautious—real cautious. Your words had kinder cooled me down some. And when Tollman asked me where Crooked Reef was located, I just gave him the exact figures—only I sort of got mixed up a bit. I told him that the reef was situated in Colorado State."

"And isn't it?" asked Eileen, with a sudden gleam in her eyes.

"No, by long chalks, miss?" grinned Jimmy Fielder. "Crooked Reef is further west—five hundred miles, I guess. When Tollman gets round Colorado he'll receive a bit of a shock, I'm thinking."

"But why didn't you tell me this before?" demanded Lee, half-angrily.

"I guess it would have saved a whole heap of trouble if I had done so," admitted Fielder. "But I've got a confession to make, Mr. Lee. At the back of my mind I still had a lingering doubt about the whole thing; I faintly believed that Tollman and Roading were acting square with me. By saying nothing no harm would be done, and those galoots would be put to the test. I guess I'm satisfied. They're a couple of blamed scoundrels!"

Lee and Eileen laughed heartily, and with huge relief.

In spite of all success was theirs. Rufus Tollman had gone off on a fool's errand, and the Combine was defeated. The secret of Crooked Reef remained secure.

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Later on, Jimmy Fielder gave Nelson Lee fuller details, and the detective found that Tollman had made one small blunder; and he could be prosecuted for attempted fraud. The New York police were informed, and when the Morantic arrived, the mining engineer was arrested and sent home for trial. Later on he received his punishment in the shape of penal servitude.

Thus, ignominiously, the great scheme ended.

And, incidentally, Jimmy Fielder "made good" with capital advanced to him by Nelson Lee himself.

THE END.

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YOUR EDITOR.

THE ISLAND OF GOLD

A Story of Treasure Hunting in the South Sea Islands

By **FENTON ASH**

You can begin this Story to-day!

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

They meet with many adventures. One day, Alec and Clive are lost in a rocky and cavernous part of the island. They sit down to talk matters over, but immediately become the targets of a troop of huge apes, who 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, but is beaten off. Our chums, whilst exploring, are fired upon by two strange men, and in the act of seeking shelter tumble through an aperture in the rocks into an underground cavern.

(Now read on.)

Ben Grove on the War Path.

"JOLLY unpromising!" grunted Alec, as he turned the rays of the lamp upwards. "There's the opening we came through in such a hurry. A very nice opening. It let us through, so I suppose it's big enough for us to get back the same way if—if we could only get up to it. But there's the rub! I see no sort of way by which we can get up there!"

Nor could Clive. The aperture was in the roof of the place, high above their heads, with no possible means of reaching it.

"I say, this is no joke!" muttered Clive, as their helplessness became clear to him. "I do believe we've tumbled into another of those underground galleries. And now, I suppose, we shall have to start on another wandering tour through 'em in hopes of finding an outlet! I don't like it!"

"Nor do I!" Alec agreed. "It's rotten luck!"

"Look here!" said Clive suddenly. "Can't we fire some shots up through the roof? The doctor or Ben may hear them, and come to investigate, you know."

"So might our murderous foes—the two who shot at us!" Alec remarked drily, with a shake of the head. "It would be just as likely to bring them round to investigate as our friends. Then they might cover the hole up altogether, so that even our friends could not find it. Even as it is, I don't think it's quite safe to stop where we are. Those scoundrels may be up above, and be crawling to the side of the hole to get a shot at us as we stand here!"

"By Jove! that's true enough!" Clive agreed. "What had we better do?"

"I think we may as well look round a bit—get further away, out of the line of fire—till the coast seems clear. 'Then—if my rifle is all right—we could try your plan, and risk a few shots, perhaps.'"

It was certainly not a cheerful outlook; and Clive shivered a little as he reluctantly turned away from the glimmer of light above, and moved into the surrounding darkness, which seemed only to become all the more impenetrable by contrast with the spots momentarily illuminated by the little circle of light thrown by the electric torch.

In moody silence they wandered on, stumbling here and there against rocky obstacles, and doing their best to get some idea of the real nature of the place in which they were imprisoned.

As to that, they soon saw that they were in the bed of another subterranean watercourse, which, for the time being, was dry.

They followed it along for some little distance, and then the roof suddenly rose, the whole passage widened, and they entered some larger chamber, probably another of those spacious grottoes of which they had seen several elsewhere.

But this was different, for, as they turned their light about, they uttered startled exclamations.

The light was reflected back! From every side, as it was turned this way and that, came the sheen of reflections from some bright, glistening surface!

After their first exclamations of surprise they were silent. Wonder had almost taken their breath away. They scarcely dared trust their eyes; they could hardly believe that it was real.

Presently Alec, who was carrying the light, moved slowly forward, like one in a dream, and, still without a word, touched the glittering sides, passing his hand along as if to test whether they were real.

But, by degrees, the almost incredible, almost overpowering truth forced itself upon them.

They looked at each other, turned their gaze away to the sides of the place, and, still without a word, looked at one another again.

Then at last they spoke:

"The golden cavern itself!" burst from Alec.

"The dream—old Ben's dream—has come true!" ejaculated Clive. "And that poor beggar who told him about it was not mad after all!"

Even now, they had not much to say at first. The whole thing was so unexpected; its very suddenness overcame them.

And small wonder, for the more they went about investigating, the greater did the miracle seem.

Evidently the whole of this great grotto had been filled at one time by the marvellous "gold water," which must have passed through it during long periods of time, slowly depositing the traces of precious metal it contained, exactly as the "petrifying wells," in Derbyshire, for instance, coat everything they run or trickle over with a deposit of lime.

All the rocky walls of the grotto, which ran into curious shapes in places, forming arches and minor grottoes, were glittering with the shining coating. The very ledge at the side, which seemed as if fashioned purposely to form a seat, and on which the two spellbound explorers sat down, was covered like the rest, forming a veritable golden throne!

It took them some time to get used to the full import of the great discovery they had chanced upon. They moved about from one part to another, touching, testing, wondering, with awestruck feelings. Only by degrees were they able to get so far accustomed to their good fortune as to be able to talk calmly about it, and to bring their thoughts back to the question of

how they were going to get once more into the open air, to carry the great news to their friends.

They came back at last to the discussion of this all-important question, and their spirits fell as they found that the more they considered the problem the more difficult it became.

They were prisoners in a golden prison. Was it possible that Fate was going to play a terribly scurvy trick upon them? Were they to reach the end of their quest, only to be left there to starve to death in the midst of uncountable riches?

After a while, as nothing happened, no one came to look for them, no sound, either of shots or anything else reached their ears from above, they decided to risk firing some themselves.

And then came a discovery which sent a wave of something like despair to their hearts. The one rifle they possessed had, as Alec had feared, received a jar which rendered it useless. The cartridge in it jammed when they tried to fire it. They had their revolvers, it was true, but no spare cartridges for them. If they fired away those few and were not heard by their friends, their prospects would become gloomy indeed!

Ben Grove, hunting around alone, was interested but little in the beauty of the place in which he now found himself. He thought neither of the flowers nor of the inviting streams of crystal water; even the wild fruits failed to attract more than a passing notice.

He did, however, stand and gaze attentively at the smoking crater of the volcano when he came in view of it, for that was one of the things his thoughts had been running upon.



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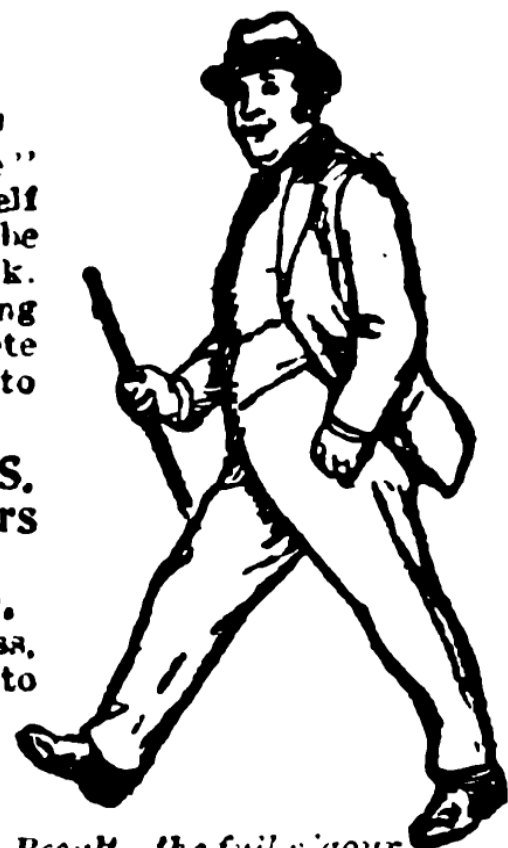
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Ben had had a wonderful experience that day. He had travelled in an aeroplane—had soared above the rocky precipice like a bird, and landed safely on the top. The latter part of the journey had been the most satisfactory. The journey itself—well, the less said about his feelings, perhaps, the better. If it had not tried the doctor's nerves, it had certainly tried Ben's—almost to breaking point. And when he had at last put foot on terra firma again, he had felt like one released from an awful nightmare.

Yet even that experience—recent and nerve-wracking as it had been—did not now occupy his thoughts.

Ben was thinking of two things—of the treasure cave, which ought to be so close to him, and of the volcano.

As to the first, here he was at last on the very spot, or pretty close to it, where the cave must be situated, if that poor, demented shipmate of his had told him years ago were true. Here, then, was the great chance of Ben's life. If he was ever to make that fortune he had dreamed of, if his aspirations after horses and carriages, and his fancy for servants "in blue an' gold liveries," were ever to become realities, that chance must be made the most of. The gold cave, if it really existed, must be found—now.

Ay, now! And that for the other reason which had drawn his thoughts to the volcano.

The doctor had confided to him only that very morning that he did not like the look of certain signs and portents which he had noted during the last few days. He, like Grove, had sailed these seas before; and he had had some terrible experiences of the wild, whirling, devastating storms and great tidal waves with which the islands in these regions were swept at times; and he knew some of the signs by which they were often preceded.

Captain Barron knew them, too, and he was as uneasy as the doctor—probably even more so, as feeling himself responsible for the yacht's safety.

There were, however, certain points which puzzled the doctor. The delicate scientific instruments he had brought with him were behaving in a manner which certainly pointed to an approaching disturbance of some kind; and yet he was not satisfied that mere storms were indicated. A little puzzled by this fact, and seeking about for a possible explanation, the neighbourhood of the volcano offered itself as the answer to the problem.

True, the burning mountain had been quiescent rather than otherwise during the past week. There had been less smoke, less of the internal rumbling, and other portentous warnings. But that in itself might be a bad sign. Scientists know that a period of unusual quiet on the part of a volcano is often the prelude to an outburst.

True, the present interval of quiet had been only a week or so, which in itself was nothing. But there was the unusual behaviour of his various instruments to be accounted for; and the more the doctor thought matters over the more uneasy he became.

He did not, however, say anything to his young assistants, as he did not wish to alarm them—perhaps, after all, needlessly. But after talking it over with the captain, he had asked Grove, as a veteran traveller, his opinion, and Ben was now greatly perturbed in consequence.

The idea thus suggested—that, just as they seemed so near to positive success, all their chances might be dashed to the ground, and perhaps destroyed once and for all, by a convulsion of nature—was naturally one the worthy old mariner could not contemplate with equanimity.

So he gazed now at the crater and its thin spiral of smoke rising through the sunlight in the heated air far up into the azure sky with doubting and anything but friendly eyes. Indeed, he stared at it and shook his head

with an air of exceeding strong disfavour. Then he turned away to resume his search for the gold cave, and set about it feverishly, impatiently. There was no time to lose if the doctor's apprehensions should prove to be well founded.

He was standing on a grassy knoll, which gave him a good view of the vicinity, though it was screened on his left by some high bushes: and just as he turned he caught sight in the distance of Alec and Clive. They and he had evidently wandered somewhat in the same direction; and he paused for a moment to see which way they would go next—whichever direction they chose he would leave to them and follow some other.

But at that moment there came the sound of rifle shots, and then of others; and he saw the two sink down as though—so it seemed to him—they had been shot.

Now Ben had also seen where the shots had come from. He had seen two heads rise up, two rifles suddenly appear, and then two spurts of flame and wreaths of smoke.

Ben's mind was filled at once with wrath and indignation. Gone, for the time, were all his dreams of gold, and even of volcanic eruptions. He only thought of the two treacherous murderers he had seen fire at his friends, and, as he believed, shoot them down. He did not even give a thought to the surprising puzzle of who the scoundrels were, and how they could have come there. He was filled with a righteous anger, and a determination to avenge his friends.

At once old Ben Grove became the alert, cautious, experienced stalker. All the knowledge, the tact, the strategy he had ever learned he summoned to his aid. He had marked down the place where the murderers were lying in ambush, and he commenced crawling towards them.

Thanks to the boughs and bushes which had screened him from their view, they had no idea he was there. That was obvious, for they would not knowingly have exposed themselves to the tender mercies of an enemy in their rear, as they had done here.

Ben could have shot at them from the rock as he had stood there; but though he could have made sure of one, the other might have got away. And he was sternly resolved that neither should escape him. He would get closer—to a position where he could make sure of the two before risking a shot. Besides, there might be more than two somewhere about; and to fire at one would only warn the others while he was too far off to deal with them.

As he crawled onwards, Indian fashion, dragging his rifle with him, he suddenly stopped and lay flat more than once as he saw the men he was stalking lift their heads to look round, seeking, as he knew, for some sign of the two they had fired at so treacherously. And as no such sign appeared, he became more and more certain that they were both dead or grievously

wounded, and his blood boiled with rage, and he registered a fresh vow that he would kill both their murderers out of hand, rather than give either of them a chance of escape.

At last, just as he had drawn quite near, the two stood up. Evidently they now felt as sure as Ben did that their bullets had done their deadly work.

(To be continued.)



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