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BEHIND THE DOOR; OR, WHO KILLED STANTON ROADING?

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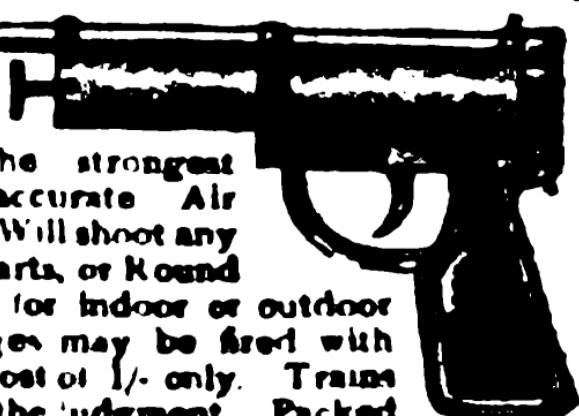
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BEHIND THE DOOR.

Or,
Who Killed Stanton Roding?

An Adventure of EILEEN
DARE, the Girl Detective.

By the Author of "Harlo the Hypnotist,"
"Millions at Stake," "A Mystery of the
Footlights," "The Secret of Crooked
Reef, etc.

CHAPTER I.

NELSON LEE'S VISITOR—THE EMBANKMENT INCIDENT—A DISCOVERY.

NIPPER was leaning out of the window of the consulting-room, gazing down upon the heads of the people who passed up and down Gray's Inn Road. Nipper was leaning out to a rather precarious extent, in fact.

Being something of an acrobat, however, the young rascal was in no actual danger of toppling out. Nelson Lee was seated at his desk, writing, and he was thinking deeply; he was oblivious of Nipper's presence.

The time was early evening, and the sun still cast a glow over the western sky. It was a delightful spring evening, and Nipper was just taking a breath of fresh air. He gazed down upon the traffic of Gray's Inn Road with careless interest.

But he suddenly awoke to startling activity.

Without any apparent cause, the lad wriggled round, tumbled into the room, and rushed over to the mirror upon the mantelpiece. Nipper glared at his reflection with consternation.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated.

There was really no cause for Nipper's dismay. Apart from being somewhat untidy, and generally ruffled, he looked

very much as usual. True, his tie was decidedly crooked, and there was a space or two on his collar. And his hair seemed as though it had not been combed or brushed for a week. But this was because there was a breeze, and leaning far out of a window, in an almost inverted position, is not exactly calculated to keep one's hair in good trim.

But, from the expression upon Nipper's face, it would seem as though he had suddenly discovered signs of a dreadful skin disease breaking out on his face. His immediate actions, however, were reassuring.

He dashed to the door, jerking Nelson Lee's arm as he flew past, and a splodge of ink came from the famous detective's pen, and displayed itself to full advantage upon the centre of the sheet of note-paper which Lee was using.

"Upon my soul! What on earth——"

Nelson Lee looked up angrily. But Nipper had gone, and the door closed with a slam. The great criminologist pursed his lips, and started on a fresh sheet of paper. Fortunately he had only just commenced the letter.

In less than a minute Nipper was back, and the transformation in his appearance was remarkable. He wore a clean collar and a new tie. His face shone from the effect of much rubbing, and his hair was neat and tidy. For a second the lad stood listening; then he glared at his master.

"Like a tramp!" he grunted fiercely.

Nipper strode across the room and shook Lee's shoulder. As it happened, the detective had just filled his pen-nib, and once more a huge blot was cast upon the notepaper. This was just a little too much. Twice in succession—

"Confound you, Nipper!" roared Nelson Lee irritably. "See what you have done! Twice you have blotted my paper—"

"Blow the paper!" gasped Nipper. "Get yourself tidy, guv'nor! You're looking simply disgraceful! More like a tramp than anything else—"

"Upon my soul!"

"You didn't shave this morning, your hair wants cutting, and I don't believe you've washed yourself—"

"Silence, Nipper!" thundered Lee. "Perhaps you will explain the meaning of this sudden fit of insanity? What is the matter with you, my lad? Why have you suddenly become demented?"

There was a moment's tense silence between the two, and a soft footfall could be distinctly heard on the stairs.

"She's coming!" hissed Nipper.

Nelson Lee looked bewildered for a moment. Then realisation dawned upon him, and he chuckled with relief and amusement. Nipper had not gone off his head, after all. There was a purely natural explanation of his singular conduct.

Even as Lee was chuckling there came a tap at the door, and it opened to admit an extremely dainty visitor. She was small and chic, her spring costume being neatly cut, and of some "swishy" material which rustled delightfully as she moved.

An extremely becoming hat was set upon her dark chestnut tresses. She stood there with a healthy glow upon her cheeks, and with her little red lips parted slightly in a smile, revealing, incidentally, a perfect set of pearly teeth.

And there was an expression of pleasure in the girl's large brown eyes. She stepped forward with a little laugh.

"I'm so glad to find you both in," she said softly. "I'm not a nuisance, am I? If you are busy now, Mr. Lee—"

"Never too busy to welcome you, Miss Eileen!" cut in Nipper promptly. "This is ripping of you. I say, you're looking fine!"

Eileen Dare laughed.

"Am I?" she said. "Thank you, Nipper. I feel fine, to tell the truth. How are you, Mr. Lee? It's a week since we met, I believe."

She shook hands with her friends, and then sat down. Both Nelson Lee and Nipper were pleased to see their visitor—Nipper especially. Nipper would have gone to the extreme ends of the earth to serve Eileen.

And his extraordinary conduct was now explained. Nelson Lee smiled as he thought of it. Nipper had evidently seen Eileen Dare coming along Gray's Inn Road, and had forthwith flown to make himself tidy. His remarks concerning his master were, of course, shamefully exaggerated. Nelson Lee certainly had shaved that morning—he never missed when he was in town—and his hair was quite tidy. But when Eileen came Nipper was extra particular. He even objected to the table being littered and the chairs being dusty. If Nipper had had his way—and if he had had sufficient warning—he would have turned the consulting-room completely upside down.

"I really thought that Nipper had taken leave of his senses a few minutes ago," said the great detective smilingly. "He evidently saw you coming along—"

"Here, I say, guv'nor!" protested Nipper. "Dry up, you know!"

"I am sure Miss Eileen will feel highly flattered, my dear Nipper," went on Lee relentlessly. "If she could have seen you rushing to change your collar and tidy your hair—incidentally ruining two good sheets of my notepaper—she would have smiled with real pleasure."

"Don't you believe him, Miss Eileen!" mumbled Nipper, red as a beetroot. "I—I just titivated myself up a bit; that's all. I—I say, that dress of yours looks spiffing," he went on hastily. "And that hat suits you to a tee! Blessed if you don't look prit—prit—prettier every time you come!"

Somehow or other, Nipper was always mightily confused when Eileen Dare called. Usually he was the most self-possessed of mortals, but this dainty girl seemed to take all the assurance out of him. Yet Nipper entertained no foolish notions with regard to Eileen. He just admired her terrifically, as he expressed it, and thought that she was a downright stunner.

And, certainly, in more concise language, Eileen Dare was undoubtedly charming and sweet. A prettier girl would have been difficult to find. And she was more than pretty; there was something in her eyes which told of gentleness and abundant good nature.

There was strength in those deep, liquid eyes, too—strength of will, and strength of purpose.

For Eileen Dare, so charming and dainty, was really a formidable little person.

Formidable, that is, to her enemies.

For Eileen had enemies—stern, scoundrelly enemies. Her father had been virtually murdered, months before, by a gang of highly placed rogues who called themselves the Combine. And Eileen had sworn to punish them for their terrible crime; the law could not touch them, and so she had taken matters into her own capable hands.

And, during the past months, Eileen had proved herself to be possessed of amazing detective ability. Nelson Lee had agreed to help her in any and every way, and this trio—Eileen Dare, Nelson Lee, and Nipper—had experienced many exciting and dangerous adventures together.

Eileen was no ordinary girl.

Her cleverness and resource seemed never-ending. And, one by one, her enemies had suffered. Already she had settled her account with many of them. There were others, but the Combine's strength was waning, and before long, if Justice prevailed, her task would be completed.

Yet it must not be thought that Eileen was vengeful. Truth to tell, she loved detective work, and nothing pleased her better than to be engaged on a case. Nelson Lee had found that she was astoundingly capable, and he would have entrusted her with many a dangerous task—he had done so, in fact, on several occasions. And Eileen had never once failed.

Indeed, Nelson Lee was anxious occasionally. The girl's courage and determination led her to perform rash acts sometimes. At least, Lee deemed them rash; Eileen herself held a different view. She preferred to regard herself as Lee's assistant, for, as she explained, she could not do much without the great detective's advice and co-operation. Lee thought the opposite. Eileen was fully capable of handling a difficult problem herself. Yet he was always pleased to join her in any enterprise.

Her enemies were no ordinary criminals; they were well-known gentlemen, against whom there was no breath of suspicion. And her task of exposing them in their true colours, therefore, was greatly increased in difficulty. Famous

City men, such as Ford Abbercorn, Stanton Roding, Sydney Bradford, Rudolph Stebbing, and Ransome Wilmore, were among the men she was pitted against. Stebbing and Wilmore had met with their punishment, in addition to many others, but there were still several members of the secret Combine to account for.

It was an appalling task, all things considered. And Eileen had undergone grave risks and terrible perils in the course of her campaign. In spite of all, however, she was always cheerful and smiling and delightful. She was on very friendly terms with Nelson Lee and Nipper, and took a great interest in their work. And now and again she would place before them some case of her own.

Did this visit of hers portend further trouble with the Combine?

Nipper, at all events, would have welcomed such trouble with open arms. To work with Eileen, or for Eileen, was the keenest pleasure to Nipper. The lad would have been almost contemptuous of any ordinary girl. But Eileen was—well, she was Eileen!

"I have really called on business, and yet it's not on business," the girl detective said smilingly. "A rather curious incident occurred last night, Mr. Lee, and I thought I would tell you."

"Connected with the Combine, miss?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"Well, yes, in a way. But I am quite sure it was an unrehearsed incident," replied Eileen. "I don't suppose anything more will come of it, and that's why I said my visit wasn't exactly on business."

Nelson Lee lit a cigarette—Eileen didn't mind, although she loathed the thought of smoking herself, as so many modern girls do—and leaned back in his chair. He had an idea that Eileen's little story would be interesting.

"It was about a quarter to ten," went on the girl. "Living at Chelsea, as you know, I sometimes take a stroll along the Embankment with my aunt. It was calm and mild last night, and Aunt Esther and I went for a walk. We had been indoors all the evening—I had been doing some needlework—and we wanted some fresh air. Well, we were talking about some little alteration we are going to make in the drawing-room, when we heard a sharp cry ahead."

"My hat!" ejaculated Nipper. "Was it dark, miss?"

"Oh, Nipper, what a question to ask!"

protested Eileen. "Weren't you alive last night? You know that it was exceedingly dark, mainly because there is no moon this week, and the sky was clouded last night. The Embankment, too, is always black nowadays. Well, auntie and I stepped, and looked ahead. I thought I saw a dim form upon the ground about a hundred yards ahead."

"Somebody in a fit!" said Nipper feelingly.

Eileen laughed.

"You're guessing, you silly boy," she smiled. "No, it wasn't somebody in a fit. I ran ahead quickly, leaving Aunt Esther to come on at her leisure—she is not so agile as I am, you know."

"No, I am aware of that," observed Lee drily, with a vision of Miss Esther Gilbey's comfortable figure before his eyes. "Well, go on, Miss Eileen. Did you discover the cause of the cry?"

"Oh, yes. I went quickly forward and found a man lying upon the pavement. As I approached he struggled up into a sitting position, and panted heavily. I heard, at the same time, heavy footfalls approaching."

"She nearly had me!" the man gasped. "The murderous wretch!"

"I was a little surprised, and, somehow, the man's voice seemed familiar to me, and I thought his figure seemed familiar, too. While he was speaking I took out my little torch, and flashed it on."

"And then I got such a surprise, Mr. Lee," added Eileen. "For I saw that the man upon the ground was Stanton Roding."

"One of the Combine rotters!" exclaimed Nipper.

"Did he recognise you?" asked Lee.

"I don't think so—oh, I'm sure he didn't," was the girl's reply. "It was very dark, remember, and, besides, I switched on the light before he fairly looked at me. And then it was impossible for him to see me."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Quite impossible," he agreed. "The glare of the light was in his eyes, and he could not see beyond it, naturally. You, on the other hand, could see him with great distinctness. Well, what then?"

"Before I could speak a policeman came up—it was he whom I had heard approaching—and he at once assisted Roding to his feet," said Eileen.

"Roding seemed dazed and bewildered, and rather unsteady."

"Boozed, perhaps," said Nipper thoughtfully. "Oh, I—I beg your pardon, Miss Eileen!" he added, with a gasp. "I—I meant intoxicated, of course!"

Eileen gave a little silvery laugh.

"No, he wasn't intoxicated, Nipper," she said. "I am sure of that. He seemed to have had a shock, and I heard him tell the constable that he had been attacked by a woman."

"A woman!" echoed Nipper. "Why, the coward. Fancy being bowled over by a woman! He must be a weak-kneed bounder!"

"He said that she had attempted to stab him in the back, from behind," went on the girl thoughtfully. "Strange, wasn't it, Mr. Lee? Of course, a woman could have stabbed him, I suppose; but it seemed curious to me."

"Did you see any sign of a woman?"

"None whatever. But that wasn't surprising, considering the darkness," replied Eileen. "Roding positively declared that a woman had attacked him unawares, and that he had only escaped by twisting suddenly, and falling. The woman had then disappeared."

"Funny thing she didn't go for him when he was down," said Nipper.

"I don't know. He had cried out, don't forget, and attention had been drawn," exclaimed Eileen. "She probably slipped away, fearing to stay longer. Roding was angry and alarmed. 'It was Yolande,' he kept on saying. 'It was that infernal witch, Yo'ande.' And he told us that he had hurt himself by the fall."

"H'm," said Lee. "And the incident closed?"

"I suppose that was the close of it, yes," answered Eileen. "The policeman took a good look at me—a long stare, in fact—"

"Check!" said Nipper indignantly.

"Perhaps he thought I was 'Yo'ande,' Nipper," laughed Eileen. "Anyhow, he didn't ask me any questions, and just then Aunt Esther came up. She had been standing close by, wondering what to do. The policeman led Roding away, and I saw them going along the Embankment, Roding giving the officer all particulars."

"And you are sure he didn't recognise you?"

"Positive. He didn't have a chance of seeing me," replied Eileen. "It was just chance, my being on the spot. Yet there was nothing strange about it. People often meet on the Embankment—enemies as well as friends. But there is something else I have to tell you."

Eileen opened her bag, and produced a curious-looking clasp-knife.

"I found this on the ground," she went on. "I only saw it by accident. I was just going to switch off my light, when I happened to turn it downwards. And there, lying upon the stones, was this knife."

"Looks as though Roding's story was true," commented Nelson Lee. "It was with this knife, presumably, that the unknown woman had attempted to stab——"

"No, I don't think so, Mr. Lee. I believe this knife slipped out of Roding's pocket when he fell."

"Why do you think so?"

"Two things. First of all, the knife was closed, and I found that it was very difficult to open," replied Eileen shrewdly. "Surely, the woman didn't close it before dropping it? And she couldn't stab him with it closed, could she?"

Lee nodded approvingly.

"That is a sound piece of reasoning," he remarked. "What else?"

"I thought for a moment that the knife had closed itself by the fall to the ground, but I soon found that that couldn't have happened," said the girl. "And there was another thing. I found a penny and a sixpence lying beside it."

"Which clearly showed that they had all three slipped from Roding's pocket," agreed Lee. "Quite so. From what you say, I conclude that the presence of the knife there had nothing to do with the attack. It was just a coincidence—and not a singular one, either. Men usually carry knives in their pockets, and for this one to slip out was not in the least surprising."

"In addition to all that," continued Eileen, "the initials 'S. R.' are stamped upon the handle. That's enough, isn't it, Mr. Lee? Well, the knife was Roding's—and here it is."

She handed it to Nelson Lee, who examined it.

There was nothing remarkable about the clasp-knife. It was quite an ordi-

nary article, although somewhat quaint in design. It was large and broad, and the handles were faced with mother-of-pearl.

Lee opened the blades with a little difficulty, for they worked stiffly. Then, after a cursory examination, he handed the thing back to the dainty visitor. She placed it in her bag.

"I shall keep it," she said. "It will be a trophy of my campaign, Mr. Lee. Of course, it has nothing to do with any particular case, but it is of some little interest. I wonder who that woman was Roding referred to?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Really, I don't see how we can possibly find out," he replied. "Not that the information would be of any value. Probably Roding was formerly engaged in some intrigue with this mysterious 'Yolande,' and she, for some reason, desires revenge. It is a subject which had better, perhaps, be left alone. At all events, I don't think it concerns the Combine. It is one of Roding's private affairs."

And so the subject was dropped, and Eileen Daro became interested in a case which Nelson Lee had just brought to a successful conclusion. The time passed quickly, and it was quite dark when the girl proposed to go.

Nipper gallantly offered to see her home, and he was delighted when Eileen graciously consented to accept his escort. Of course, Eileen was fully capable of seeing herself home at almost any hour of the night or day—she was self-possessed and quick-witted—but she was quite glad of Nipper's company.

They taxied to Chelsea, where Eileen lived. She had a dear little flat, and this was presided over by her kindly old aunt, a maiden lady of jovial disposition. Nipper remained for a little while, and enjoyed Eileen's singing—for the girl gave a solo or two.

To tell the truth, Nipper sang, too. Aunt Esther prevailed upon him, and the lad rendered a couple of rollicking songs in splendid style. For the life of a crime investigator is not all grim, perilous work. Such people take pleasure exactly the same as other citizens, whose forte in life is less adventurous. Scotland Yard, for example, "knocks off" work at six o'clock, just the same as any ordinary business establishment. Detectives are human beings, all said and done. They are certainly not super-

human—as some fiction-writers would have people suppose.

Nipper left Eileen's flat at about nine o'clock, feeling thoroughly satisfied with the world in general, and himself in particular. He had enjoyed himself "top-notch," "O.K.," and "A1," as he reported to Nelson Lee, later, in his own curious vernacular.

And Eileen Dare repaired to her bedroom, there to slip into a comfortable rest-gown, preparatory to sitting down with Aunt Esther for some fancy-work. Eileen's bedroom was an exquisite little apartment, deliciously feminine, and full of characteristic charms.

She opened her hand-bag to take something out, and her glance fell upon the clasp-knife which had once belonged to Mr. Stanton Roding, the City financier and business-man.

She picked it up idly, and toved with it, her thoughts reverting to that little scene on the Embankment the previous night. The policeman had seen her, she knew, for he had been close enough to see her features; but Roding had not once looked into her face. What would he have done if he had known—

"Eileen, dear."

The girl's thoughts were interrupted by her aunt's voice at the door. She turned quickly, and the knife dropped from her fingers somehow, and struck a half-open drawer of the dressing-table a sharp, oblique blow. It then fell to the floor.

Eileen laughed softly at her own clumsiness, and opened the door. After a few minutes' conversation with Aunt Esther, she turned again, softly humming a snatch of one of the songs she had been singing earlier.

"Oh!" she exclaimed suddenly. "Oh, what a pity!"

For she saw that the clasp-knife was in two pieces! One of the pearl handles, in fact, had come off—that is, one of the pearl facings.

She picked the two parts up, and looked at them closely under the electric light, wondering how she should fix them together again. The rivets, of course, had given way—

"Oh!" gasped Eileen. "It isn't broken at all! It's a trick knife—this handle is meant to come off! I expect it just happened to fall upon the edge of the drawer, and that released the spring!"

She had guessed the truth. Indeed, there was not much guesswork about it, because the design of the knife and the cunning slots in the mother-of-pearl, told their own story.

But why should the knife be made so that one of the handles was removable?

Eileen Dare gazed at the knife more closely, and then became aware of some writing and some curious figures engraved upon the metal-work of the handle proper—the handle which was concealed by the pearl face.

And quite distinctly she read the words:

"The Key to the Cipher of Diary No. 2, Containing Combine Secrets."

Under those words were numerous figures and signs, all neatly engraved.

What could it mean?

CHAPTER II.

EILEEN'S RESOLVE—AT PUTNEY—THE CRY FROM THE LIBRARY.

EILEEN DARE felt her heart give a little jump, and she suddenly sat down in a comfortable chair, and gazed at the knife in her hands. In that one second the whole aspect of things had undergone a complete change.

The girl's brain worked quickly.

She knew at once what this discovery meant! She saw everything as clearly as though it had been written down before her. And the knowledge caused her to clench one hand and press the other to her breast.

Stanton Roding had evidently been in the habit of keeping a secret diary—"No. 2" he called it—and this diary was apparently lying openly upon his desk. Otherwise why should Roding trouble about a cipher? That it was not locked away in a secret receptacle was almost certain.

And in that diary was a record of the Combine's doings—its secrets and enterprises, and villainies! This record was written in cipher, so that nobody save himself could read it. And, in Eileen's hand was the key to that cipher!

"Oh! I can't realise what this may mean!" murmured Eileen tensely.

Yet, even as she formed the words, she knew very well that she did realise what it meant. With the cipher-key she would be able to read every entry

in the diary as though it were written in plain English.

And others would be able to read, too!

The police—Scotland Yard! If Eileen could only get hold of that incriminating diary, she believed—ay, she was positively certain—that the Combine would cease to exist. Every remaining member would be exposed for the scoundrel he was! With that damning evidence—a secret record of past crimes—Eileen could make a clean sweep of her enemies at one blow!

The thought was almost staggering.

There was only one disquieting possibility. Roding might have discovered his loss, and destroyed the diary. This, however, was improbable. Even if he had known that the knife was missing, he would assume that it had fallen into the hands of some passer-by, who would learn nothing from the words and the cipher, even supposing the secret of the pearl handle were discovered.

The chances were that Stanton Roding still possessed the diary. And, although he might possibly be upset by his loss, he would hesitate before destroying the volume. And it was not likely that he would tell his associates of the loss of the knife. In all probability they knew nothing of its existence. It was merely a novel method of keeping the cipher-key secret.

Eileen glanced at her dainty gold wrist-watch. The hour was still early, and Stanton Roding, she knew, lived at Putney, close by the river. His house was comparatively near by, and in a secluded road.

Should she make a bold move?

It was certainly a time for action. To gain possession of the diary—that was the urgent need of the moment!

Eileen thought of going to Nelson Lee. But Lee, she knew, would be out at this time, and would not be in until close upon midnight. The detective had told her that he was going to Hendon to-night, to meet a man at the famous aerodrome regarding a new high-power rotary engine—for Nelson Lee possessed an aeroplane of his own. Lee had told Eileen that he would start as soon as Nipper got back to Gray's Inn Road—they were both going.

She could 'phone, of course—but she could not discuss this affair over the

wires. Telephones are by no means private.

It was scarcely possible to see Nelson Lee before the morning.

Eileen, therefore, was thrown upon her own resources. Moreover, she might not have gone to Nelson Lee even if he had been at home. She was a capable girl, and the prospect of an adventure rather appealed to her. She flushed as she thought of Nelson Lee's praise when she showed him the incriminating diary.

Could she get it?

Oh, if it were only possible! The game would be risky, but Eileen Dare was well accustomed to taking risks. She had risked grave dangers on many an occasion. And, somehow, she thrilled at the thought of succeeding in this venture.

It would mean so much—so very, very much.

And the girl detective, with her characteristic promptness, came to a decision. She would go to Putney, and have a look round, at all events. She would go on a scouting expedition, and find out the lie of the land. In all probability she would take no definite action; but she would discover exactly how Roding's house was situated, and what chances there were of gaining an entry to the study.

That would be so much accomplished. And the next night, perhaps, with Nelson Lee's help, she would attempt to obtain possession of the fateful diary.

Full of her resolve, Eileen made her preparations. Aunt Esther was dismayed when she was told that Eileen was off out; but the good soul was accustomed to the girl's escapades, and she knew better than to raise objections.

Eileen left her flat at about half-past ten, and she was dressed especially for the part she had resolved to play. Her dress was all black, and fitted her closely. Her hat was a very small affair, and she carried no bag. In her coat, however, there were several pockets, so made that they did not bulge. One of these pockets contained the knife and a few tools, which would be used if necessary.

Yet the girl had not definitely decided to enter Roding's house; she would just have a look round to-night. It would be foolish, perhaps, to attempt an entry before she was fully acquainted with the position of things.

She travelled to Putney by motor-bus.

alighting from the conveyance at the corner of Putney Bridge Road, on the south side of the river. From this spot she walked to the quiet avenue in which Stanton Roding lived.

Collingwood Gardens was a road in which each house stood in its own grounds. There was no thoroughfare through it, for at the end there was a blank wall. And Roding's residence was one of those at the extreme end.

Traffic, therefore, was non-existent, and even in the day-time, the only pedestrians who used this particular sidewalk were people who actually wished to visit Roding's house. And these were few. Now, at eleven o'clock at night, the road was absolutely deserted.

Eileen saw that the situation of the house was excellent for her purpose. The high wall at the end of the road continued along Roding's front garden, and joined up with the house. On that side of the building, therefore, there was no garden; probably a meadow lay there, or a piece of waste-land.

Wearing light shoes, with rubber heels, Eileen made no noise as she walked. She arrived at the gateway of No. 17—Roding's dwelling—and paused for a moment. The house was dark, save for a glimmer in one of the basement windows. The house was old and big, and of the basement type, with a broad flight of steps leading up to the front door.

"I suppose I had better slip in, and get round to the back," decided Eileen. "There will be a window there, probably, within easy reach. To-night I mean to find out exactly how an entry can be made."

The girl detective pushed open the gate and walked quickly up the gravel-path. Evergreen bushes lined the path, and Eileen dimly saw a trellis-work gate set into a fence. This gate led into the rear garden. She was softly approaching this gate when her attention became arrested by a sudden sound.

The front door was being opened.

Eileen was not at the angle of the house, yet, where the path branched off to the trellis gate. Therefore, if anybody came out, she would be seen in a moment. One glance at the door revealed to her a dim form in the gloom.

The girl acted promptly; she crouched down, and concealed herself behind a big barrel bush. Who was it leaving the house? Stanton Roding himself? Eileen was soon satisfied as to this point.

There was a crunch of gravel, and a man passed along the path. Eileen, peering out, saw that he was a small, thin man, and he wore no hat. There was something white in his hand, and he only wore slippers.

He passed by, reached the gate, and at once crossed the road.

Eileen easily guessed the truth.

The man was Roding's butler, in all probability—or a manservant, at all events. And the fact that he was wearing no cap, and that his feet were encased in slippers, told the girl where he had gone.

"To the pillar-box, of course," thought Eileen. "There is one just up the road, on the other side, I know. That white thing I saw in his hand must have been the letter."

This was not a matter of deduction—it was obvious fact.

Eileen decided to remain where she was until the butler came back and entered the house again. She glanced at the front door idly, and then saw that it was partly open. The manservant had left it ajar!

There was nothing startling in this. Nine people out of ten leave their doors ajar when they slip up the road to post a letter at night. Eileen moved her head a little, so that a bunch of leaves were not obstructing her vision. But even then she could not see into the hall.

And a startling idea came to her.

Should she take this opportunity? Should she enter the house—now? There was the door, open, and the hall was in darkness! Nobody would see her enter, and in less than a minute she would be able to conceal herself.

The thought was one which made Eileen's heart beat quickly. There was no time for indecision or hesitation. She must make up her mind, one way or the other, at once.

She had as good as settled herself to the fact that this expedition was only to be a scouting one. But this sudden chance was unexpected. The door was open and unguarded. She could be in the hall within five seconds—

A quick impulse seized the girl, and the next moment she was running softly and swiftly towards the steps. She mounted them, and slipped into the hall. Everything was dim and gloomy. A suspicion of light came from a spot down

The hall—probably from a doorway round a bend.

And there was a dead silence over the house.

Eileen Dare had acted boldly—she was in Stanton Roding's house!

The die was cast now; there could be no backing out, for if she attempted to leave she would probably come face to face with the manservant. She had taken the initial step on the impulse of the moment, and would now have to rely upon her wits to see her through.

Perhaps she had been a little rash, she thought; but what a chance it was! She strained her eyes, and dimly saw a big, old-fashioned hall-stand against the wall. It was hung with coats and hats—two of the coats being big and roomy.

Eileen softly stepped across to the stand, and found that there was ample room for her to conceal herself behind the hanging coats. And she was only just in time, for even as she steadied herself she heard the manservant ascending the steps. He had posted his letter and had returned.

The man came in, and closed the door with a click. Then, without bolting it, as Eileen had half-expected, he walked down the hall with the assurance of one who thoroughly knows his way in the dark, and disappeared round a bend at the back of the hall.

Eileen saw a dull, reflected gleam of light, and then a door closed. Faintly she heard footsteps descending some stairs. The man, of course, had gone down to the basement.

"Oh, dear! I'm glad I'm all right so far," thought the girl breathlessly.

And then she smiled to herself.

There had been no need for alarm at all. She was in the hall, all to herself, and the front door was quite near at hand, unbolted. If necessary, she could slip out and get away without a soul being the wiser.

And, by a trick of chance, she was inside Roding's house. Eileen told herself that she had been extremely fortunate in arriving just when the manservant went out with his letter.

If the girl only knew what was to follow!

She stood there, hardly knowing what to do. Should she make a move at once, or wait a while to see how events turned? She did not even know whether Stanton Roding was at home. In all probability he was not.

There was certainly no sign of his presence in the house.

And if he had not arrived home yet, surely it was an opportune moment, now, for Eileen to accomplish her object. The library, or study, would be on this floor, the girl pondered.

She moved out of her hiding-place, and softly made her way along the hall to the bend. Cautiously peering round, she saw a door fairly close by with a weak slit of light beneath it. Further on, at the end of the right-angle passage, there was another door, and this also showed a weak slit of light.

Eileen judged that the nearest door was that of the basement staircase. If this was so, what was the other door? The library? Somebody was apparently in the apartment, or the light wouldn't be there.

The girl listened intently.

And she heard the sounds of movement from the further door. Roding was at home! Eileen Dare realised that it would be folly for her to remain in the building; she very wisely told herself that her best course would be to get into the open air as soon as possible.

This would be easy enough; she had only to slip along the hall and open the front door, and she would be outside. Nobody would be the wiser—

And then, with an abruptness which startled Eileen considerably, there arose a scream of horror and fear—and it came from the room at the end of the passage. The girl stood rooted to the spot.

She heard Stanton Roding's voice raised in furious terror.

"Yolande!" came the scream, high and tremulous. "You she-fiend—you—you——"

The shout ended in a gurgling cry, and it was instantly followed by a dull thud, as of somebody falling, and then a loud, sharp bang, just as though a heavy door had been slammed violently.

Eileen Dare took a deep breath. She felt a tingly sensation all over her skin, and her heart was beating quickly in her breast. Something dreadful had taken place in that apartment, and all Eileen's instincts were aroused. In that tense moment she forgot that she was an intruder in the house, and that, if she was discovered, her presence would have to be explained.

And the front-door was within a second's reach! If only Eileen had got away at that fateful moment events

would have been very different. But Eileen hurried forward instinctively, and opened the door of the end apartment. She opened it suddenly, and she heard a swish and a scurry, and a door on the other side of the room closed with a soft click.

Somebody had just gone out!

Eileen was on the point of darting across the room, when her attention was arrested. A single electric-light was burning upon the big centre desk—a light which was so shaded that it only cast a glow upon the surface of the desk itself; the rest of the room remained in deep gloom.

And at the first glimpse Eileen thought that the apartment was empty. As she took a light step forward, however, her keen eyes saw something lying upon the floor, against the window—between the desk and the wall.

The girl came to a sudden stop, her breath caught in with a sharp catch.

Stanton Roding was lying there; his eyes were open and staring, and there was a curiously set expression of alarm upon his features. And upon his white shirt-front there was a deep crimson stain!

"Oh!" gasped Eileen, horrified. "Oh! He has been stabbed!"

Her thoughts were swift. She remembered the attack upon the Embankment, and Roding's reference to "Yolande"! She remembered Roding's sudden cry a minute ago, and his screaming shout of: "Yolande, you she-fiend!" And she remembered the soft swish and the closing of the further door.

Instinctively she knew that Roding was dead. He had been killed—murdered! The girl was almost stunned by the shock, but she did not lose her wits. She took a step forward, towards the other door.

And then came an interruption.

There was a quick footstep, and, turning, she saw the manservant in the doorway. He came forward, his face as white as a sheet.

"The master!" he cried wildly, staring at Roding's deathly still form. "The master's been killed——"

"By a woman, I think!" said Eileen quickly. "She escaped——"

"A woman!" shouted the man in a thick voice. "It was you—you! I heard him shout some name or other, and then—then—— You have murdered Mr. Roding!"

Eileen Darc stamped her foot.

"Do not be absurd!" she said sharply. "I saw the other door close——"

"It's a lie—a lie! You killed the master!"

And the manservant suddenly flung himself upon Eileen, caught her hands together behind her back, and held them as in a vice. Small as the fellow was, he possessed considerable strength.

Then, in a shrill, excited voice, he commenced shouting wildly for help.

CHAPTER III

THE 'PHONE CALL—A TERRIBLE POSITION—
LEE INVESTIGATES.

THE telephone bell rang irritatingly.

Nelson Lee looked up, and motioned to Nipper. The great criminologist and his young assistant were in their consulting-room. The time was just after midnight.

The pair had not long been back from Hendon; having concluded their business there, they had taxied home, and had partaken of supper. Now they were having a few minutes' rest before turning in.

Nelson Lee was sprawled in a big arm-chair, and Nipper sat upon a corner of the table, glancing through the pages of an illustrated periodical. The lad laid the journal down, and reached for the phone.

"Hallo!" he called yawningly. "Eh? Yes, this is number one-five-double—— Oh, it's Inspector Fuller! Time you were in bed, inspector. What? I didn't quite catch—— Gammon!"

Nipper chuckled into the receiver.

"That yarn won't wash, Mr. Fuller!" he grinned. "Eh? Serious, you say? Get away! You're pulling my leg——"

Nipper paused suddenly, and listened with strange intentness. Then a choking kind of cry came into his throat, and he turned to Nelson Lee, who was now sitting forward, looking on with curiosity and interest.

"Guv'nor!" panted Nipper, in a thick, strained voice.

"What is it, young 'un?" asked Leo crisply.

The detective saw that Nipper had turned dreadfully pale, and the hand which held the receiver to his ear was trembling agitatedly. Lee was by the lad's side in a moment.

"Miss Eileen!" gasped Nipper agonizingly. "She's—she's arrested!"

"What?" roared Nelson Lee.

"For—for murder——"

"Good heavens!"

Lee snatched the receiver from Nipper's nerveless grasp, and clapped it to his ear.

"Hallo!" he called curtly. "Yes—Lee speaking. What is it, Fuller? It's too bad of you to frighten Nipper by telling him——"

It was Nelson Lee's turn to come to an abrupt stop. He listened intently, and his jaw became strangely set and rigid. Nipper, with a dazed expression in his eyes, stood by, clutching at the edge of the table.

At last Nelson Lee hung the receiver up, and pushed the instrument from him. For just two seconds the detective sat perfectly still; then he sprang to his feet, and kicked his slippers off.

"Some terrible blunder, Nipper," he exclaimed tensely. "Some preposterous, criminal mistake of a suburban policeman. Look alive, lad—get your things on. We're off to Putney at once."

"What's—what's happened, guv'nor?" asked Nipper huskily.

"Fuller gave me no details," was Lee's reply. "He's at the Yard—or was when he spoke just now—and was just off to Putney, in answer to an urgent call by the Putney police. Stanton Roding has been murdered in his own house, and Miss Eileen is detained on suspicion. She was found with the body, and things seem to be black."

"Stanton Roding! He's one of the Combine—one of Miss Eileen's enemies——"

"That makes the matter worse," said Lee uneasily. "Of course, Miss Eileen is absolutely innocent——"

Nipper gulped something down.

"Innocent!" he cried thickly. "I should think she is! They must be mad to detain her! It's a sin and a shame, guv'nor! That sweet, dainty girl, suspected of killing—— Oh, it's too horrible to think of! They're fools—fools!"

"Pull yourself together, lad!" said Nelson Lee kindly. "We'll get Miss Eileen out of this fix. I am quite sure that she has done nothing criminal. Dear, dear! What a girl she is, Nipper! I am afraid she is too venturesome—too daring."

"That's wrong, guv'nor!" said Nipper hotly. "You've praised her for being

daring and plucky—you've praised her many a time——"

"Yes, yes, of course," interjected Lee gently. "Don't get excited, my boy. 'Pon my soul, Nipper, hasn't my training been of any use? You must learn to remain calm. You are flustered and confused. Cool down—cool down!"

Nipper suddenly laughed.

"I'm cool enough, sir," he said in a hard voice. "I was an ass to be startled, even. We'll get Miss Eileen out of this hole in no time. I expect she'll have explained matters before we arrive, in fact. Don't you remember that incident she spoke of this evening? Roding was killed by that 'Yolande' person, whoever she happens to be. I dare say he's met with his just deserts."

In less than five minutes the pair were off, and they happened to pick up a taxi at once. The driver was told to make for Putney Police-station with all speed. Nipper was irritable and impatient; the cab seemed to be crawling.

"What can it mean, guv'nor?" exclaimed the lad. "I wonder——"

"Then don't!" cut in Nelson Lee. "Don't wonder anything, young 'un. We'll wait until we have the facts. It is idle to form conjectures at this stage. I mean to see Miss Eileen herself, and get her own version of the story."

"That'll be the true story, anyhow!" declared Nipper stoutly.

"Undoubtedly."

Nothing more was said during the journey, and when Putney Police-station was reached, Nelson Lee and Nipper at once interviewed the inspector in charge. He knew Lee fairly well, and knew, also, that Eileen Dare was by way of being the great detective's assistant. During the girl's campaign the police had had much evidence of her cleverness and ability.

"Afraid it's infernally serious, Mr. Lee," said the inspector gravely. "Miss Dare is being detained, and things look black. It's hateful in every way, but the facts were very damning."

"Can you give me any details?"

"A few. The officer I sent round to Collingwood Gardens hasn't reported yet, but I know the general outline of the affair," replied the inspector. "Sanders, Mr. Roding's butler, heard his master cry out suddenly, and then fall. He was in the basement at the time, enjoying a last pipe before going to bed. The basement of those houses contains the kitchen and butler's pantry, and so on, you know. Well, Sanders rushed upstairs and found

Miss Dare in the library, standing over the body."

"Was Roding quite dead?"

"I believe so, Mr. Lee. He had been stabbed. The butler, it seems, detained Miss Dare, and shouted for help. A constable heard the outcry, and hurried to the spot. Miss Dare was then brought straight here—and, of course, searched."

"Searched!" snorted Nipper. "Disgraceful—"

"Miss Dare volunteered to empty all her pockets, youngster," interrupted the inspector grimly. "Our female searcher had practically nothing to do. And there's one thing I am going to tell you, Mr. Lee, which I really think ought to be kept from you. You see, we've got a strong piece of evidence. Miss Dare produced a heavy clasp knife, bearing Roding's initials. Undoubtedly the murder was committed with that weapon; she picked it up from the desk in all probability, and used it in a fit of anger—"

"What rot!" cried Nipper angrily.

"Hush, lad," admonished Lee. "You mustn't burst out in that way. I think I know something about that knife, too, inspector. I can prove, for instance, that it was in Miss Dare's possession quite early this evening—long before she went to Roding's house. However, that point doesn't seem to be of much importance. It was dreadfully unfortunate that Miss Dare had the knife upon her person. Did she make any statement?"

"Nothing beyond the fact that she was quite innocent, and that she had heard Roding cry out a woman's name—'Yolande,' I think it was. Oh, and she also stated that somebody had been in the room when she entered, but escaped by another door."

"Did she explain what she was doing in Roding's house?"

"No."

Nelson Lee looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Will you allow us to see Miss Dare?" he asked at length.

"Certainly. The young lady is not exactly a prisoner—as yet," replied the inspector. "She'll go before the magistrate in the morning, I expect, and we shall ask for a remand, of course. Personally, between you and me, Mr. Lee, I think there's been a mistake, but we had to detain the young lady. You quite understand that?"

"The facts were certainly sinister," said Lee.

Two minutes later the great detective and Nipper were ushered into a cosy apartment. Eileen was there, resting upon a couch. It must not be supposed that the girl detective had been cast into a cell. She was only being detained on suspicion of being connected with the crime.

The door closed, and the visitors were left alone with Eileen.

"Oh, Mr. Lee, whatever do you think of me?" asked the girl concernedly. "I have got myself into a terrible fix this time."

"The police are all fools!" burst out Nipper angrily.

"You mustn't say that, Nipper," smiled Eileen. "I don't blame them in the least. I was discovered at a terrible moment, and I suppose things do look black against me. But you'll get me out of this fix, won't you?"

"Of course," declared Lee cheerfully. "Now, Miss Eileen, just tell me exactly what happened."

In clear sentences, the girl described how she had discovered the secret of the clasp-knife, and how she had decided to go to Putney, in order to take a preliminary look round. Both Lee and Nipper were greatly interested, and fully realised the importance of the clasp-knife. Once possessed of that diary, Eileen would have the Combine completely in her hands.

"You didn't mean to enter the house?"

"No, Mr. Lee," replied Eileen quietly. "I had made up my mind not to, for it seemed too risky to me. But then something happened which was totally unexpected; an opportunity occurred which was too good to miss, and I acted on the impulse of the moment."

She explained how Sanders, the butler, had gone out to post his letter, leaving the front door ajar; how she had entered the house, and had heard the sudden cry from the library. Nelson Lee listened intently, and knew that if he had been in the same position, he would have acted just as Eileen had done. The girl had not even been rash. But circumstances had arisen which mechanically involved her in a tragedy which was as mysterious as it was unexpected.

Eileen said that a policeman had soon come in response to Sanders' wild shouting, and she had realised that her best course was to submit to arrest—or what amounted to arrest. And so the constable had 'phoned for a cab, and in due

course she had been brought to the police-station.

"But I know how black the case is," said the girl quietly. "If the real murderer can't be traced I shall be in a terrible position. The police know something of my affairs, Mr. Lee—they know that I hated Stanton Roding. Then there was that affair on the Embankment. The constable who took Roding away saw me distinctly, and I believe he suspected me. When he gives evidence that I was on the spot when Roding was attacked previously, it will look significant, won't it? Nobody saw any other woman, and they will say that Roding was too dazed to realise that I was still with him——"

"Yes, things are difficult," interrupted Nelson Lee. "Fate seems to have conspired against you, Miss Eileen. And that was particularly cruel, seeing that you have been working solely in the cause of justice. But this tangle can be straightened out, I am certain."

"Of course it can!" declared Nipper. "We'll have you free by the morning, miss!"

"I hope so—I do hope so," said Eileen gravely. "I believe Roding was killed by a woman; and she was actually in the room when I entered."

"You didn't see her?"

"No, I didn't see anything of her."

"H'm! A pity," said Lee. "You merely heard a suspicious sound?"

"I heard a scurry, and just caught a glimpse of the opposite door closing. I believe it leads out into a conservatory," said Eileen. "If so, the woman could have slipped away quite easily. The street was deserted."

Nelson Lee glanced at his watch.

"I think we had better leave you now, Miss Eileen," he exclaimed. "I want to have a look round Roding's library, and every second is precious. I shall visit you again, I expect, and you may have remembered a few other seemingly trivial details. One never knows how important a triviality may prove to be. Keep your spirits up, and trust in Nipper and me."

Eileen smiled brightly.

"Oh, I know you will clear the mystery up," she said confidently. "At all events, Stanton Roding is settled with, isn't he? It was terrible for him to die in that way, but when I think of my poor father—— Roding has merely paid the penalty for his crimes, Mr. Lee."

Another enemy has gone. The only misfortune is that I should be suspected of the awful crime."

"There was every reason why you should kill Roding," said Lee quietly. "We cannot altogether blame the police for their attitude. They have only acted cautiously. You were on the spot, and there was a knife of Roding's in your possession. The police would, indeed, have been foolish to let you go."

"But you don't think that I——"

"Upon my soul! What a suggestion!" protested Nelson Lee. "Not for a second, Miss Eileen. I know that you are incapable of such violence. You merely wished to expose Roding for the scoundrel he was—together, if possible with his associates. Fate dealt an unkind blow, and Nipper and I must set things straight."

A few minutes later Lee and Nipper left the apartment, and they had a few more words with the inspector. Then they set out briskly for Collingwood Gardens—their taxi having been dismissed.

The distance was short, and they arrived in less than ten minutes. Given as the facts were, both Nelson Lee and Nipper positively knew that Eileen Dare was absolutely innocent.

Collingwood Gardens lay black and silent; not a sign of human life was visible except in Roding's house. And here a slight glimmer in the hall told that somebody was up and about. The other houses were in darkness—as was only to be expected at that hour of the night.

Detective-inspector Fuller, of Scotland Yard, came into the hall as Lee and Nipper entered. He was looking grave and serious, and there was a troubled expression in his eyes.

"A bad business, Lee," he said, as he shook hands. "Thought you'd like to know of it—that's why I rang you up. Miss Dare's a friend of yours, isn't she?"

"More than a friend, Fuller," replied Lee quietly. "She's an extremely able assistant—a girl of amazing ability and resource."

Fuller shook his head.

"I'm afraid she's gone too far this trip," he said.

"Miss Dare didn't kill that rotter!" declared Nipper indignantly.

"Well, I'd give anything to think the

"Nipper," said the inspector. "But, hang it all, consider the facts! I'm a detective officer, and I've got to look facts in the face—not blink at them, although I'd like to. And this affair is as plain as daylight."

"Yes—daylight in a black fog!" grunted Nipper.

Fuller smiled uncomfortably, and led the way along the passage, and into the library. Just inside the door he paused, and turned to his companions. He jerked his head towards the bulk of the room.

"I haven't touched anything yet, Mr. Lee," he explained. "The room's just as it was when Miss Dare was found. Nobody's been inside, in fact, except a doctor. And he only took a cursory glance at the body. Quite dead, of course."

Fuller had been in the house some time, it appeared, but he had been busy getting the policeman's story, and had put many questions to Sanders, the dead man's butler. Lee was glad of this.

The library was brilliantly lit; for, in addition to the table lamp, a hanging cluster of electric lamps were glowing in the centre of the room. Nelson Lee stood for a moment or two, gazing searchingly in every direction.

There was a small safe set into one wall, and this was open. Papers lay on the floor, as though somebody had hurriedly flung them there. The desk itself was in a state of considerable confusion. The door leading into the conservatory was fitted with heavy coloured glasses—leaded, of course—in the upper panels.

Nelson Lee switched off the main lights, and gazed at the room again. Except for the glow upon the desk, the apartment was almost in darkness. Fuller looked on approvingly and with interest.

After a few moments Lee flooded the room with light again. Then he stepped across to the body. Stanton Rounding lay upon his back almost straight out. One hand seemed to be clutching something. His eyes were now closed, the doctor having lowered the lids before rigor mortis set in.

Rounding had been a medium-sized man, with a clean shaven face and rather thick lips. Usually he had worn heavy glasses before his pale blue, unpleasant eyes. The glasses were now lying beside

him, having evidently fallen from his nose as he crashed down.

He had been wearing evening dress, and there was a jagged hole in his shirt-front upon the left side. This was stained ominously a dark, brownish crimson. Both Lee and Fuller bent over the body, and Nipper hung in the background, rather awed.

"That blow must have been a severe one," remarked Fuller. "A clean thrust, I should judge—right to the heart. It's a wonder he didn't prevent it somehow."

"I daresay he was taken unawares," replied Lee. "Look here, Fuller, you are a sensible man; you know as well as I do that Miss Dare didn't commit this murder. She wasn't capable of it."

"Do you mean she couldn't have struck the blow?"

"Oh, no. Miss Dare is strong enough," replied Lee. "She could easily have inflicted this wound with that clasp-knife. But, my dear Fuller, that girl has never committed an act of violence in all her life."

"Well, I won't give any opinion at present," said the inspector gruffly. "I know something of Miss Dare, having met her more than once, and I will say that I was tremendously shocked when I heard this news. I'm afraid she'll have a bit of a job to clear herself."

"You'd like to see her cleared?"

"Good heavens, yes!" said the inspector heartily. "And I'm not going to obstruct you in any way, Mr. Lee. Some police officers, I know, have often done their best to hinder your investigations—but I'm not that sort. You've done me a good turn more than once, and I don't forget things like that. It may not be exactly professional, but I'm going to help you all I can to prove Miss Dare's innocence."

"Good man!" exclaimed Lee quietly. "This attitude of yours, Fuller, will make things easier for me. If you had resented my presence you could have made things awkward for me. I'm quite aware of that. Just lend me a hand a moment."

They turned the body over, and then Fuller uttered a short exclamation. A lady's handbag was revealed, having been, until now, hidden by the body. Fuller picked it up and opened it. It was quite empty.

"Can you identify this?" he asked abruptly.

"As Miss Dare's, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I've never seen it before," said Lee.

"That's straight, I suppose?"

"My dear man, it wouldn't pay me to tell falsehoods," smiled the detective.

"No, this bag is quite new to me. I know for a fact that I've never seen it in Miss Dare's possession. Have you, Nipper?"

"Never, guv'nor."

Fuller regarded the pair quizzically.

"But you can't swear that it wasn't hers?" he asked. "You can only say that you've never seen it before? Well, never mind—I don't suppose the thing will be of much use, anyway."

"What's this—what's this?"

Nelson Lee withdrew some dark-brown hairs from the dead man's clutched fingers. They were fine and long, and had obviously been torn from a woman's head.

"Hair!" exclaimed Fuller. "That's a clue, anyhow! 'Pon my soul! Miss Dare's hair is dark, isn't it? If this proves to be hers she'll be convicted as sure as a gun! There'll be no escape whatever, for it's as plain as pie that Roding clutched these hairs from his assailant's head at the moment of attack."

"That hair's darker than Miss Eileen's!" declared Nipper uneasily.

Nelson Lee said nothing. He believed that the hair was, indeed, a trifle darker. It was a point which would have to be proved later on. If no difference could be detected—

"I suppose he didn't commit suicide?" asked Nipper hopefully.

"Now that's foolish!" exclaimed the inspector. "I thought you were smart, Nipper. If Roding had committed suicide there would have been a knife beside him or in one of his hands. And there wouldn't have been a lady's handbag here, or a bunch of lady's hair, either. And I don't suppose the man took the trouble to go and bury the knife after he'd stabbed himself to the heart!" added Fuller sarcastically.

The theory of suicide, of course, was absurd. Stanton Roding had been murdered—but by whom?

"Whose hand had struck the fatal blow?"

CHAPTER IV.

NIPPER'S ADVENTURES—THE COMBINE'S PLAN—TRAPPED.

AFTER a further half-hour had sped by Nelson Lee had satisfied himself regarding one or two points. The murderer—or murderess, as seemed more probable—could easily have escaped by means of the conservatory door. Indeed, it was practically certain that the woman had entered the house in that way.

Who was the mysterious Yolande? There was an element of mystery surrounding her identity which worried Nelson Lee considerably. If he had only known who the woman actually was, matters would have been different.

In the desk Stanton Roding's will was found. This had been drawn up some months before, and was lying beneath a pile of other papers and packages. A glance through it told Lee that the chief legatee was a nephew of Roding's, named Harold Newton. And Newton, it appeared, lived only in Fulham—quite near by, on the other side of the river.

"Look here, Nipper," said Nelson Lee quietly, "we don't know this Newton, but if he's of the same calibre as his uncle was—well, he's a wrong 'un. He wouldn't hesitate at murder. Roding had blood on his hands, at all events."

"Yes, he helped to kill Miss Eileen's father—"

"Oh, the man has only paid for his sins," interjected Lee. "But you're doing nothing, Nipper. You may as well occupy your time by running over to Fulham, to Harold Newton's place—he's got a flat there, I believe. Just scout round a bit, and keep your eyes open. One never knows. If everything is quiet come back here at once."

Lee gave Nipper some further instructions, and then the lad hastened off. After all, his errand might possibly prove to be of use. Although there was no direct connection between the murder and Harold Newton, it was nevertheless possible that Newton might have been mixed up in it. As Nelson Lee said, one never knew. There were many possibilities.

Newton might have disguised himself as a woman—as the unknown Yolande—for the especial purpose of concealing his own identity. Newton was a

bachelor, living in a flat; and Nipper conjured up visions of the nephew, fast-living and reckless, being overwhelmed by gambling and other debts. By killing Stanton Roding he would come into a large amount of money. Oh, yes, it was certainly worth the trouble, this trip to Fulham.

Nipper walked along the pavement of Collingwood Gardens with a firm step. His teeth were set, and he turned over all sorts of theories in his mind—some wild and some exceedingly astute. Anyhow, Miss Eileen was innocent! That was a certain fact, Nipper told himself. And she must be released from custody by the morning at least. That she should have to remain in the hands of the police for days on end was unthinkable.

Just before Nipper got to the end of the road he saw a light commercial motor-van turn into Collingwood Gardens; it was something after the style of a Ford—low-built and squat.

At the moment Nipper was passing under the subdued light of a street lamp, and his figure was clearly visible. The car was just passing him when he heard somebody give an order to stop. The motor-van jerked to a standstill.

Nipper was still walking, but now his head was turned.

"Hi! Youngster!"

The call was soft and urgent, and Nipper came to a halt.

"Hallo!" he said. "What's wrong?"

"Is that Nipper?"

"Yes—I'm Nipper," replied the young detective.

"Good business!" came the voice. "Come here a minute, there's a good chap."

Nipper walked into the road and approached the van. Probably some police officials, he thought. They knew him, anyhow. He got close up, and saw that the back of the van was open, and two dim forms were standing there.

"Looking for No. 17?" asked Nipper.

"Yes—Roding's place."

"That's right. You want No. 17."

"We're from the Yard," went on the speaker. "Is your guv'nor there?"

"Mr. Lee? Yes, he's there——" Nipper paused. "I don't seem to know your voices," he went on. "This rotten darkness——"

The lad couldn't get any further. For, without warning, the two men flung

themselves upon him. He was helpless in their fierce, determined grip. Before a cry could rise in his throat—before he could attempt to struggle—he was whirled round and thrust into the van like a sack of potatoes.

Even while he was struggling up the vehicle started forward, and he heard the doors slam to. Then he found himself held down firmly—by the feet and arms. The lad had been collared almost before he was aware of the fact.

His mind was in a whirl.

What could it mean? Who were these men? And why, in Heaven's name, had they kidnapped him? The incident had only occupied twenty seconds' space of time, and now the light van was bowling away at a rapid speed, having quickly turned.

For a moment Nipper thought of struggling with all his strength. He was angry and surprised, and Nipper hated nothing worse than being surprised—being taken off his guard. He knew that nobody could blame him for falling a victim to these men; but that wasn't much consolation.

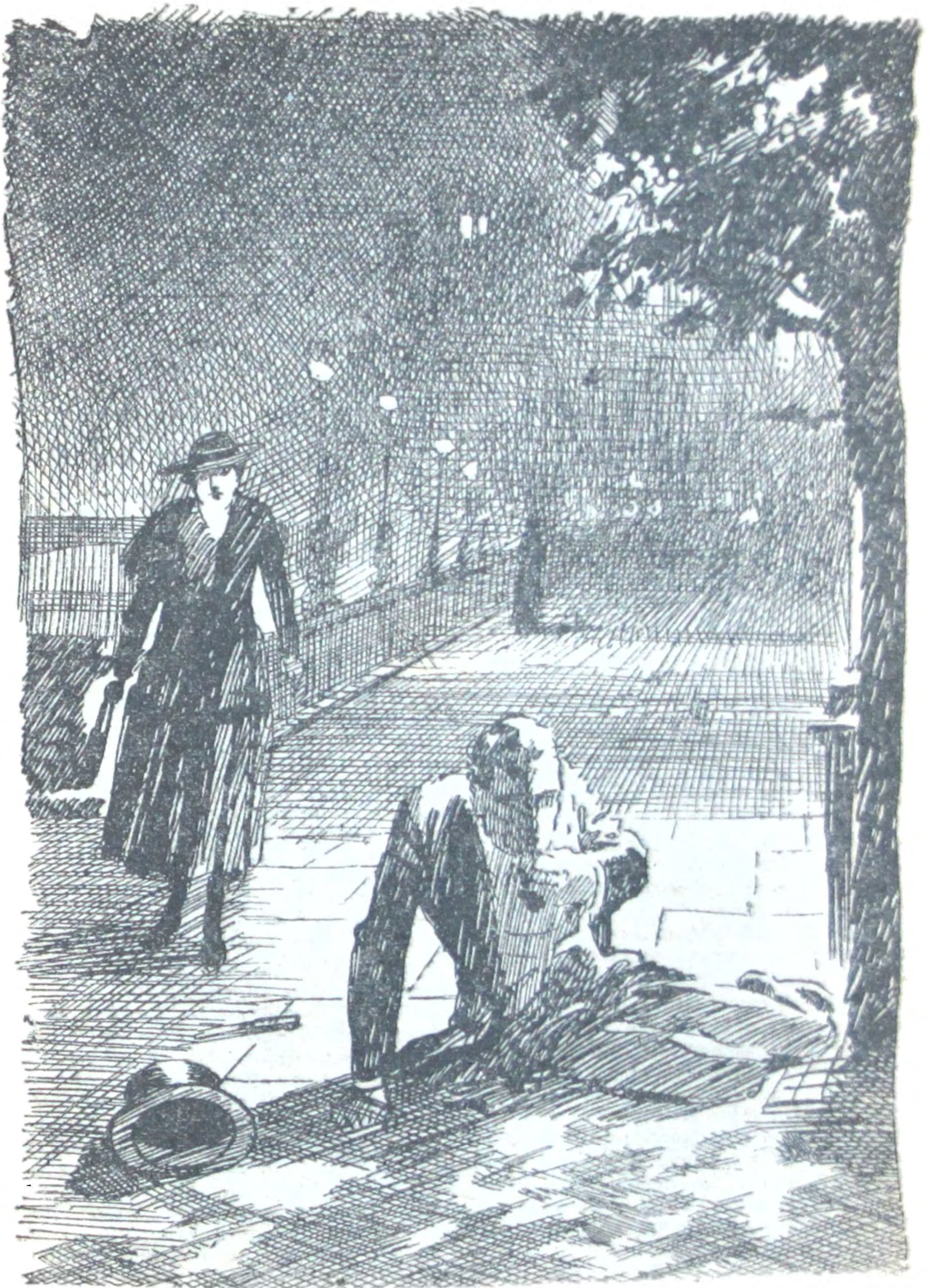
And in his fury he half-decided to make a terrific fight for liberty.

Then he changed his mind, and lay still. And in choosing that course Nipper showed much wisdom. When one is hopelessly outnumbered, it is madness itself to resist. Nipper, in desperation, had fought for his liberty on other occasions, and his efforts were generally rewarded by a fearful crack on the head—a crack which effectually stunned him, and which made his head sore and tender for a week afterwards.

With the two strong men sprawled upon him, Nipper considered that the game wasn't worth the candle. He admitted defeat with as good a grace as possible under the circumstances.

"All right, you rotters!" he gasped. "I throw up the sponge. I'm whacked, and I know it. I say, get off my chest, for goodness sake. Chuck it!"

It was quite dark in the interior of the van. But Nipper could feel, by the space about him, that the vehicle was empty, save for its human freight. And he found that his ankles were being bound roughly but very effectively. His wrists received similar treatment. This was better than a whack on the head, anyhow, Nipper decided. He was still one whole piece, and in possession of his wits. But who the thunder had got



I went quickly forward and found a man lying on the pavement. —
(See p. 4.)

hold of him? It couldn't be a mistake, because the men had asked his name.

"As long as you keep still and quiet, Nipper, you won't be harmed," said a gruff, panting voice. "If you yell, you'll suddenly drop off into dreamland, and wake up to find a lump as big as an egg on your brain-box."

"Thanks, I'll keep quiet," said Nipper. "But what's the game? I didn't know I was worth all this trouble! Haven't you made a blunder?"

"To tell you the truth, we are after your master, Nelson Lee," said the voice from the darkness. "but, seeing you, we decided to act on the spur of the moment. Lee will be captured later."

"For thundering haps!" remarked Nipper grimly, and with a scandalous misuse of the British language.

He saw a match flare up, and caught a glimpse of his two captors as they lit cigarettes. They were both bearded men, although very different in appearance. One was dark, and his beard was small and pointed, the other was fair, and his chin was adorned by a "ginger" beard of a barge cut, his upper lip being shaved.

"Disguised, of course," Nipper told himself.

Yet the disguises were very excellent. Nipper would have been astonished if he had known that the bargee-looking individual was none other than Mr. Sydney Bradford, the well-known London solicitor, and that his companion was Mr. Fred Abbercorn, known and respected in half a dozen famous West End clubs, and that the driver of the commercial car, in chauffeur's uniform, was the Right Honourable Lord Max Roper. Nipper would certainly have been astonished if he had known these facts.

But, bizarre as it seemed, there was a very natural explanation.

The Combine was on the war path.

In one sentence, that was precisely the truth.

Nipper didn't know that he was in the hands of the Combine; just at this moment he didn't think of such a possibility. Why should the Combine wish to get hold of him? They were Eileen's enemies, and, in any case, this was not their style of thing at all.

The Combine confined themselves to business and fraud—to profitable deals which lined their own pockets, and made large-sized holes in other people's. The Combine did not indulge in kidnapping

and violence of this sort. Their villainies were not of the straightforward order; they were subtle and secret.

Why, then, this radical change of policy?

Why were these three men, with reputations and good names at stake, taking part in a common abduction?

For one thing, they dared not trust the work to others; and for another, by acting drastically to-night, they were ensuring their own future safety. For the Combine was uneasy, and had been uneasy for weeks past.

Their number had been sadly depleted of late. Their best men had been snuffed out, one by one, with terrible regularity. This does not mean to say that they were killed; they had gone into obscurity in one way or another. Some had died, and others were guests of His Majesty—in other words, "doing time."

Rufus Tollman, Herbert Vikerson, Melville J. Ross, Dr. Munro Taggart, Sir Olof Hurst—to name a few. They had all ceased to exist so far as the Combine was concerned.

The remainder—Lord Roper, Abbercorn, Bradford, Roger Haverfield, and one or two more—had realised that the situation was desperate. They saw visions of their own downfall looming dangerously near.

And now, to-night, Stanton Roding had taken the last journey. Stanton Roding, one of the Combine's chief members—a power in himself. Roding had been murdered, and the Combine was smaller and less powerful than ever.

Truly, events had reached a pass!

Nelson Lee's half-formed theory that the Combine had quarrelled, and that Roding had been killed by his comrades, was wide of the mark. Lee himself had thought so upon consideration.

The truth was, the Combine knew nothing of Roding's fate until they learned that he was dead. And then they had received a nasty shock. They were as much mystified as anybody as to the identity of the murderer—or murderers.

Lord Roper had been one of Roding's most intimate friends. Roding had visited his lordship, on an average, about three times a week. And Roper had visited Roding with equal frequency. The pair, in fact, had concocted many of the Combine's most profitable schemes. Roding and the scapegrace peer had been a pair as regards villainy and scoundrelism. Roper had been disowned by his family years before, but

had automatically inherited the title. And, although he was a peer of the realm, he greatly augmented his income by active participation in criminal undertakings.

Sanders, Roding's butler—who, needless to say, knew nothing of his master's true mode of life—had phoned through to Lord Max Roper almost as soon as Eileen Dare had been taken away to the police-station.

Lord Max lived in chambers off Piccadilly, and he had just arrived home from a late supper with Bradford and Abbercorn. The three had been chatting and smoking at the time of Sanders' call.

The news of Roding's tragic death had filled them with alarm; but this was somewhat nullified by their joy when Sanders added that Miss Eileen Dare had been arrested for the murder. Sanders didn't exactly state the actual facts; he told Roper that Eileen had positively committed the crime, and that she had been arrested. As a matter of fact, Eileen was only detained. In some ways, perhaps, it amounted to the same thing.

Eileen Dare arrested!

This was splendid news, indeed. For the Combine knew full well that they owed their losses to the activities of this dainty girl. They were under no false impression regarding the point; they acknowledged that Eileen was a power, and that she was highly dangerous.

Again and again they had attempted to rid themselves of her, but all their efforts had failed. They knew that Nelson Lee was Eileen's friend, and that he, too, was working against them. It had been a bad day for the Combine when they concocted the plot which resulted in the death of Eileen's father!

Ever since that time the girl had been a terror to them. It was absurd—it was humiliating—it was preposterous—yet it was a fact! That girl, dainty and sweet and altogether lovable, was waging a war against her enemies; and, what was more, she was succeeding in her efforts. None knew this better than the Combine.

And here, all of a sudden, there came the opportunity to get rid of her for good. She was under arrest—for murder! The chances were that she had actually committed the crime, for Roding was one of her blackest foes. If so, she would suffer the penalty of the law. She might make awkward statements at her trial, but she had not one iota of proof against any of them. She knew full well that

they were rogues, but just saying that wouldn't hurt them. The police require proof—and very substantial proof—before they act.

Roper and Abbercorn and Bradford, discussing the affair, saw that Eileen's arrest was an event to gloat over. But there was Nelson Lee! Confound him, he would be bound to come butting in! And it was morally certain that Lee would do all in his power to prove Eileen's innocence.

Roper had rung Sanders up after a while, and had learned that Nelson Lee was even then on his way to Putney! Sanders had learned this from Inspector Fuller, who had just arrived at that time. It was all perfectly natural.

The fact that Nelson Lee was on his way to Roding's house was disturbing. Lee knew more than the police regarding Roding's character, and he might discover things—things which would affect the whole Combine. At all cost, Lee must be got away. Besides, his efforts were on Eileen Dare's behalf, and the Combine did not want Eileen to have a champion during this time of stress.

Plans had therefore been made, and the trio of rogues had decided to make a bold move. The circumstances demanded instant action, and they rose to the occasion. Nelson Lee must be got away, and he must be kept a prisoner until Eileen's trial was over! Once a prisoner, indeed, it would be as well, perhaps, to settle the detective once and for all. The scoundrels were fully capable of murder.

Cleverly disguised, the trio had set out in the motor-van—with the intention of tricking Nelson Lee into it. A van of that sort was more roomy than a car, and better suited to the purpose.

And then, while in Collingwood Gardens, Lord Max, at the wheel, had spotted Nipper! Nipper, in his way, was a dangerous customer. And the plan had been hastily altered, and Nipper had been captured. The original scheme could be carried out later on—improved, perhaps.

Thus Nipper found himself a prisoner. And in quite a short time he found himself at a spot just below Esher, on the Portsmouth Road. Here, there was a small cottage retreat of Ford Abbercorn's, and he had consented to the plan of making the cottage a temporary prison for the captives.

Just over an hour later, while Nelson Lee was carefully going through a pile of Roding's papers, he heard a motor-

car come to a stop out in the road. Detective-Inspector Fuller was busy with a couple of draughtsmen, who had been sent from Scotland Yard. They were measuring up the library, and making a scale-drawing of the apartment. There are lots of queer things to be done when a murder is committed.

"Somebody for Mr. Lee," announced the constable on duty.

This excellent officer had been stationed in the hall, and he now stuck his head into the library. Nelson Lee looked up, the others, after a glance, continuing with their work.

"Who is it?" asked the great detective. "Nipper?"

"No, sir. There's a motor-car, I think."

Lee laid a paper-weight upon the papers he had been inspecting, and strolled out into the hall. He found there a man dressed in the livery of a chauffeur, holding a note. Lee little guessed that he was face to face with a member of the Combine—Lord Max Roper himself!

"You're Mr. Lee, sir?" asked the "chauffeur."

"Yes. What is it?"

"I've brought a note from a young gentleman named Mr. Nipper, sir," replied Lord Max, acting his part to perfection. "It's urgent, I believe. Leastways, he told me to drive like——"

"Let me see the note," interrupted Lee. "Where have you come from?"

"London, sir."

Lee lifted his eyebrows a trifle. What had Nipper been doing in London, when he had merely gone to Fulham, on the other side of the river? The detective tore open the envelope which had been handed to him, and extracted a sheet of notepaper.

On it he read:

"Have got on track. Am keeping my eye on our man now. Please come in car without delay. Don't bring Fuller—we can effect the capture alone. Am at Bloomsbury. Please come at once."

"NIPPER."

Nelson Lee's eyes gleamed as he looked up.

"Wait one minute, my man," he said crisply.

He turned, entered the library, and spoke rapidly with Detective-Inspector Fuller for a few seconds, explaining that he would probably be gone some little time. Then, bustling into his overcoat, he returned to the hall.

"I'm ready," he said to the waiting "chauffeur."

Lord Max inwardly chuckled, and led the way outside. Nelson Lee was rather surprised to find a commercial van waiting to convey him to Bloomsbury; but his companion explained that no taxi was available at that hour of the night, and that the light van was just as speedy.

Nelson Lee entered, and pulled the doors to. Then Roper jumped into the driving seat, and the car sped away. In less than two minutes, however, just at the top of the quiet road, the vehicle came to a stop.

Lord Max jumped from his seat, went round to the back, and rapped upon the doors. They were opened at once by Nelson Lee.

"What's wrong——?"

Before the detective could proceed further, Lord Roper gave him a violent shove, and Lee fell backwards. Another man had crept up in the darkness, and he and Roper fell upon their captive.

Nelson Lee struggled weakly, for his head had seemingly hit a bolt in the floor of the car. He felt a pad of something placed to his nostrils, and a sickly smell assailed him, and numbed his wits.

With astonishing suddenness the detective succumbed altogether, and his head fell back, and his limbs became limp.

Nelson Lee was drugged and unconscious—a prisoner!

CHAPTER V.

NELSON LEE WAKES UP—TURNING THE TABLES—CAN EILEEN BE SAVED?

MR. SYDNEY BRADFORD jerked his head and listened.

He was sitting within the little cottage just off the main road beyond Esher. It was quite a pretty cottage, and Ford Abbercorn had used it hitherto for mere harmless week-end trips.

It was all in darkness, and Bradford had been sitting in the front room, smoking a cigar. Nipper lay opposite to him, upon a couch, still bound, and quite helpless. He was under Bradford's eye all the time.

The solicitor listened intently.

"Sounds like the car, Nipper," he remarked.

"I'll bet those rotten pals of yours haven't got the guv'nor!" growled Nipper.

Bradford made no answer, but rose to his feet and went to the little front door. The night was strangely peaceful, and Bradford could now distinctly hear the hum of an approaching motor-car. It was coming along the main road, two hundred yards away.

Two little weak spots of light suddenly appeared.

"I wonder if they've got him?" thought Bradford anxiously.

It was not necessary for him to wonder long.

The spots of light approached, and resolved themselves into the two shaded head-lamps of a motor-vehicle. It came to a halt opposite the rustic gate of the cottage.

Bradford walked up the little path. Nipper, inside the building, strained his ears anxiously. Had the Combine succeeded in getting hold of Nelson Lee? It was a question which worried Nipper more than a little.

He heard voices plainly, for Bradford had left the front door wide open.

"Well," came Bradford's voice. "What's the result?"

Nipper caught his breath in. He had no precise knowledge as to the identity of his captors; he merely knew that three strangers had captured him, and that two of them had gone off for Nelson Lee. They were members of the Combine, of course, but their actual identity was quite hidden beneath their disguises.

He heard the reply to Bradford's anxious query.

"We've got him all right," came a satisfied voice. "The fool took the bait without a suspicion. He's here—doped, and helpless."

Nipper gritted his teeth.

"So the gov'nor's copped!" he muttered bitterly. "What a rotten state of affairs! And Miss Eileen will be at the mercy—Ob, what will happen to her? Great Caesar! I—I feel like having a fit!"

There was every reason for Nipper to feel furious and alarmed. Something bad had happened; the lad had not thought for a moment that Nelson Lee would fall into the trap. But the detective had been taken off his guard.

Outside in the road, Ford Abbercorn and Lord Max Roper dragged Lee's unconscious form from the light van. The detective was limp and senseless, still

suffering from the effects of the drug which had been administered.

"Bring him inside," said Bradford, in satisfied tones.

"The kid's all right?" asked Abbercorn.

"Of course. We've been having quite an interesting chat," laughed Bradford. "He takes everything with amazing coolness. He's sensible, too—he knows when he's beaten."

Nipper, within the cottage, heard the softly uttered words.

"Do I?" he growled to himself. "I'm not beaten yet, anyhow, old scout!"

Nelson Lee was carried by Abbercorn and Roper through the little gateway, Bradford leading the way towards the cottage door. Everything was wonderfully still and peaceful. The night was growing old.

Then, quite clearly, the hoot of an owl was heard. The men took no notice of the sound, and they did not even notice that it was twice repeated. It was a sound that belonged to the night itself.

"The dunderhead fell into the trap without a suspicion," chuckled Abbercorn. "I half-expected trouble, but we didn't have any at all —"

"No! The trouble starts from this minute!"

The voice was loud and strong—and it was Nelson Lee's!

Nipper heard that voice, and he seemed to go dizzy for a second. Had he been mistaken?

Various sounds from outside told him that he had not!

Nelson Lee was not quite so senseless as he appeared to be. It was really astonishing the amount of energy he displayed, considering everything. Abbercorn and Lord Max, currying the detective, were totally unprepared for the startling thing which suddenly happened.

Their limp burden became singularly active. In one second Nelson Lee kicked his feet free, and simultaneously delivered a hard punch with his left fist. He caught Lord Max a painful jab on the ribs, and the next second the famous detective was upon his feet.

"Stand back!" he roared. "Up with your hands!"

The three men were utterly startled. For a few moments they were incapable of action; they could only stare at their

"captive" dumbly and with rising alarm and fear.

Crack!

Abbercorn, Bradford and Roper were thunderstruck. Lee had jerked out his revolver, and he immediately fired in the sky. The sudden report startled the scoundrels considerably.

"Up with your hands!" repeated Lee crisply. "I've got you covered, my beauties. The tables are turned, I imagine, and you will be wise——"

"There's a car coming along!" exclaimed Bradford huskily.

Amazingly enough, the solicitor was right. Down the little lane a powerful motor-car was speeding. And then the Combine trio realised the truth. It was they who had been trapped—not Nelson Lee!

And the scoundrels flew into a mad panic.

They knew only too well what this would mean! Once captured, their identity would be revealed, and then they would be exposed in their true colours. Astute as they were, they knew that they had been duped by Nelson Lee. While appearing to fall into their trap, Lee had, in reality, set a snare for them!

With one accord the three alarmed men flung themselves upon Nelson Lee. Even as they did so, the approaching motor-car came to a halt. Detective-inspector Fuller and four police officers poured out of it, and came towards the cottage at a run.

There was confused excitement for several minutes.

Nelson Lee was unable to fire at such close range. Indeed, he would not have cared to fire, in any case. The famous criminologist was not in the habit of loosing off his revolver at random, especially when there were police officers about. One of the bullets was just as likely to hit Fuller as one of the criminals, and that sort of shooting was not permissible.

Lee was attacked furiously.

One of the trio—he did not know which one—struck at him with his fist, but Lee easily turned the blow aside, and delivered a stunning blow with his revolver-butt. The man rolled over, and lay still.

At that second Lee was struck, and in recovering his balance he tripped against the senseless form of the man he had felled. Lee toppled over, and he was

in the act of rising when the police arrived on the spot.

One of the officers, full of excitement and zeal, promptly mistook Lee for an enemy. And Lee found himself lying flat on his back, with his jaw somewhat loose and his brain dizzy.

The police-officer knelt upon his chest.

"Finished?" he asked grimly, "or do you want another tap? You've only got to say, old man. Better give in——"

"Confound you!" gasped Nelson Lee. "I'm Lee!"

"That gag won't work——"

"You blazing fool, Watkins!" roared Detective-inspector Fuller. "That's Mr. Lee you're trampling on! Get up, you blockhead!"

Watkins jumped as though he had been electrified.

"Mr. Lee!" he gasped. "I—I thought——"

"Never mind what you thought!" snapped Fuller. "You'll hear more of this, my man! Blundering of that sort won't get you promotion, I can assure you!"

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"Have you got them all?" he asked unsteadily.

"I don't know!" growled the inspector. "Things got mixed up in the darkness. Two of 'em slid off, I believe—my men are after 'em now. Who's this down here? And where's that imp of a Nipper?"

"I'm here, inspector," yelled Nipper excitedly, from within the cottage.

In a few minutes things were sorted out. It was found that two of the rogues had succeeded in breaking away in the confusion. Their identity was quite unknown to Nelson Lee. The third man was knocked out of time—he was destined for the cells, at all events.

Three of Fuller's men were in full cry after the escaped pair, and there was more than a chance that they would succeed in running them to earth. They had dashed off, round the cottage, and into a thick wood at the rear.

Nipper was soon released, and he sniffed with disgust when he heard the news.

"Five of you, beside the guv'nor, and you couldn't nab the brutes!" he said with delicious contempt. "What the dickens were you all doing?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Under the circumstances, we mustn't

grumble, Nipper," he replied. "I had my hands full, and floored one man. The other two took advantage of the darkness and the confusion. I was greatly handicapped, too, by the receipt of a wonderfully effective upper-cut from the fist of the excellent Watkins. He mistook me for one of the enemy, and didn't wait to ask questions."

"I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Lee——"

"That'll do, Watkins!" snapped the inspector tartly. "You'll hear more of this affair! If you hadn't blundered in that fool way we should have nabbed the whole bunch. I was just getting busy when I saw who it was you'd got down, and I paused to set things right. And all these seconds were valuable."

Watkins looked awfully miserable.

"Look here, Fuller," said Nelson Lee. "You mustn't blame Watkins for that little mistake—I don't blame him, at all events. We were all more or less confused, in the general scrimmage. Let the thing drop."

"He'll be reported——"

"Nonsense!" laughed Lee. "The man did his best."

"That I did, Mr. Lee," said Watkins earnestly. "I—I thought——"

"You thought—you thought!" snorted Fuller. "By that blunder of yours, you messed up the whole capture. Still, if Mr. Lee wants the thing to drop, I suppose I'd better give in. He's the man who received the upper-cut, anyhow! And the garden was infernally dark, I'll admit."

As a matter of fact, Fuller hadn't emerged from the affair with flying colours himself. He had led the police, and had become considerably confused in the general excitement. When he had seen things clearly two of the criminals had escaped, and three officers were after them.

Watkins was grateful to Nelson Lee, and confidentially whispered to Nipper that his gov'nor was a thundering brick. Which wasn't exactly startling news to the lad; Nipper had known it for years, in fact.

Twenty minutes later the three police-officers returned—empty-handed. The fugitives had got clean away, taking advantage of the wood, and the darkness. They had managed to dodge their pursuers, and had vanished into the night.

"H'm! Well, it can't be helped," growled Fuller. "I expected as much."

We shall have to circulate their descriptions. You know what they were like, Lee, don't you? Nipper, too."

"They were disguised," said Lee. "They've slipped through our fingers, Fuller, and it's no good growling. By the morning they will be totally changed in appearance. Let's be thankful we've nabbed one of the three."

To remain at the spot would be futile. And so the two motor-vehicles started off for London. The prisoner was identified by Nelson Lee as Mr. Ford Abbercorn, and the detective was pleased. Abbercorn was one of Eileen's bitterest enemies. He recovered his wits after a while, and positively swore that he knew nothing whatever of Stanton Roding's death. He had only been told that Roding had been killed, and he said that he could prove that he was in a certain famous restaurant at the time of the murder.

Nipper wanted to know how Nelson Lee had hoodwinked the rogues, and the detective briefly explained. Lee had given Nipper precise instructions—before the latter had started off for Fulham—that he was not to communicate with Lee by writing. He was to report in person.

Therefore, when a motor-car arrived, with a note from Nipper, requesting Lee to rush off to a vague address in London, the detective had been instantly suspicious. He would have been suspicious in any case, for the note, though written cleverly enough, was not quite convincing enough.

Nelson Lee had pretended to fall in with the arrangement, but he had given Fuller the tip before accompanying the "chauffeur." He had told Fuller to follow the commercial van with several police-officers. And Fuller, very smartly, had done this. The owl-hoot had been a signal to tell Lee that Fuller was ready.

As for the drugging incident, Lee laughed when he explained it. He had fallen back, and had pretended to hurt his head. Then, taking a deep breath, he had simply allowed the drugged pad to be pressed to his nostrils, his struggles becoming feebler and feebler. The attackers had believed that Lee was drugged. Yet, as a matter of fact, the detective was in full possession of his wits. In brief, Nelson Lee had outwitted the enemy all along.

But what did it all mean? Why had the attack been engineered? The great detective felt convinced that the Combine were largely concerned with the murder of Stanton Roding, and that Eileen Dare's terrible position was the result of deliberate plotting.

How could the girl be saved? That was a question which worried Nelson Lee very considerably.

CHAPTER VI.

THE NEWSPAPER CUTTINGS—THE CLUE OF THE CUT SASHLINE—LEE'S THEORY.

NELSON LEE was very thoughtful when No. 17, Collingwood Gardens, was reached once more.

The night was now far advanced, but it was still dark, and the select residential road was as quiet as ever.

Where did the Combine come in?

What hand had they in this mysterious crime? Was the unknown "Yolande" in any way connected with the Combine? The exciting affair which had just finished told Lee that the Combine were concerned in the mystery somewhere. They had deliberately tried to kidnap Nipper and Lee. Why?

The detective shrewdly guessed the truth—because they were anxious for Eileen Dare to be convicted of the crime. And Nelson Lee and Nipper might, perhaps, prove her innocence. But this did not implicate the Combine in the actual murder itself. Somehow, Lee was inclined to believe Abbercorn's statement—that he knew nothing of the crime, so far as its author was concerned.

There was another factor in the case, somewhere. The mystery surrounding the identity of "Yolande" was puzzling. A woman had committed the crime, undoubtedly; or, at least, a man dressed as a woman.

But what of the hair clutched in Roding's hand? What of Roding's adventure on the Embankment? The whole thing was a tangle, and now that Lee found himself faced with the problem again, he seemed in a greater fog than ever.

And Eileen was in custody, suspected of the murder!

The great detective braced himself grimly. At all costs, the girl must be released from that awful position.

Lee had already made some discoveries—before the exciting interlude concerning Nipper. And the detective explained to Nipper what had passed. Papers and documents found in the desk indicated shady dealings by the dead man; but there was nothing whatever to implicate any other member of the Combine.

"Roding was cautious," commented Lee. "Miss Eileen came here for that diary, as you know, Nipper. I am afraid she would have been disappointed, even if this tragedy had not occurred."

"Can't you find the diary?"

"Not a trace of it, young 'un. Of course, that would have been immensely valuable, for it would have been convincing proof of the Combine's villainies. Miss Eileen had a strong motive in entering the house, and it was the height of misfortune that she arrived at such a terrible moment."

"Roding burned that diary, I suppose," said Nipper. "When he found that he'd lost the clasp-knife he realised that he'd better destroy the diary, just to be on the safe side."

"Either that, or the person who murdered him took it away," replied Lee thoughtfully. "It is clear—or seems to be clear—that Roding was menaced by some unknown woman. That attack on the Embankment, for instance. And these newspaper cuttings, which were found on his desk."

"Which newspaper cuttings, guv'nor?"

"Oh, you don't know of them, of course," said Lee. "In looking over Roding's papers, Nipper, I found at least five cuttings from recent newspapers—from the 'agony column,' as it is called."

"What were they—messages for Roding?"

"Yes, and all signed 'Yolande.'"

"She seems to be a formidable person, that Yolande," said Nipper.

"The bother of it is, we haven't the slightest clue to her true identity," said Nelson Lee, frowning. "Every one of those 'personal' messages, Nipper, was a threat—a barely stated threat. They did not exactly say that Roding was to die, but the implication amounted to as much."

"It's a case of revenge," observed Nipper. "I don't believe the Combine had anything to do with it, guv'nor. They collared us because we're working to prove Miss Eileen's innocence. Of course, they'd like to see her hanged."

Oh, guv'nor, doesn't it sound terrible! We've got to get her free somehow!"

"Of course—and we shall, never fear," said the detective confidently. "I haven't half completed my investigations. There may be half a score of clues before us this very minute. We shall see very shortly."

"The police reckon that the case is as plain as a pikestaff."

"I think differently. There is something strangely complex about this affair. Nipper," replied Lee. "This unknown woman, Yolande, was presumably in the room when Miss Eileen entered. Suppose we try and reconstruct the crime? It may help us in more than one respect."

Lee and Nipper had the apartment to themselves. Fuller was at Putney Police Station, and the other officers had completed their preliminary inquiries. The body had been shifted to a big couch, and now lay beneath a sheet.

"Considering that the murder was committed by a woman, I should say Roding was surprised," remarked Lee. "Remember what Miss Eileen told us, too. Roding called out in fear and horror; that seems to suggest that he suddenly found himself face to face with 'Yolande,' doesn't it?"

"And she stabbed him, I suppose?"

"That is the probable truth," replied Nelson Lee. "She took advantage of Roding's fear and surprise, and struck the fatal blow. Roding crashed down, mortally wounded—probably killed instantaneously."

"Didn't Miss Eileen say that she heard a sudden bang?"

"Yes, and I am somewhat puzzled. What could that bang have been, Nipper? A heavy chair overturning, perhaps, or a—"

Nelson Lee paused, and stared straight at the woodwork of the window-ledge. Then he took a step forward, and bent quite near.

"Strange!" murmured the detective.

"What's strange, guv'nor?"

"How did this bloodstain get here, young 'un?"

Lee pointed, and Nipper saw a small smudge of blood upon the painted woodwork. It was dry and hard, and almost invisible against the dark paint. Roding had fallen comparatively near to the window, certainly, but it was somewhat puzzling as to how this bloodstain had splashed to such a spot.

The detective's glance travelled up, and he noticed that the window was un-

fastened. The glass was coloured and opaque, and there was no blind. At least, the blind was not drawn.

Lee grasped the lower sash, and lifted it. The next second, however, it came down with a crash, nearly jamming one of Lee's thumbs in the process.

"Dear me! The sashline is broken," murmured the detective.

"Nothing funny in that," said Nipper. "These old houses generally have wonky windows. What do you want to open the window for, guv'nor?"

"Mere curiosity, Nipper."

"Waste of time, I should think."

"One learns things by being curious," smiled Nelson Lee.

He raised the sash more cautiously this time, and told Nipper to give him a stout round ruler which lay upon the desk. With this he propped the sash up, and then stuck his head out into the night darkness.

Nipper looked on idly, and was considerably surprised when Nelson Lee suddenly jerked himself into the room again, and dived hurriedly for his electric torch. There was an expression in Lee's eyes which Nipper knew of old.

"Found anything, sir?" he asked eagerly.

"Wait, my boy—wait!"

But Nipper didn't feel like waiting. There was room at the window for him, so he thrust his head and shoulders out, too. He found Lee focussing the light upon one particular patch of the window-sill. This was broad, and of stone. And just at this spot there was a thin brown streak.

It was a bloodstain!

The drop of blood had evidently been very small, and it had spread out to a thin line as it fell. But it was certainly a bloodstain, and it was fresh. Nelson Lee turned his face towards Nipper.

"This is astounding," said the detective in a low voice. "How did this blood get here, Nipper? The window was closed at the time of the murder! By James, I am beginning to understand!"

"I'm not!" declared Nipper. "Blessed if I can make head or tail of anything. Why, look down here, sir! There's water right beneath the window. The giddy garden must be completely flooded."

Lee flashed his light down. Immediately beneath the window there was an expanse of dull, unpleasant looking water. It ran along the whole side of the house, and was about fifteen feet broad.

"This isn't a flood, Nipper," said Lee. "Don't you understand? A backwater of the river passes along here—a kind of stream, which probably dries up to a mere trickle in the summer months."

"It looks pretty deep, sir."

"I dare say it is fairly deep," agreed Lee. "We have had a good deal of rain this spring. But what of this bloodstain? How came it here? Did the murderer escape by this window?"

"And drop into this lovely cold bath?" asked Nipper. "Not likely. Anyhow, if she did, there's bound to be traces. But a woman wouldn't plunge into that water! There was no reason to, anyhow, because the conservatory door was open, and the side-garden deserted."

After a further look at the window-sill, Nelson Lee and Nipper withdrew their heads, and then looked at one another for some little time in silence. Both were thinking deeply, Lee with an expression of intent concentration in his kindly grey eyes.

"By James!" he murmured suddenly.

"Thought of something, guv'nor?"

"Not exactly. Look at this, though."

Lee pointed to one of the sashlines, and then to the other. Nipper gazed at them intently, but without comprehension.

"They're broken, sir," he said, somewhat impatiently. "We knew that before."

"But they're new, Nipper—comparatively new, at all events."

"About a year old, perhaps."

"Well, do sashlines usually break after a year's wear?" asked the detective eventually. "Have a look at the jagged ends."

"I'm dull as ditchwater, I suppose," said Nipper. "Blessed if I can see what you are driving at, sir. These cords must have been rotten things to break——"

"My dear Nipper, you are indeed dull," interjected Lee softly. "Don't you see? The sashlines are not broken in the ordinary sense—they have been deliberately cut! Does that not suggest a startling possibility?"

Nipper sighed heavily.

"It's double Dutch to me," he confessed.

"Well, perhaps I had better not voice the amazing theory which is forming in my mind," said Nelson Lee. "These discoveries, however, have altered the whole aspect of the case. I must probe deeper into Roding's private papers."

"What have his papers got to do with it?" asked Nipper blankly.

"Everything, young 'un—just everything!"

And Lee turned to the desk, sat down, and was soon absorbed in a pile of documents. For a full hour he sat there, Nipper not daring to speak. The lad was thinking deeply, and forming all sorts of weird theories; but he certainly couldn't make anything tangible out of the maze of facts.

Then Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"Yes, Nipper," he exclaimed. "It is possible—quite possible."

"What's possible?" asked Nipper, pleased at being able to speak again.

"I have come to a startling conclusion, my lad," replied Nelson Lee quietly.

"And, if my theory is correct—if our efforts are fruitful—Miss Eileen will be free before midday!"

Nipper's eyes danced.

"Oh, ripping!" he cried. "What are we going to do, guv'nor?"

"We're going to—get busy!" replied the gret detective crisply.

And they did get busy, too!

— — —

CHAPTER VII.

AT THE POLICE-COURT—NELSON LEE EXPLAINS—EILEEN'S RELEASE—FINIS.

EILEEN DARE was looking rather pale and wan when she was brought up before the magistrate in the morning.

It was a humiliating position enough, but the girl was brave and calm. She knew that the facts were dead against her, and she even despaired of Nelson Lee discovering the truth until the actual trial came on; and that would perhaps be delayed for weeks. The Old Bailey! Eileen almost shuddered when she thought of the possibility.

The police-court proceedings were merely formal, of course. She did not mind this ordeal so much. She knew something of police methods, and guessed that they would merely ask for a remand. The facts would just be stated, and the magistrate would probably grant a remand at once. The whole proceedings would be over in less than ten minutes. Eileen believed.

The girl was mistaken.

Yet a remand was not granted, and neither was she committed for trial.

Something entirely unlooked-for happened.

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When she was brought into the court she saw that the big oak-panelled room—for it was no more than a room—was nearly empty, save for the usual officials, and the magistrate.

Eileen listened with interest, wondering what the police would make out against her. The facts of her arrest were briefly described, and then a week's remand was asked for, so that the police could obtain further evidence.

After the usual formalities, the magistrate was about to assent, when there was a slight interruption. Eileen, looking at the side door, was delighted to see Nelson Lee and Nipper entering, followed by Detective-Inspector Fuller.

Nipper waved his hand boldly, and Eileen smiled. There was something about that hand-wave which filled her with confidence.

She saw Nelson Lee talking to the officials, and there was a little delay. Then the great detective entered the witness-box, and was sworn in. Inspector Fuller sat down with a pleased smile on his face.

"I understand you have a statement to make, Mr. Lee?" asked the magistrate.

"Yes, a very important statement," replied Nelson Lee. "I am afraid I shall occupy the court some little time, but I have brought conclusive evidence that Miss Eileen Dare is entirely innocent of the charge made against her. It would be absurd to detain her further. The police, let me add, are quite anxious for this matter to be cleared up, and are equally anxious to set Miss Dare at liberty—if it can be established that she was in no way connected with the killing of Mr. Stanton Roding. I intend to explain the whole affair, clearly and conclusively."

There were a few formal questions, and then Lee proceeded.

"To begin with, it is necessary for me to explain something of Mr. Roding's private affairs," the detective began. "I have investigated the matter thoroughly, and what I shall now proceed to explain is absolutely established fact. I have not come here with a mere theory—a possible suggestion. What I have to say has been proved to the hilt, and the police, I am sure, will at once drop all proceedings against Miss Dare when the facts have been told. It is possible that this method of procedure is slightly informal, but the circumstances fully warrant a departure from the general rule."

"For some months past Mr. Roding had been engaged upon large Government contracts. He was in a big way of business in the City, with offices in Southampton Lane and elsewhere. And these contracts were not exactly legitimately carried out. In short, Mr. Roding had, for quite a long time, been engineering extensive frauds, with personal gain as his objective."

"But Roding, in spite of his unblemished character, came under suspicion at last. Notwithstanding his elaborate precautions, the Government officials began to suspect that villainy was afoot. Secret Service men were given certain instructions, and they obtained sufficient evidence to warrant an inquiry into the whole matter. Huge sums of money were involved, and an ordinary prosecution was impossible. Indeed, until the inquiry was held, it was not practicable to prosecute."

"I don't quite see how all this bears upon the charge——"

"Pardon me," interrupted Nelson Lee smoothly. "If you will allow me to proceed, I will very soon make everything thoroughly clear. In consequence of Roding's gigantic frauds, a Royal Commission was appointed to inquire into the whole matter. Roding knew this, and he knew also that he was to appear before the Commission on the eighteenth of this month—that is, on the Friday of next week."

"Roding was guilty—that fact was quite clear to all who thoroughly understood the position. He knew, positively, that disgrace and ruin would follow his examination—that he would, in all certainty, be committed for trial, and subsequently sent into penal servitude. There was no loophole of escape for him. To appear before the Commission would be to accept absolute downfall."

"He was in a terrible position, and, like many other men similarly placed, he preferred to take his own life rather than face the disgrace. That is the simple truth. Stanton Roding committed suicide—he died by his own hand. Miss Dare arrived only a few seconds after he had struck the fatal blow."

Eileen listened amazedly.

Stanton Roding had committed suicide! How could such a thing be possible? Considering all the facts, this statement of Nelson Lee's, uttered quietly and confidently, sounded almost

incredible. Yet there was a ring of conviction in the detective's voice, and all who listened were impressed.

After a short delay, Lee proceeded.

"Roding, however, was in a difficulty," the detective said. "He was very heavily insured by several big companies, and in the event of his death, the insurance money would go to a nephew, named Harold Newton. Let me add here that Newton is a thoroughly good man, and he knew nothing whatever of his uncle's scoundrelly mode of business. Roding was fond of Newton, and wished him to benefit largely by his decease."

"But insurance policies of that sort become invalid if the holder takes his own life," said the magistrate.

"Exactly. That is just what I am going to explain," replied Nelson Lee. "By committing suicide in the ordinary way, Roding would have rendered his policies null and void, and Newton would not have received a farthing. Accordingly, Roding very ingeniously decided to make it appear that murder had been committed. It was a singularly cold-blooded and calculated scheme that he adopted, and he must have possessed considerable strength of will and courage to carry the programme through successfully.

"The scheme, moreover, saved him from the disgrace. His friends and the public would think that he had been killed, and his memory would be honoured rather than reviled. For, with Roding dead, the Commissioners' report would never have been made public.

"Well, to begin with, Roding invented a certain mysterious person, whom he named 'Yolande.' She did not really exist—she was a myth of his own conception. He caused threats against his life to be inserted into several daily newspapers, and all were supposed to be the work of this 'Yolande.'

"On one occasion, upon the Thames Embankment, Roding chose his opportunity, and suddenly cried out as though he had been attacked. When help reached him—and curiously enough, Miss Dare happened to be on the spot—he faintly declared that 'Yolande' had attempted to stab him. All this, you will understand, was by way of preparation. Roding wished to make it quite clear, to police and public, that his life was in danger from an unknown woman.

In this way, when the presumed murder took place, there would be plenty of evidence to prove that Roding had been killed by an unknown, mysterious enemy.

"It was all very cleverly planned and devised. But Roding was not at the end of his resources yet. When his dead body was discovered he wanted the crime to be placed at the door of the mythical 'Yolande.' She, of course, having no existence, would never be found, and so his death would remain a mystery for ever and ever. That was Roding's scheme—all conceived for the purpose of assuring the payment of the insurance, and concealing his own wicked past life.

"But how did Roding achieve his object? How did he get rid of the knife after stabbing himself?" went on Nelson Lee quietly. "That was surely a problem. Yet the solution is amazingly simple. After I had inquired into the affair, and after I had made certain discoveries, I formulated a theory—a startling theory.

"Naturally, I could not voice a mere theory here, and so it was necessary for me to obtain absolute, concrete proof. I have secured that proof, and the charge against Miss Dare must automatically fall to the ground.

"It is necessary for me to explain that beneath the window of Roding's library there runs a sluggish stream—deep, and fairly broad. The water actually laps the stonework of the foundations. Roding's window is fairly high above this, for there is a basement below. The height of the window from the water would be, I should judge, about ten feet.

"It occurred to me, after I had seen a bloodstain upon the window-sill, that if Roding had the library window open, and had a heavy weight fastened to the knife by a piece of stout cord, the weight would naturally drop sheer into the water as soon as he relaxed his hold upon the knife. And, naturally, the knife itself would be jerked out of the window, and into the water. In this way the evidence would be completely concealed."

"Oh!" murmured Eileen Dare. "Oh, what a scheme! And how clever of Mr. Lee to think it all out in this way!"

"The knife, according to my theory," proceeded Nelson Lee calmly, "was in Roding's hand, and a cord passed out

of the window. Here, at the other end, a weight was fastened. I assumed that Roding stabbed himself, and then managed to jerk the knife from the wound. Then, as he fell, the knife was wrenched from his hand by the sudden falling of the weight, and it naturally jerked out of the window, and so into the water. This, it is plain, actually happened. It was an extremely simple device, but quite novel and effective. He would thus be discovered lying dead, with every evidence of having been stabbed by a hand other than his own. For he took means to provide other evidence of a stranger having been in the library.

"But how had he closed the window? To leave it open would be to draw attention to the method he had adopted. But with the window closed, there would be nothing to connect the window with the crime.

"Now I come to the actual proof. So far, I will admit, I have been merely voicing my theory. I confess, too, that I was puzzled as to how Roding had closed the window. The sashlines were cut, but surely he had not jerked the sash down—after stabbing himself? That seemed too improbable.

"Well, with the help of my assistant, I went outside, and dragged the bed of the stream beneath the window. Detective-Inspector Fuller, of Scotland Yard, was with us at the time. I may add. After considerable difficulty, and after almost giving up hope, we brought to light—a weight to which a sharp dagger was attached by a stout piece of cord."

"Dear me!" said the magistrate. "Then your ingenious theory was correct?"

"In every detail," replied Nelson Lee. "And there was another piece of cord attached to the weight, we found. At the other end was a frail wooden prop, and I instantly realized the truth. The sudden dropping of the weight was made to perform a double purpose. It jerked the knife out of the window, and it dislodged the wooden prop from beneath the window-sash—where it had been placed, presumably, as finely as a mouse-trap is set. The slightest tug, therefore, freed it, with the result that the window thudded down into a closed position. It was for this reason that the sashlines had been cut.

"It will be clearly understood that

Roding stood near the window. He stabbed himself, and just managed to free the knife from the wound. The weight then pulled the knife out of the window, and caused the sash to descend. Thus the window was closed, and the weight and the knife and the wooden prop were sunk to the bottom of the stream. No evidence was visible—except that which Roding had prepared beforehand. It was the height of misfortune that Miss Dare should have been in the house at that particular time, but she certainly had nothing to do with the killing of Stanton Roding. He committed suicide deliberately, and with the full knowledge of what he was doing. It was better to die than to face certain disgrace and imprisonment.

"It is quite clear why Roding faked the evidence so as to indicate that a woman had killed him. By making it appear that the murderer was a woman he obviated the possibility of his nephew being suspected—or of any of his friends being suspected. He intended the affair to remain an unsolved mystery. Fortunately, however, I have been able to piece the true evidence together—and with the discovery of the apparatus by which Roding got rid of the dagger, I venture to suggest that the police cannot possibly pursue the charge against Miss Dare. The whole case is as clear as crystal."

"I certainly agree with you upon that point, Mr. Lee," said the magistrate warmly. "And you must allow me to congratulate you upon the astounding astuteness you have displayed in elucidating the mystery. Nothing could be more plain and apparent. The fact that you recovered the weight and the dagger from the bed of the stream leaves no room for doubt that Miss Dare is entirely innocent of the charge which has been preferred against her."

.

Eileen Dare was therefore discharged—without a stain upon her character. She had been merely a victim of circumstance, and it was a matter for great thankfulness that Nelson Lee had been able to secure her release so promptly.

The girl herself was overjoyed.

There were one or two little things she wanted to know, however. The sudden bang she had heard from the library had, of course, been caused by the falling of the window-sash.

But what of the scuffle and the closing of the conservatory door?

Nelson Lee smiled as he gave the explanation. It was certain that a cat had been in the room. Lee was sure of this, because he had made careful investigation in the conservatory, and had found distinct traces near the door, and upon the ledge of an open window. The animal was no doubt frightened by Roding's sudden collapse, and when Eileen had entered the room it had rushed out through the conservatory door—which had, presumably, been ajar. And the draught from the other door had caused it to swing gently to. Eileen naturally assumed that a human being had passed out of the room.

Nelson Lee's evidence was conclusive, and the police dropped the proceedings.

At the great detective's request, the authorities did not inquire too closely into the reason for Eileen's presence in Roding's house. They knew, at least, that her object had been a commendable one.

And, later on, Ford Abbercorn was charged with attempted abduction and conspiracy, and he received a heavy sentence. Eileen Dare had certainly scored another triumph, for if she had not taken that trip to Putney, Abbercorn would never have laid himself open to arrest.

The scoundrelly Combine was getting to the end of its tether. Eileen Dare's campaign was drawing to a close. Gradually, relentlessly, her enemies were receiving the punishment they all so richly deserved.

THE END.

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THE 1st CHAPTER.

MR. QUIDD FROM CONNECTICUT.

MR. MARCUS P. QUIDD stood on the outer side of the moat, and contemplated the ruined old manor-house with fiercely eager eyes. He carried a small handbag. This contained nothing but a nightshirt and other toilet articles, and his inseparable writing materials.

His excitement was absurd, considering his age, which his short grey hair seemed to indicate sufficiently.

"If I don't give them thrills Westville way after a week in this so-called haunted mansion, my pen's lost its cunning," he murmured so earnestly that he might have seemed to be saying his prayers. "Mind you, Marcus," he proceeded, with a smile, "I'm using the word 'so-called,' and I mean it. There's no such critters as ghosts—they're a one from the North Pole to the South Pole."

Nodding blissfully, the American at length approached the massive door, with its embroidery of great nail-heads, and pulled a bell-handle.

In another minute the door was unlocked, and Rupert Brangton confronted the American. He looked heated as well as exceedingly dusty.

"I'm young Brangton," he said, with a grin.

"Shake, my boy, then. I'm maybe going to vex you, so let's begin with friendship."

Rupert "shook" rather suspiciously.

"Why, what's the row?" he asked.

Then, winking placidly, the American gave him the note from his father suggesting that he and his chum Bass should return to the Shire House unless they could come to terms with Mr. Quidd for the rest of their gipsying.

Rupert led the way in silence over rotten boards, and up a short, shallow staircase, also rotten. Here he yelled:

"Haw, where are you?"

And, to Mr. Quidd's surprise, another boy appeared almost on his heels.

"I bet you don't know where I came from," he said to the astonished Yankee.

But Rupert didn't give him time to explain. He rushed matters for Bass, and spoke with much indignation of a sort.

"What ever do you want to squat in such a place for?" he asked Mr. Quidd finally.

The American turned from the mouldering old picture-panels and stags' heads of this once stately room. He was downright enchanted.

"Never you mind, sonny," he said. "And yet I'll tell you. I'm wagering a British five-pound note there's no ghost or anything can stir me from this place inside a week. I'll pin the note right there, on the table, if so. I'm sole proprietor of the 'Westville Courier,' Connecticut, and I'm writing up my impressions. And now, just show me round, there's good lads, and then cut off to your other home."

Willie Bass's face became quite in keeping with Brangton's.

"Just when——" he exclaimed; but Rupert silenced him with a look.

"Come along, sir," he said to Mr. Quidd; we will clear out all right. You can have our mattresses and grub if you like."

This was no more than Mr. Quidd thought he had a right to expect, and so he was not effusively grateful. Besides he was so deeply interested in the look of things.

In half an hour he was shaking hands with the boys at the manor gate. Only when the door was slammed after them did Rupert justify himself for his apparent lightheartedness throughout this half hour.

"I'm awfully glad you took me up about not showing him more than those three secret places, old chap," he said radiantly to Bass. "We'll give him fits."

THE 2nd CHAPTER.

THE PICTURE ON THE WALL.

IT was eleven o'clock, p.m. Mr. Quidd had supped on tinned salmon, bread and cheese, and Eiffel Tower lemonade, and was now writing his first set of impressions for the "Westville Courier." He had two tallow candles to light him, in ginger-beer bottles. His corn-cob pipe was in his mouth.

"It's a place you might call resurrected history," Mr. Quidd wrote. "What with its tales of hidden priests, traitors with prices on their heads—Hullo! Good sakes!"

He had jumped from the stool which served him for a seat. There was a red splash on his paper. It had dropped from the old panelled ceiling.

"Maybe it's red ink; but even then!"

Mr. Quidd dipped the tip of his fingers into the blot and smelt it.

"Blood! By all that's—"

His shoulders fidgeted as he scratched his head and forced a laugh.

"This is coming it mighty strong and early," he remarked. "Now, if there was another soul in the house besides myself I'd be after thinking it was just a trick. But, as it is, blamed if I know what to think!"

He strolled to the nearest window, after a steady survey of that dark old ceiling. One more drop of blood had fallen—only one; whence exactly it came he could not see.

An owl hooted in the darkness outside.

"I hate them durned misers!" said Mr. Quidd.

Under a sudden inspiration he darted back to the table, pushed this a yard away, and went on writing. He drew two circles round the bloodspots.

"They're just rats that have been fighting—nothing else," he said valorously.

For a quarter of an hour he continued his work, with merely occasional turns this way and that. Then he dashed at his left leg.

"What the mischief's tickling me like that!" he cried. But the next instant he was unmindful of that small annoyance, and his eyes were riveted on the

faded face of one of the panel portraits high up in front of him.

"If it was my last hour," he whispered, "I'd swear I saw a pinhead point of light there!"

He faced about a bit, and gradually recovered his equanimity. The picture's right eye no longer seemed to him human in its expression. And now he laughed as an idea came to him.

"Yes, I'll not be interrupted by these disembodied notions," he said. He tore a page from his notebook, pulled an old chest towards the picture, set his foot on it, and thus got level with the Cavalier's eye.

This now seemed dull and dusty enough. But he was not to be turned from his notion. With some bits of stamp-paper he fastened the page as a kind of cover to the Cavalier's pair of eyes. Then he turned to his work.

"I'm sort of unsteadied by these proceedings—Was that a dragging chain? Or, in thunder's name, what the—"

These last words roared from him as he faced the wainscoting by the window.

But a sudden flicker behind made him jump round again, just in time to see that paper frill to the Cavalier's eyes make its final flare up, and drop in light ashes to the floor.

Then for a minute or more Mr. Marcus P. Quidd danced about the room in a panic of fear. When he became quieter he was still so much unnerved that he could not hold his pen comfortably.

"I'll go to bed," he said; "and in the morning if I don't overhaul this mildewed horror of a hole I'll—"

As he stuffed cotton-wool into his ears, it is not perhaps surprising that he missed many of the commotions of the night. But he felt things, and lay in suffering until the dawn.

THE 3rd CHAPTER.

THE FLIGHT OF MR. QUIDD.

IT was a pale-faced Mr. Quidd who then got up, and under the sunshine went carefully over the old manor. But not one single clue to the disturbances could he discover. The three

(Continued overleaf.)

aiding-places were empty, and the bolts and bars to the great door were as he had left them.

By and by he strolled down to the village—a mile away. But at the village inn they had nothing to tell him except that it was a marvel he was alive.

"The young gentlemen," they said "being mere boys, thought the goings-on great fun; but for an intelligent and Christian adult nothing could be more upsetting." And so on.

He spent the day tapping walls and poking sticks into holes. That picture completely beat him. The right eye had an indented rim to it which the other lacked; but he made no more of it than that. And he would rather not have discovered that much.

Mr. Quidd smoked many pipes, but ate little. He had a poor appetite, and he felt decidedly anxious about the coming night. Nor could he continue writing to his beloved paper, for he didn't know but what his very words might be falsified by future events.

Still, at sunset he tried to be brave, and lit four candles instead of two. Also, he balanced a board in front of the picture. He hated doing this, but, as he said, there was that durned little fancy without that eye business, seeing that the paper ashes still lay upon the floor where they had fallen.

"There's one thing I'll do more," he said, an hour or two later when certain scratchings had begun on the premises—"I'll show I'm not to be bluffed. See here!"

He pinned a five-pound-note to the table with his knife, and smiled.

"I'll stand some skeering before I confess myself beat by leaving that," he said.

But he didn't feel at all happy, especially with the intensifying of the creepings on all sides, as it seemed.

By and by the eerie blood-splashing began again. The first spot descended plump on Mr. Quidd's rather bald head, the second on the floor. Four or five others followed.

Then Mr. Quidd hustled himself to bed in quite a cowardly way. He drew the mattress close to the big window with the fixed seat in it, and kept the candles burning.

And now the crowning blow of all came.

He was lying with shut eyes and stuffed ears, wondering if it wouldn't be wiser, after all, to leave Brangton Manor in the morning, and write his impressions comfortably in a hotel at Cheltenham, when he felt that he was moving.

A sudden draught of air convinced him that something was very wrong indeed, and he opened his eyes to find that, bed and all, he was swinging out under the stars—who in the world could tell whither?

Without hesitation he stood up and leaped for his life, landing, as luck had it, in a soft and shallow part of the moat. Waist-deep though he was when he recovered his footing, he plunged madly forward for the outer precincts of the ghostly old house, reached the outer bank, and—

Well, he didn't stop until he was down in the village, where he slept—nightmarishly enough—at the inn.

The innkeeper smiled at his story, and commiserated with him. But he did not tell tales about the boys.

And Rupert and Willie Bass no sooner realised that they had the good old place, all to themselves again than they made it snug, and by and by spent a much more restful night than the previous one.

There were a dozen pleasant little devices in the old manor for concealment and hidden movement which were only known to the Brangton family, and splendidly they had served their turn.

Even Rupert's father thought the boys had every right to the five-pound-note left by Mr. Quidd. His other possessions were never claimed either.

THE END.