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THE PROLOGUE

IN PRE-WAR DAYS—DISASTER IN THE
CHANNEL—THE USURPER.

LORD HOWARD ROPER rested his elbows upon the rail, and gazed down into the creamy foam which curled and hissed below. The boat was rocking rather badly, and most of the passengers were below.

"Deuce of a rough crossing, this!" said Lord Roper.

"It's not so bad," remarked Mr. Sydney Bradford, with a laugh. "I'm rather fond of the water, and a rough sea is interesting. Not feeling shaky, are you, Roper? This blow will do you any amount of good, you know."

Lord Roper grunted.

"I shall be glad when we get into Folkestone," he said, shivering.

"That will be in about another hour, I expect."

Bradford laughed again, and faced the strong, salt wind. There was a touch of spray in it, and it beat upon Bradford's cheeks. He rather enjoyed it. But his companion was a bad sailor, and longed for the crossing to be over.

It was night, and as black as pitch.

Lord Howard Roper and his solicitor—Bradford—had been to Paris on a matter of business, and his lordship now wished that he had stayed in Paris another day or two. As a rule, he enjoyed the Channel crossing, but when the weather was rough he detested it.

And the weather was certainly rough to-night.

The month was May, but the sea and

sky reminded one of winter rather than late spring. A sudden blow had come on, and the Channel was now choppy and treacherous. The weather was thick, and it was impossible to see a cable's length in any direction. The cross-Channel steamer *Foreland* was a rather old boat, and she didn't like a rough sea any more than Lord Roper.

Consequently, she was protesting, and in doing so behaved erratically and without the least consideration for her passengers. The passage was now half completed, and before long the lights of Folkestone would be seen.

At least, they should have been seen; but the weather was so misty and thick that Folkestone was not likely to be sighted until the *Foreland* was practically in port. It was unusually bad weather for the month of May.

Lord Roper would not have been on deck at all, but for the laughing persuasions of Sydney Bradford. The pair had been up for some little time, and their faces were shiny with salt spray.

"We ought to have taken the Calais-Dover route!" grumbled Lord Roper. "It's shorter than this, Bradford. Infernal nuisance we couldn't book passages——"

"Oh, we shall soon be ashore!" interjected Bradford. "You'll be as right as a trivet once we get into the London express. This boat's a poor old tub! Hallo! What's the row about?"

Bradford turned as a sudden yell sounded.

It came from the look-out, and was followed by another shout, even more

urgent. A confusion of startled cries followed, intermingled with much cursing. Looking ahead, Bradford caught a glimpse of a dim, hazy red light twinkling.

"That looks like a ship's side light," said Bradford wonderingly. "If it is, we're uncomfortably close—"

He paused as he heard the skipper, up on the bridge, yell to the steersman to put the helm hard a-starboard. At the same second Bradford faintly heard the engine-room telegraph clang "Stop!" then, immediately afterwards, "Full speed astern!"

"What's wrong?" asked Lord Roper nervously.

"Some other boat in the way, I expect."

The solicitor's words were cut short in a startling manner. With an abruptness which was little short of appalling, the *Foreland* crashed into something which seemed to stop the boat dead.

The crash was loud and horrible; it was a sickening, tearing rending of metal. And the ship shivered from stem to stern, and the sudden jolt was so terrific that both Bradford and Lord Roper were flung headlong to the slippery deck.

They scrambled up, bruised and startled.

The confusion was worse than ever for one moment. People came rushing up from below, and the shrieks of feminine voices rent the air. Sydney Bradford, white to the lips, clung unsteadily to the rail.

"It's a collision!" he gasped hoarsely.

"Great Heaven!" said Lord Howard Roper.

But there was a surprising change in the attitude of the two men. A moment before Roper had been nervous and irritable, and Bradford laughingly jocular. But now there was—danger.

The ship was disabled—perhaps sinking!

And Bradford became fearsome and alarmed. Lord Roper, on the contrary, seemed to find new life, and was brisk in a second. It was just the difference between what is commonly called funk and genuine courage.

The supreme test had come, and Bradford, the free-and-easy, was converted into a nervous, panicky coward. Lord Roper, who loathed a rough sea—and was, indeed, nervous of it—became instantly cool and self-possessed.

The real, inner characters of the two men came to the surface.

"It'll be a job to launch the boats in this smother, I'm afraid!" said Roper quietly. "Hold up, Bradford! What the deuce—"

For the solicitor was staring round him wildly.

"The boats!" he gasped. "We must get into one!"

"Pull yourself together, man!" snapped Lord Roper sharply. "Women and children first!"

"Hang you!" snarled Bradford. "It's every man for himself!"

An officer hurried along the wet deck. "Now, then, ladies and gentlemen,"

he bellowed, "don't get excited! Just a little accident. It may not be serious. Wait until the extent of damage is ascertained before you begin to think of the boats!"

Sydney Bradford laughed harshly.

"I—I suppose it's nothing, after all," he said. "Curse these fools of seamen! Why can't they take us across safely? We pay for our safe passage, don't we? What do they care for our lives?"

Lord Roper didn't answer. He was filled with silent contempt. He had never believed that the solicitor was such an arrant coward. Roper was a man of fifty; a quiet, typical example of British nobility. Bradford, on the other hand, was a typical example of that type of character which is—fortunately—seldom found among Britishers—a funk.

There was much activity on board the stricken *Foreland*.

For it was obvious to her captain and officers that she was stricken. Already she was listing heavily to port, and there was a dull sound of rushing water from below. The English Channel was roaring into the *Foreland's* vitals with appalling swiftness.

That heavy list was serious; many of the boats could not be lowered. Those that could, however, were quickly prepared. The crew of the ship behaved with singular courage and discipline. There wasn't a sign of panic, although every man knew that his chance of deliverance was small.

It was their duty to attend to the passengers first.

"By Jove! Look there!" said Lord Roper suddenly.

He and Bradford were still standing by the rail. And Bradford, turning, followed the direction of his companion's pointing finger. Dimly visible in the

dashing spray, a big, untidy steamer was wallowing in the waves, about a couple of fathoms away. She was drifting, stern first, away from the Foreland, and even as Roper and Bradford watched, she suddenly lurched over.

It was a deliberate movement, as though the vessel had been a gigantic whale. It was ghastly to witness. The tramp turned turtle completely, and the two men caught a glimpse of a glistening keel. Then a dull explosion sounded, and there was nothing more. The tragedy was over.

"Heavens! How awful!" said Lord Roper, in a subdued voice.

"Awful! Are we not in the same plight?" burst out Bradford fiercely. "The fools on board that ship deserve their fate! Why couldn't they keep away from us? We shall go the same way in less than——"

Before the solicitor could finish his sentence the Foreland shivered convulsively; the plates strained and cracked, and dozens of bolts snapped with a noise like pistol shots. And the vessel heeled abruptly to starboard.

Bradford and Roper were flung across the deck. They slithered over the slippery plates, utterly unable to stay their headlong progress. Ten seconds later they were hurled overboard, and they plunged into the angry sea.

When Roper came to the surface, gasping and desperate, he found Bradford right by his side. The solicitor was mad with fear. He clutched at his companion wildly and feverishly.

And then, as luck would have it, a great length of wood struck Roper on the shoulder. It was a portion of wreckage from the sunken tramp, probably. Roper gripped it, and rested his weight upon it. Bradford did the same.

"Hold up, man!" gasped his lordship. "This is lucky!"

"Where's a boat?" panted Bradford, gazing round him fearfully. "We shall never be picked up, Roper! Shout for help! Shout——"

"We must consider ourselves lucky to be able to cling to this spar!" said Lord Roper. "Pull yourself together, Bradford! The water's not so very cold, and we shall be picked up in due course. Think of the poor souls who are dying!"

"We must think of ourselves!" panted the other fiercely.

Roper did not answer. He was exceedingly disgusted, and mentally resolved, then and there, that if he and

Bradford escaped, he would finish with the man for good. He had always thought the solicitor to be a good fellow, but this adventure was an eye-opener.

The two men drifted away from the scene of the disaster. They knew nothing of what was happening. But Roper guessed that the ill-fated Foreland was even now settling down rapidly. In the smother of the waves it was impossible to see anything. The salt water was dashing over the faces of the two men continuously.

Lord Roper knew what had happened, of course. The cross-Channel packet had butted into an old tramp steamer fairly amidships. It was really impossible to say which vessel was to blame for the disaster. Probably neither. The weather was dirty in the extreme.

The tramp had already gone to the bottom, for the Foreland's bows had ripped into her plates as though they had been made of cardboard. The passenger boat was not stricken so severely. If she could only be kept afloat for another half-hour the majority of the passengers and crew would be saved. Already other ships were hurrying to the rescue.

But Lord Roper and Sydney Bradford had been unfortunately flung overside. Only a few people shared their fate when the Foreland gave that giddy lurch. Lord Roper wondered as he clung to the spar. He could see nothing. The darkness and stinging spray hemmed him in. Had the Foreland gone to the bottom already?

It was clear, in any case, that no assistance was likely to arrive—for Bradford and Roper. The waves had carried them far from the scene of wreck, and they could do nothing but cling to the stout piece of wood, and so their trust in providence.

Bradford did not recover his nerve; he was completely prostrated by fear and cowardice. But his companion, on the other hand, was perfectly cool and self-possessed. The thought which had terrified Bradford only caused Lord Roper to set his teeth grimly.

Both men realised that their chance of deliverance was slim.

They would probably drift about for hours in the darkness, until, at last, sheer physical exhaustion compelled them to relax their grip.

Indeed, it seemed as though hours had passed already.

They were tossed hither and thither, led and numbed, and the time slipped relentlessly. Now and again dim, y lights were visible. Other ships were close by, but they might as well have been a hundred miles away. For Bradford and Roper could do nothing to make their presence known.

They just drifted—and waited for the end.

It came sooner than they had anticipated. And it was not the end they had told themselves was inevitable. A change seemed to occur in the dull splash of the waves about them. Inter-mingled with it there was a subdued, distant roar—continuous and ever-increasing in its violence.

Quite suddenly Sydney Bradford roused himself.

"What is that?" he asked huskily.

"I have been trying to make out where the roar comes from," replied Lord Roper, dashing the spray from his eyes. "I don't want to alarm you, Bradford, but I believe we are approaching the shore. The noise we can hear is the roar of the breakers."

"Why should that alarm me?" asked Bradford, with fierce excitement. "We are nearing the shore! Thank Heaven for that! We shall be saved!"

"I am afraid our danger will be increased, Bradford," said his lordship. "If we are cast upon the rocks I do not think there will be much chance of coming out alive. I suppose we are on the Kent coast. And the cliffs are high in some parts. If the tide is up there will be no escape for us."

"Hang you!" snarled Bradford hoarsely. "We shall be saved, I tell you!"

But it was panic which caused Bradford to speak so harshly. He knew only too well that his companion's words were right. The chances were that they would be dashed to pieces by the great waves.

It was now perfectly obvious that the shore was very near to them. Gazing intently ahead, Lord Roper even made out the dim, indistinct outline of towering cliffs. And before the two could converse again they found themselves in the fury of the breakers.

The great length of wood was lifted like a cork, the two men clinging to it, and hurled forward with appalling force. The water broke over them in hissing cascades, and when they were able to breathe again they were sucked back by the powerful undertow.

The next wave caught them again, and once more they were hurled towards the roaring shingle with terrific velocity. This time they were cast right upon the beach, and the fierce, receding water was not powerful enough to drag them back in its all-powerful grasp.

Battered, torn, bleeding, the two survivors of the *Forland* were cast ashore. The struggle of the last few minutes had practically exhausted them, and they lay half-buried among the millions of stones of the foreshore. It was impossible for them to drag themselves higher at the moment.

Another curling wave broke behind them with a deafening, thunderous crash. The foam hissed up with amazing force. The two men were lifted in the grip of the waters. The wooden spar rose like a feather, and then disaster came.

The heavy piece of timber crashed down forcibly upon Lord Roper's head as he struggled vainly to grasp the moving pebbles. That blow stunned him completely, and he lay still.

Bradford was more fortunate.

The solicitor was lifted clear, and flung with comparative lightness almost high and dry. He scrambled dizzily to his feet, and stood panting heavily. He was saved! And with that knowledge came a return of the old confidence.

He looked round with bloodshot, staring eyes.

And there, within easy reach of him, lay Lord Howard Roper. The succession of great combers had come to an end, and now the waves were not so fierce. This is always the case with the sea. Another series of tremendous waves would follow in due course.

Bradford staggered forward, and bent over Lord Roper as the foam swirled round his feet.

"Get up, man—get up!" said Bradford huskily.

But the other made no reply.

With a heave, the solicitor hurled the piece of wood clear, and grasped Lord Roper's hands. Then, with considerable difficulty, he dragged the unconscious form of his companion high up the beach—well out of reach of the most powerful waves. The tide was on the ebb, and so there was no danger of being caught in a trap.

The cliffs, too, were by no means sheer. They sloped backwards, and it would be a comparatively easy matter to scramble to the top. The wind roared fiercely.

and Bradford knelt beside his stricken companion.

"What's wrong, Roper?" he asked. "You're not done, are you?"

And then, in the gloom, Bradford saw that blood was trickling down Roper's face. For just one second the solicitor thought that the other man was dead. But, feeling over his heart, he knew that Roper was only stunned. His pulse, too, was quite strong.

Bradford stood up and looked about him. He was in a kind of bay—a curiously formed bay. And to the left a mass of rocks jutted out far into the sea. The waves were bursting over them and casting the spray in cascades into the air. And, vaguely, Bradford seemed to know the spot.

"I've seen this place before," he muttered. "Those rocks are familiar. These cliffs, too——" He turned, and surveyed the other stretch of beach, dimly visible in the gloom of night. "Why, yes, of course!"

Bradford shivered as the wind blustered about his dripping figure.

"This is Melwyn Bay," he told himself, with a nod. "Of course. I ought to know it well enough—— By James! And there's Starke's place within a mile, just over the cliff. Thank Heaven!"

Quite suddenly the aspect of things had changed for the better. Bradford knew where he was; and he knew, moreover, that the residence of a friend of his was only just over the cliff-top. The village of Keningvale, too, was within a couple of miles.

Bradford had spent a month on this portion of the Kent coast the year previously, while recuperating from a bad attack of influenza. And he realised how lucky he had been; Melwyn Bay was about the only safe spot for miles. If he and Lord Roper had been cast ashore elsewhere they would assuredly have been grievously injured. Even as it was, Roper was bowled over.

As the solicitor stood there, he clenched his teeth hard. He remembered how he had acted. What would Lord Roper say when he recovered? Bradford knew that his lordship could indulge in some quiet, bitter remarks.

The Foreland, how had the battered steamer fared?

Bradford shivered.

He had had a narrow escape, and he knew it. He looked down, and was glad

to see that Lord Roper was showing signs of coming to himself.

"Yes, it's serious, Bradford," said Dr. Hugo Starke quietly. "Lord Roper is all right in the main, but that blow injured his brain. He acts and talks like a child. He doesn't seem to have will-power enough to speak sensibly."

"By Jove!" said Sydney Bradford.

"But your friend will be himself again very shortly," went on the other. "A simple operation is necessary—that is all. Unless that operation is performed he will remain in his present semi-idiotic state. No danger of any sort. But the operation must not be attempted until he is quite well."

"Will you mind if he remains here for a few days——"

"Not at all," said Dr. Starke. "Just as you please, my dear fellow."

Three hours had passed since Bradford and Lord Roper were cast ashore in Melwyn Bay. The solicitor had managed to assist his companion up the cliff. Roper had been dazed and quite incapable of speech, but he had been able to stagger along with a good deal of assistance.

And now his lordship was in bed. And Bradford, in a borrowed dressing-gown, was sitting before a big fire in Dr. Starke's cosy study. The hour was three a.m., and everything was still, except for the blustering wind.

Hugo Starke was a man of sixty; a faced doctor, with a hard glitter in his blue eyes. Perhaps the nature of his establishment had hardened him a deal. For this great house on the coast was a private asylum for the insane. Dr. Starke had twenty-five patients under his control.

He and Bradford had been great friends for more years than either could remember. And, consequently, the solicitor had been warmly welcomed, and everything had been done for his comfort, and for the comfort of Lord Howard Roper.

"What of your friend's family?" asked the doctor curiously.

"Roper is a bachelor," replied Bradford. "His parents are dead, and he has no near relatives. I believe, is in the family—the Hon. Max Roper, his youngest brother. A bad lot, Starke. Max was sent out in disgrace years ago."

"In that case Lord Roper may just

as well stay here until he recovers," said the doctor. "The operation can be performed here, too: There is no reason why I should not profit by this affair. Lord Roper will pay for professional attendance, I suppose. Money is none too plentiful, Bradford."

Both men laughed somewhat. Bradford was surprisingly well, under the circumstances. A few scratches were his sole injuries, and he did not even show symptoms of developing a bad cold. He was hardy, and the exercise of helping Roper up the cliff and along the grassland to Starke's house had warmed his blood.

He went to bed shortly afterwards, and slept like a top.

By noon of the following day Sydney Bradford was in London.

He was shaken and rather nervous, but otherwise himself. Lord Roper had been left with Dr. Hugo Starke, and Bradford had promised the doctor to inform Roper's household, at Roper Manor, in Surrey, of their master's whereabouts.

Bradford had read the morning's newspaper with interest. And he had been amused to see his own name, and that of Lord Roper, amongst the victims of the Channel disaster. According to the newspapers, Bradford and Roper were dead.

The affair was not so serious as Bradford had imagined.

The Foreland had kept afloat for a full hour after he and Roper had been accidentally flung overboard. And, during that time, the passengers had been safely transferred to other ships which had come to the rescue.

Only eight people had been killed—five passengers and three of the crew. But the tramp steamer's crew were practically all lost. The unfortunate boat had gone to the bottom before anything could be done.

Bradford was rather astonished to find himself so fit. Many men would have been prostrated for days, by the shock alone. But Bradford, being alive, had recovered his composure, and inwardly felt rather ashamed of himself. He almost wished that Lord Roper would remain in his present state.

Travelling up to London by train, Bradford thought deeply. He was dead, and Roper was dead. That was rather

rich. The solicitor's staff at his office would be somewhat staggered when he walked in. Bradford smiled amusedly.

Of course, nobody knew that he and Roper had been saved—nobody, that is, except Dr. Starke. And the doctor, isolated as he was, had nobody to talk to. Bradford mentally resolved to ring up the new agencies when he got to London; it would be as well to deny the report at once.

"This news has been cabled abroad, of course," thought Bradford, as he lit a cigar. "In all probability Australia is aware of the disaster by this time. By Jove! What if Roper's brother sees the report? He's the direct heir. He'll think that he's now Lord Roper! I shall have to state the actual facts immediately!"

Bradford knew the Hon. Max. In fact, the pair had been somewhat "thick" before Max had gone out to Australia. For Sydney Bradford was not the honourable legal gentleman his clients believed him to be. Bradford had the makings of a first-class scoundrel, and the Honourable Max Roper was a man after his own heart.

"It's rather a pity his lordship didn't get drowned," thought Bradford callously. "I should have liked Max to come over to England again——"

The solicitor paused.

A striking, staggering thought had suddenly come to him.

Lord Howard Roper was dead!

The world at large had been told that Lord Roper had perished in the Channel disaster. What if that report was not denied? What if Lord Roper remained in the asylum. Why, of course, the Hon. Max would assume the title; he would inherit the Roper estates. These were not extensive, but they were worth having!

Not a soul on earth knew that Lord Roper had escaped—except Bradford himself and Dr. Hugo Starke. And Starke was not overburdened with money. As Bradford well knew, the doctor was not above a little shady business, if that business was profitable to himself.

Why, the whole game was as simple as though it had been deliberately planned!

If Bradford cabled to Max that his brother was dead, Max would come to England at once. He would enter into the conspiracy whole-heartedly. He would pay handsomely. The thing

would be profitable both to Bradford and Dr. Starke.

And it was Bradford's place to take charge of Lord Roper's affairs. He was the peer's solicitor; everybody knew that. Not a suspicion could arise. The High Courts could be applied to for the right to presume the death of Lord Roper. This would be necessary; for, of course, Roper's body would never be recovered. The courts would grant the application without hesitation.

Before noon—before the train steamed into London—Sydney Bradford had come to a definite decision.

Lord Max Roper was in England.

To be more exact, the Hon. Max Roper was in England. But the world believed him to be Lord Roper, and, to all intents and purposes, he was. Sydney Bradford's scoundrelly plot had prospered.

Down at Dr. Hugo Starke's private asylum, on the Kent coast, there was a patient named Mr. Fitzgerald. He was a quiet man of fifty; a man with childish habits, and with eyes that stared vacantly. He was not insane, but his condition fully warranted his being kept under supervision.

Who was to guess that Mr. Fitzgerald was Lord Howard Roper?

He was kept within the asylum grounds always; nobody was ever allowed to see him. Dr. Starke had entered into the plot after a certain amount of persuasion. He received a large sum of money for his share in the scheme. And the operation he had spoken of had not been performed. It was not too late, of course. The operation would have been fully successful now, but it was not to the interests of certain people to have it performed. Lord Roper was easily handled in his present state. He caused no trouble whatever, and was quite contented.

He knew, in a way, that he was Lord Roper, but quite believed Dr. Starke when the latter informed him that his name was Mr. Fitzgerald. He was ready enough to regard himself as Mr. Fitzgerald. Truth to tell, the poor man's brain was dull to such an extent that he had no power to resist. His inquiry was a curious one, but it was not serious. Under ordinary circumstances, he could have been restored to full reason without the slightest danger.

It was never for a moment doubted that Lord Howard Roper had gone to the bottom of the Channel. Not a soul could tell otherwise.

Max, as Bradford had anticipated, had entered heartily into the vile plot against his brother. Max was a scallawag, a black sheep. He was only too eager to step into the peerage, and become "somebody."

The application to the court had been entirely successful; Bradford, as Roper's solicitor, managed everything.

And thus, in time, Max Roper almost believed that he was the rightful holder of the title he bore. The contented, child-like Mr. Fitzgerald in Dr. Starke's asylum, was practically forgotten.

The years passed, and in due course Lord Max Roper became involved in—the Combine. He became a member of the set of rogues whom Eileen Dare, the girl detective, had sworn to hound down.

His dastardly secret had been well kept, and nobody—not even Eileen Dare—guessed that he had no right whatever to the title he bore and the estates which went with it.

But the hour of retribution was drawing ever nearer.

END OF THE PROLOGUE.

CHAPTER I.

THE GERMAN RAIDER—THE KENINGVALE SPORTS—THE CINEMA CLUE.

EILEEN DARE'S sweetly pretty face was flushed with the glow of health, and her glorious brown eyes shone delightfully.

"Oh, I'm so glad I came!" she exclaimed, with a happy little laugh.

"So am I, Miss Eileen!" remarked Nipper. "I'm tremendously glad, in fact. I haven't enjoyed myself so much for weeks and weeks. If you hadn't come with us I'll bet it would have rained in torrents. You've made the sky sunny——"

"Don't be absurd, Nipper!" laughed the girl.

"Never more serious in my life!" declared Nipper.

Nevertheless, he grinned cheerfully, and noticed that Nelson Lee was sitting at the steering-wheel.

The trio were in the great detective's motor-car, and the latter was gliding along a dusty road with green fields on

one side and the blue sea on the other. The sun was shining with a forty-horse-power shine, as Nipper put it.

It was early summer, and the day was certainly one of the best that had been experienced for some little time. Business had taken Nelson Lee down to the Kent coast, and he had decided to travel by car.

Nipper had eagerly suggested that Eileen Dare should be taken "just for the fun of the trip." Accordingly, Lee had rung up his girl assistant, and she had joyfully acclaimed the suggestion.

The run down from London had been splendid, and the great detective's business had been duly attended to. The little party was now on its way home, and reckoned to reach the metropolis again by tea-time.

They were just nearing the village of Keningvale, and would leave the coast there, and strike up through the heart of Kent for London. While coming through Keningvale on the outward journey they had seen signs that something special was in the wind, as it were.

They soon learned the interesting fact that the Keningvale inhabitants had organised some sports. A number of wounded Tommies from a hospital near by were going to take part in the programme, and the affair was to be something of an event. Indeed, a famous general was to open the sports.

But the affair was not particularly interesting to Eileen Dare and Nelson Lee and Nipper. At all events, they did not intend to stop in Keningvale. They were now heading straight for the village, and soon turned away from the coast; for Keningvale was some little distance inland.

Eileen Dare was looking her sunniest. Always lively and full of spirits, she seemed particularly delightful and dainty to-day. The girl-detective was in no way showing the effects of the grim campaign she was even now waging against her father's enemies—the Combine—and that campaign was drawing to its close.

The Combine consisted of such men as Sydney Bradford, the well-known London solicitor, Roger Haverfield, the Midland steel manufacturer, Lord Max Roper, Dr. Munro-Taggart, Sir Caleb Hurst, and many others of the same high standing in business and social circles.

The majority of the Combine's scoundrelly members had been dealt with

by Eileen and Nelson Lee. For the great detective had taken a great part in the exposing of each individual rogue.

Only Roger Haverfield, Sydney Bradford, and Lord Max Roper now remained. There were one or two others, but they were comparatively recent additions to the Circle, and Eileen considered that the Combine now consisted of three men only.

The others, thirteen or fourteen in number, had already paid the penalty of their many crimes. Some were dead, but the majority were serving terms of penal servitude.

These men, calling themselves the Combine, had plotted against Eileen Dare's father, and they had been directly responsible for his death. In the eyes of heaven murder had been committed. And the girl had made a great vow that each man should suffer for his sins.

Eileen was one of the sweetest girls breathing—and she was one of the cleverest. She had not been waging her war for sheer revenge; justice was merely being done. Her enemies were highly-placed men, and beyond reach of the law. So she was quietly exposing them one by one.

Nelson Lee had long since given up showing surprise at Eileen's actions. She was possessed of amazing detective ability, and Lee often entrusted delicate tasks to the girl which required exquisite judgment and skill in their execution. And Eileen always acquitted herself with honours.

The work of the past months had been perilous, but Eileen's wits had nearly always seen her through. Nelson Lee, of course, had worked on every case, and Eileen frankly admitted that, without his advice and aid, she would have been hampered to such an extent that her campaign would have been impossible.

In spite of dangers and excitements, Eileen always cheered all those who came into contact with her. Her smile was as sunny as Mediterranean skies. Nipper, whenever he felt down in the dumps, sallied out to Eileen's sweet little flat in Chelsea, and spent an hour or two with Eileen and her dear old aunt. He always came back smiling and cheerful.

To-day Nipper was enjoying himself hugely. There was no silly sentiment about him. Nipper was a lad of action,

a lively, healthy young fellow, without an ounce of nonsense in his whole composition. He loved to be in Eileen's company because she always made him happy, and, in a way, he worshipped her. But Nipper was sensible and level-headed.

He was rather sorry that the return journey had commenced. London would be reached all too soon.

"Pity you don't have business trips more often, gov'nor," remarked the lad, with a grin. "These motor-rides are ripping——"

Boom!

Nipper's remark was interrupted by a dull explosion from somewhere near by.

"Oh, what was that?" asked Eileen, turning with far-opened eyes.

"Sounded like a gun of some sort," said Nipper. "Practice with——"

Boom! . Boom!

This time the three occupants of the car distinctly saw the corner of a large house, half-a-mile to the right of them, and close to the cliff-edge, crumple away into dust. A dense mass of smoke arose.

Nipper, with a gasp, looked into the sky, shading his eyes with his hands.

"Look up there!" he roared. "It's a raid!"

"Oh!" gasped Eileen.

The girl was in no way frightened—merely startled.

And Nipper's explanation was certainly the correct one. Far up in the blue sky a swiftly-moving speck was visible. Nelson Lee and Eileen Dare needed no telling that the speck was a German aeroplane.

Boom! Boom!

Two more bombs were dropped, but they seemed to fall harmlessly into the open fields. Then, as Nipper and the others watched, the raider circled round, and made straight out to sea.

Nelson Lee had brought his car to a standstill now, and he watched the brief drama. For it was exceedingly brief. Almost within a minute the German raiding aeroplane had disappeared into the heat-haze.

"One of those futile dashes," commented Lee. "A 'one-minute' raid. The airman just came over the coast, dropped his cargo of bombs, and then dashed off home again. Let us hope he is brought down."

Eileen brushed her hair back impatiently.

"I can't understand why the Germans send their machines over like this," she said. "They serve no good purpose. The people are not terrified in the least. Most people rush out of their houses to watch!"

"Hallo!" said Nipper suddenly. "Hurrah! That's fine!"

"Why, what——"

"Don't you see, Miss Eileen?" roared the lad. "Two of our machines just going up! They're after that bomb-dropping blighter! My hat! I wish I was one of those chasing machines! I'd give the Huns what-ho!"

Nipper was rather excited. Eileen and Nelson Lee now espied a couple of British aeroplanes soaring aloft like a pair of angry birds. They were both speed machines, and—so Nipper positively declared—miles better than any rotten old German machine.

But, as Nipper knew himself, the German machines are by no means rotten. They are fast and reliable. But they are certainly not so fast and not so reliable as the latest British 'planes. Accordingly, there was a possibility that the daring raider would be caught.

"Cheeky varmint, them Germans!" said a wheezy voice.

Eileen and Nipper and Nelson Lee had been so busy looking into the sky that they had not observed the approach of an aged countryman. He was standing beside the car, smiling quite pleasantly.

"Be it gone, sir?" he asked, as Nipper looked round at him.

"Yes—two of our chaps after him," said the lad.

"Ay. That's good hearin'. Likely they'll bring the varmint down," said the old fellow, with a nod of his hoary head. "I dessay he deserves drownin'. There'll be a bit of damage done this time."

Nipper and Eileen sat down, and Nelson Lee lit a cigarette. The old countryman was standing close to the car, leaning on his stick. The sun beat down hotly, and the brasswork of the automobile glistened. It really seemed impossible that a terrible war was in progress—a war which surpassed all other conflict in the world's history.

The summer's day was perfect, and the countryside was peaceful. Not a

sign of the recent raid remained—Ah! But what was that? Nipper, looking over to the big house by the cliff, saw volumes of smoke arising into the blue heavens.

"That house is on fire," he said. "The rotter did a bit of damage then."

"Ay, an' likely killed a few poor mortals, too," said the old rustic. "Them as ain't got no senses, neither. I reckon it's hard for the likes o' them to be bothered by bombs droppin' from the sky!"

Eileen smiled.

"It's hardly fair to say that the poor people haven't any sense," she remarked. "They can't help the German aeroplane coming over—"

"You don't rightly unnerstand me, missy," said the old man. "That house yonder is Dr. Starke's place."

"And who's the genial Dr. Starke?" inquired Nipper.

"I dunno as the doctor's genial, sir," said the countryman. "Leastways, he ain't never said a bright word to me, although I have passed the time o'-day more'n once. Dr. Starke ain't what you'd call a sociable man."

"That's rather rummy for a doctor," said Nipper.

"Ay, but Dr. Starke ain't a real doctor," wheezed the ancient. "Not what I'd call a doctor. He keeps that there old house—a loony-house the folk call it. I ain't never bin nigh the place—an' don't want—but I've heard as the poor critters who live there ain't in their right minds."

Eileen Dare looked serious.

"Oh, a private lunatic asylum," she said, nodding. "Isn't that awful, Mr. Lee? I do hope those poor creatures are not hurt. It must be dreadful for bombs to drop on such an establishment."

"We'd better look out for ourselves," said Nipper, with a grin. "We shall be seeing chaps with knives and rakes and things. Lunatics usually try to kill people when they escape, don't they? Or else tell everybody that they're the King of England, or the manager of the District Railway, or King Solomon, or the Kaiser—"

"Oh, Nipper, don't be so shocking!" protested Eileen.

Nipper blushed.

"I'm awfully sorry, Miss Eileen," he stammered. "I—I was only joking."

"It's not a subject for jokes at all!"

The girl's tone was severe, and poor Nipper subsided. If there was one thing he always wished to avoid, that one thing was offending Eileen. He felt that it was "up to him" to make amends.

"I say, suppose we hurry along and see if we can do anything to help?" he suggested eagerly. "We might be of some use—"

"That's rather a good idea, young 'un," interjected Nelson Lee crisply. "And, unless my eyes deceive me, there's one of the asylum keepers running across the meadows now. He'll be able to tell us a few things."

Both Nipper and Eileen saw a figure in uniform crossing a green meadow about three hundred yards in front. He would reach the road in less than a minute. Nelson Lee sent the car gently forward.

The old countryman grinned cheerfully, and waved his stick. Eileen and Nipper waved back, and then looked ahead. Lee stopped the car a little further on, just as the uniformed man came through a gap in the hedge. He was hot, and the sweat was standing on his face in beads.

"Hi!" he shouted, running towards the car. "I say, sir, can you give me a lift?" he went on breathlessly. "Just to the village. There's a fire—"

"Jump on," said Nelson Lee.

"Thanks! This'll save me a run, sir!" gasped the man.

He got on, and the car gathered speed again. The asylum-keeper mopped his brow, and looked extremely worried.

"Curse them Germans!" he exclaimed with sudden fierceness. "Beg pardon, miss, but a man must say something strong! They've set fire to the doctor's place, and there's a proper to-do. Five or six of our patients have escaped, too!"

"Anybody killed or hurt?" asked Nipper.

"No, an' that's something to be thankful for," said the keeper. "I was nigh blown to bits by that second bomb. Slap on the doctor's study it came! He wasn't in there, or he'd have been dead now."

"I was thinking of offering my help," said Nelson Lee. "If I can be of any use I shall be only too pleased—"

The man nodded gratefully.

"This is the best way you can help, sir," he said. "I've been sent to tell Rickman, the village constable. There's

a fire-engine in the village, too—only a hand-worked thing, but it'll serve. The doctor's study is fair blazing."

Just on the outskirts of the village the keeper asked Lee to stop. He hopped off the car, and ran into a small cottage near by. Soon he returned with a startled-looking country policeman. The latter, to tell the truth, had been indulging in a nap on his parlour sofa, and had heard nothing of the brief raid. He had been freshening himself up for the duties of the afternoon, when he would keep order among the crowds at the village sports.

He and the asylum-keeper hurried to the shed where the fire-engine was housed, and this article was soon on its way to the scene of the fire, hauled by five or six villagers.

Nelson Lee drove his car on ahead, and arrived at the private asylum long before the old-fashioned engine. It was then discovered that the fire was almost under control. Dr. Hugo Starke, in his shirt-sleeves, was helping his men with the buckets, and it looked as though the fire-engine would not be needed.

Lee did not think it necessary to interfere. He stopped the car out in the road, and he and Eileen and Nipper watched from there. The detective realised that he would only have been in the way if he had offered his services.

The news was quickly carried to the village that the danger was past; and this assurance prevented a party wounded Tommies from hurrying out to lend a hand. The sports arrangements were thus allowed to proceed. If there had been more severe the sports would have been sadly delayed.

As it was, the opening took place with much display.

Nelson Lee, after a while, decided to continue his journey to London. There was really no object in remaining in Keningvale. He couldn't very well help to scour the country for the missing patients. They would soon be found by the keepers. They were all harmless cases, anyhow. Dr. Starke had no dangerous patients in his establishment.

When the village was reached Lee and Eileen and Nipper encountered quite a crowd of animated-looking people. The sports were just about to commence, and the convalescent soldiers, at all events, were looking as lively as sandboys. They were wonderful fellows, those Tommies.

General Quainton had arrived, and he

was chatting with a couple of other officers in front of the King's Arms. An admiring crowd was lining the village street, watching.

As Nipper humorously remarked, the general was rather a quaint 'un. This atrocious pun upon the general's name afforded Nipper much amusement, but Eileen and Nelson Lee affected not to hear it.

"Oh, we shall be filmed!" said Eileen, with a little laugh, as the car slowly made its way through the animated throng.

A great many of the people were discussing the raid, and the sports, although of paramount importance, had to wait a bit. General Quainton was chatting with the two officers about the recent aeroplane raid.

"Filmed?" said Nipper, looking at Eileen.

"Yes. Don't you see, Nipper?" laughed the girl.

He did see, then. There was a cinematograph operator present, and he was busily turning the handle of his camera. Nelson Lee's car would pass right before it, and would thus be included in the film.

But Eileen, as she looked across at the throng of villagers and soldiers in hospital blue, suddenly puckered her pretty brow. She was looking straight at one man who stood a little back from the

He was elderly and quietly dressed. There was a curiously vacant expression on his face—a childish look of wonder in his eyes. He was staring about him though in bewilderment, and really acted as a child would have done.

But this was not the cause of the marring pucker upon Eileen's brow. Somehow or other, the man reminded of somebody she knew—somebody she did not like.

She had never seen this man before all her life—but he was just like—like—Who?

Eileen couldn't remember. If she had had longer time for studying the stranger's face she might have been successful in "placing" him. But Lee's car was soon past, and gathered speed after the centre of the village was left in the rear.

"We're in that film all right," grinned Nipper.

"Are we?" said Eileen absently. "Rather! I grinned right into the

camera," replied Nipper, with a chuckle. "I wonder—Hullo, what's the matter, Miss Eileen? You're looking jolly serious, I must say!"

"How can I look jolly if I'm serious?" smiled Eileen gently.

"Oh, well, you know what I mean. Besides, you always do look jolly," went on Nipper. "It gives a chap a 'glad' feeling all over him to look at you—better than any tonic! But something's happened——"

"I was thinking about that man, Nipper."

"Which man—old Quainton, the pompous general?"

Eileen laughingly shook her head.

"Don't be so ridiculous! Of course not," she replied. "Didn't you see a man standing by the side of the road, just against that inn? A man with very curious eyes. He looked just like somebody I know—somebody I detest."

"I was grinning at the film camera," said Nipper apologetically. "I didn't look on the other side of the road at all. Perhaps the gov'nor——"

"No, Nipper, I was too busy with the crowd ahead," interjected Nelson Lee. "I'm afraid you'll have to rely upon your own memory, Miss Eileen. I don't suppose the matter is of much importance, anyhow. Probably the man resembled the porter of your Chelsea flats, or the grocer's man, or——"

Eileen laughed, and the matter was dropped. But during the ride to London that little pucker returned to her brow now and again.

The journey was a good one, and London was reached in the early evening. The incidents at Keningvale were almost forgotten now. Nipper was rejoicing in the knowledge that he and his master were going to tea with Eileen and Aunt Esther.

While proceeding down Regent Street towards Piccadilly Circus the dusty car was forced to slow down to a mere crawl, owing to a block in the traffic ahead. Nipper's eye caught the placard outside the New Elite Cinema.

"Hullo! exclaimed the lad. "Why, look there! I say——"

Nipper pointed, and Eileen gave a silvery little laugh.

"Oh, I wonder if we shall be on it?" she cried.

For one of the bills announced that a film of the Keningvale Sports would be

shown during the evening. General Quainton arriving—the opening—the different events. It was the famous general's presence in Keningvale which had prompted the enterprising film company to take the pictures. It would be included in the current "Topical Chronicle."

"Is that film going to be shown to-night, really?" asked Eileen.

"Of course."

"They haven't had time to prepare——"

"What about the Derby, and other events of the same sort?" said Nipper.

"Before the war, when the Derby was run, the pictures of it were always shown in London on the same night. This is the same. I say, I'd like to see that film—just to catch sight of my own grinning dial!"

"You can go if you like, Nipper," smiled Lee. "Nobody will stop you."

"I'll tell you what!" said the lad eagerly. "Suppose you come, Miss Eileen? After tea—you and Miss Gilbey and I? The gov'nor's got an appointment, I believe, with somebody. What do you say?"

Eileen laughed.

"Oh, I'll come," she said. "But I'm not sure about my aunt; we shall have to see what she says. I expect she'll be agreeable."

A little later, after the party had arrived at the girl-detective's Chelsea flat, Eileen's aunt, Miss Esther Gilbey, was not only agreeable, but quite eager to visit the picture-theatre. She was highly amused at the thought of seeing Eileen on the screen.

The tea was a great success, and then Nelson Lee drove Eileen and her aunt and Nipper to the New Elite Cinema. Dropping them there, the great detective bade them farewell, and proceeded to Gray's Inn Road. Lee had an appointment with a gentleman that evening, and had no time for pleasure.

But this was no reason why Nipper shouldn't take Eileen and her aunt out. The lad little realised, as he entered the cinema, that amazing developments were destined to follow this visit to "the pictures."

Nipper was delighted, for it was not often he had a chance of taking Eileen out anywhere. Aunt Esther squeezed her comfortable figure into her seat, and was soon laughing heartily at the amus-

ing antics of a certain gentleman known as Mr. Charlie Chaplin, who happened to be in possession of the screen at the time.

Eileen and Nipper laughed, too, but they were soon afterwards interested in a serious "feature" drama. When this was over, after about an hour, another comedy was screened—followed by the 'Topical Chronicle.' It was now fairly late in the evening, and the cinema was well filled.

"Here we are," said Nipper, with a chuckle. "Look out for our faces, Miss Gilbey. You'll know mine by the three-foot-six grin."

"I don't believe they'll show you at all," said Aunt Esther smilingly.

"Of course, they may have cut it out—that bit," replied Nipper. "But I don't see why. If they have done, it'll be a mean trick—after we've paid our money to see ourselves."

Two minutes later, after a scene taken in London, the sub-title announced that the Keningvale Sports would be shown, with General Quainton performing the opening ceremony. The film started exactly at the spot where the camera had been set when Nelson Lee's car passed. Indeed, the car came into view after the first few seconds.

"Oh, there you are, Nipper!" laughed Eileen gaily.

Aunt Esther was greatly disappointed. The car was across the screen in next to no time, and the audience only had a glimpse of Lee's car. Nipper, grinning widely, was seen for a second, but Eileen had her pretty face turned the other way.

"Why, I didn't see you at all, my dear!" protested Aunt Esther. "Sha'n't we see any more of you?"

"That's all there is," said Nipper, rather lamely.

"Then I call it a shame!" declared Miss Gilbey. "Fancy bringing me here——"

"Oh!" exclaimed Eileen suddenly.

She was staring straight at the screen. She had observed the man with the childish eyes—the man she had seen in the flesh. He was facing the camera, and now the girl had a much better opportunity of examining his features. He was staring about him rather vaguely, and the camera had taken him very clearly.

And then, as Eileen was puzzling her

brain again, she heard a sudden low cry from a man three rows ahead, and a little to the left. It was a gasping cry of amazement and anger, and was quite low in tone. Nipper heard it, too, and he turned his head.

He and Eileen saw a man get up from his place, and then sit down again. Leaning forward, Eileen was able to see the stranger's profile fairly distinctly. And, in a flash, the girl detective recognised him.

The man was Lord Max Roper—one of her bitter "Combine" enemies!

Why had he uttered that sudden startled cry—that involuntary exclamation of amazement?

Eileen Dare caught her breath in as she realised the startling truth. Her brain worked with lightning swiftness. Of course! How silly she was not to have remembered before! The man she had seen in Keningvale—the man who was now visible on the screen—looked very much like Lord Max Roper! He resembled his lordship closely, but was more elderly, and more refined.

How extraordinary! And, of course, he was connected with Lord Max Roper, or the latter would not have cried out with surprise. Who was he? His brother? Eileen gave a little silent gasp as a terrible thought came to her. Lord Roper's brother! She knew, of course, that Lord Howard Roper had been killed in the sad Channel disaster, five years before.

His body had never been recovered, Eileen recollected. Good heavens! Had she stumbled on some five-year-old crime? A vague suspicion entered her head that Lord Howard Roper was still alive—that he was actually the man on the screen—the man with the childish eyes!

CHAPTER II.

NIPPER GETS BUSY—A SMART RUSE—
STARTLING INFORMATION—LEE ACTS.

LORD MAX ROPER was nearly stunned with the sudden shock.

He had come to the New Elite Cinema merely to pass a couple of idle hours. Although an evil-liver, a gambler, he, nevertheless, enjoyed watching the humble "pictures," and he was taken utterly by surprise now.

His brother—the brother who was dead to the whole world—was there, on the

screen, in full view of the whole audience! It was a shock of the utmost magnitude to the guilty-minded usurper.

What did it mean? What could it mean?

Lord Roper had heard of the afternoon aeroplane raid, but no details had been published, and Dr. Starke had not communicated with him. Truth to tell, Dr. Starke had been too busy with his burning house to think of communicating with Lord Max Roper. And his lordship now learned, for the first time, that Howard had escaped.

Of course he had escaped—that was obvious.

Lord Max did not know that Eileen was close to him; her presence in the cinema at the same time as himself, was just an everyday coincidence, and not at all remarkable.

Eileen was flushed with her discovery, with the startling thoughts which surged through her brain. The girl was acquainted with the history of Lord Max Roper—and with the history of most of her enemies, if it came to that. She knew that Max had inherited the title from his brother, Howard. And Howard had gone to the bottom with the ill-fated Foreland five years before.

But had Lord Howard gone to the bottom?

For the first time Eileen began to have doubts. She knew of no other relation, and the fact that Lord Max had given expression to such a gasp of amazed consternation was tremendously significant.

Eileen forgot all else in the new train of thought which now took possession of her. She saw Lord Roper get up from his seat and commence to make his way past all the people in his particular row. Eileen turned to Nipper.

"Quick, quick, Nipper!" she whispered. "Do you see that man?"

"That chap just getting out?"

"Yes. He's Lord Max Roper."

"My hat!"

"I want you to follow him, Nipper—see where he goes, and report what he does," went on the girl quickly.

"Good enough, Miss Eileen!" said Nipper promptly. "I'm on!"

"Wait a moment. You remember that man I saw in Keningvale—the man I thought I recognised? He was like somebody——"

"Great Scott! D'you mean he was like Roper?"

Exactly like him, Nipper," whispered Eileen. "I have a suspicion that the man was none other than Lord Howard Roper himself. Max is a scoundrelly impostor—he has no right to the title! It is only a suspicion, but this clue has given me the opportunity to probe the matter. Will you follow him?"

"I'll stick like glue!" declared Nipper eagerly. "By jingo, what a show-up for the merry Max if your suspicion is right! I'll do my best, Miss Eileen, and I'll report to you later on."

"Thank you, Nipper. It is splendid of you!"

She pressed Nipper's hand, and the lad went off flushing with pleasure. He was only too anxious to do any service for Eileen. Besides, he was extremely keen upon helping the girl in any way with her campaign against the Combine. Nipper had already taken a hand in many an adventure, and he was always willing to go to the most strenuous trouble, as, by so doing, he was helping Eileen.

As he left the picture-theatre, he recalled a conversation he and Eileen and Nelson Lee had once had. They had been talking about Lord Roper's brother, who had been killed in a shipping disaster in the Channel. Nipper had undying faith in Eileen's judgment and sagacity.

Her suspicion, as she called it, became to him an absolute certainty. Eileen wasn't likely to send him off on a wild-goose chase! And he felt that this innocent visit to the New Elite Cinema was to lead to startling results. They had come for pleasure—and had found work!

Nipper had no difficulty in keeping Lord Max in view. Once outside the picture-theatre, his lordship hailed a taxi. Nipper didn't wait to see Max glide away. He immediately hurried down the street and chartered a taxi himself—at that hour of the evening there were plenty of cabs to be had.

Nipper instructed his driver to follow the taxi which Lord Max had just entered. It turned round and made off towards Piccadilly Circus. Once there, the two vehicles proceeded along Piccadilly for some little distance, and then Lord Max got out.

Nipper knew now what the destination was. Roper had merely driven home:

for his lordship lived—while in London—in a neat set of chambers just off Piccadilly. It was a self-contained flat, really, situated in a large block.

Roper quickly made his way towards them, and he had no notion that he was being shadowed. The great block of flats loomed up ahead, and Nipper saw his quarry turn into one of the big entrances.

There were thick bushes set inside a heavy railing surrounding the large building, and Nipper saw another man enter almost at the same moment as Lord Max Roper. The next second the lad heard an exclamation of recognition.

Scudding up behind the cover of the thick bushes, Nipper was easily able to hear the few words that were spoken by the two men.

"Jove, that's queer!" said one of the voices. "I was just coming to see you, Roper! Have you heard anything?"

"Not a word," replied Roper.

"I'm afraid the news is rather bad."

"Confound that fool of a Starke!" exclaimed Roper savagely. "Yes, I know what's happened—at least, I can guess. Come upstairs, Bradford. We can't talk out here. There's the very deuce to pay!"

Nipper hardly heard the last words, for they were uttered as the two men entered the doorway. The lad knew, however, that Roper's companion was Mr. Sydney Bradford, the well-known solicitor.

"Bradford!" thought Nipper. "One of Miss Eileen's most powerful enemies—a rotter to the backbone! By jingo! There's something on, with a vengeance. Looks as though Miss Eileen was right. She always is right!"

But Nipper was faced with a difficulty. He couldn't follow his quarry any longer. Roper, he knew, occupied the flat on the second floor, to the left of the main staircase. But the staircase was brightly illuminated, and people would probably be passing up and down. Besides, if he went upstairs, he'd only find a closed door confronting him. He might as well stay where he was.

The lad set his wits to work. He badly wanted to hear what the two men said; everything would depend upon it. And there was not a second to lose. If Nipper was to act at all, he must act at once.

Nipper walked quickly to the corner of the block, and made his way down a narrow side turning. In a few seconds

he came to a big iron gateway. This was the tradesmen's entrance, and it led to the back of the flats.

All was dark, and not a soul was about. At that late hour of the evening all tradesmen had ceased their calls, and the rear portion of the building was deserted. Nipper had no fear of being accosted—except, perhaps, by a porter. But there was only one porter now, owing to the war, and he was an old man. In all probability, he was off duty.

Nipper soon found that there were outside lifts set against the wall. He halted against the lift which led up to the rear of Roper's flat. It was a fairly big thing, enclosed in a wooden casing. It was intended for groceries, and things of that kind, to save time and trouble. Tradesmen merely placed their goods in this lift, and hoisted it up to the particular flat they required.

Ropes operated the lift, and it was perfectly simple. At each flat there was a small window—or, at least, an opening—through which the goods were passed. The ground-floor flat, of course, had no opening. Goods were delivered there by means of a rear door some little distance away.

Nipper came to a swift decision.

He measured the interior of the lift with his eye, and then glanced down at himself. The thing was intended for light weights only, of course. Probably the lift had never before been used for the purpose he was now going to put it to.

The lad scrambled through the narrow opening and squeezed himself into the lift. He was going to haul himself up—or, at least, attempt to! He realised that he would probably fail.

And there was a chance, too, of something breaking. If this happened when he was nearly at the level of Lord Roper's flat, he would descend with greater speed than comfort. Indeed, the whole thing was dangerous in the extreme.

But Nipper didn't stop to think of dangers.

As he crouched there he heard footsteps. They died away, however, and all became quiet. Nipper took a deep breath, and hauled on the ropes. Rather to his surprise, he commenced ascending without much exertion. The lift was more serviceable than he had supposed.

But his weight was a great strain, and the elevator had certainly not been constructed for such a load. He felt the

ropes straining, and knew that he would descend with a crash if he allowed the rope to slip.

At last he reached the level of the second floor. He felt the small opening which led—he guessed—into the kitchen of the flat.

All was dark. Nipper wedged his knee against the woodwork, and pressed against the covering. The door didn't shift at all. Of course, it was locked. Then Nipper remembered that the door was probably a sliding one.

Accordingly, he tried this method, and in less than a couple of seconds had the satisfaction of feeling the door slide upwards. Right in front of him was the kitchen of the flat. It was in darkness, but the door was ajar, and a stream of light entered from the hall.

At the same second Nipper heard voices.

"Appalling consequences, Bradford!" Lord Roper was saying. "I shall have to think of clearing out. Curse the luck! Why didn't that fool of a Starke keep his patients under better supervision?"

"My dear man, the asylum was bombed!" came Bradford's voice.

Nipper hugged himself. The fact that the men were speaking so loudly proved quite plainly that they were alone in the flat. Roper kept servants, but they did not sleep on the premises. And the kitchen door being ajar, Nipper was able to hear easily. The voices of the two scoundrels carried easily along the superbly-furnished hall.

"By Jupiter, it's a success!" Nipper told himself.

He leaned his weight upon the sill of the cupboard-like opening, and was thus able to secure a fairly easy position. He was quite prepared to enter the flat, and chance the consequences; but if he could hear everything from his present position it would have been foolhardy to enter.

"After all these years, too!" he heard Lord Roper exclaim, with a savage oath. "I hardly know what to do, Bradford! What do you suggest?"

Buzz-z-z-z!

Lord Roper uttered another oath.

"Confound it!" he said. "We can't be bothered with the telephone now! One of my friends, I suppose! I'll soon shut him up. Maltwell, I expect—I promised him I'd go round to his place for a gamble to-night. Good heavens! I don't feel like card-playing!"

Nipper heard a couple of footfalls, then Roper's voice sharply demanded

what the caller wanted. Nipper grinned to himself. His lordship's nerves were evidently on edge.

"Yes, this is— What? I'm Roper! Oh, it's you, Webster?" exclaimed Lord Roper. "Don't bother me now, you infernal— What? Speak up, man; I can't hear you! Yes, yes, of course—told you he was Lord Roper? Go on. Webster—go on?—in the coal-cellar? Excellent, Webster, excellent! You did quite right! A madman, probably—no, don't inform the police, yet—I'll come down myself. Expect me in about an hour. Don't let the fellow go under any consideration, Webster—yes, that's right. I'll come at once!"

Nipper couldn't make much of Lord Roper's disjointed remarks into the transmitter of the instrument; but the lad could tell that his lordship was now suffering from a sudden subdued excitement.

"Good heavens, Bradford!" Nipper heard Roper exclaim after he had hung up the receiver. "Howard's down at Roper Manor—my country place in Surrey."

"Howard at Roper Manor!" echoed Sydney Bradford amazedly.

Those words were tremendously significant to Nipper. They told him, in one second, that Eileen Dare's theory was correct. Lord Howard Roper was alive! Max was a scoundrelly impostor! Some dastardly villainy was afoot!

Nipper almost released his hold in his excitement.

"It's the finest thing that could have happened!" went on Roper huskily. "Don't you understand, Bradford? Howard had sense enough to find his way to the Manor—his own home! He's there now—locked in the coal-cellar!"

"In the coal-cellar!" gasped the solicitor.

"Webster told me the main facts—I didn't want him to say too much over the 'phone," said Roper. "Webster is my butler, as you know. He's in sole charge of the Manor when I'm in town. The other servants, he says, don't know anything of the affair. Thank Heaven for that! This means our salvation!"

"But—but—"

"Look here! So far as I can gather, Webster was startled to find a strange man in the grounds," said Lord Roper quickly. "Webster is one of my own men—he's never seen my brother. Nor, for that matter, have any of the other servants. I took good care to clear out



The next wave caught them again, and they were hurled on the shingle with terrific force.—(See p. 4.)

the old lot, and engage new. About half an hour ago, Webster says, he was surprised to find a man wandering in front of the house—a man, he says, who seemed vacant and childish."

"Howard!" muttered Bradford.

"Of course. Howard is still in possession of his wits, although they are dulled and like those of a child. As you know, Howard can be led about like a lamb; he hasn't an ounce of vitality in him, so far as his brain is concerned. Well, he must have wandered to the Manor by instinct, as it is his real home. Webster found him, and was astounded when my brother said that he was Lord Roper."

"I should think he was astounded!"

"Webster acted with excellent judgment," went on Lord Max Roper. "He thought that Howard was a harmless lunatic, and locked him in the coal-cellar. Then, not knowing what to do, he rang me up for advice. Good heavens! Don't you understand, Bradford? Fate has played him right into our hands. Howard escaped from Starke's place, but we've got him again—got him before he's done any harm!"

Sydney Bradford took a deep breath. Nipper heard it distinctly.

"It is amazing luck, Roper!" he said. "We may avert the disaster even now. If we can only hide your brother away somewhere it will be an easy matter to 'square' the butler. He'll guess things, of course, but you will have to pay him for his silence. It's the only way."

"I'll pay him enough," said Roper grimly. "I thought that everything was lost, but Howard has walked into my hands. By Heaven, he sha'n't wander any further! We'll keep him away somewhere until Stark takes him back. But we'd better go off, Bradford. Every second is of value. Only Webster knows of Howard's arrival; but if we're not on the spot quickly the other servants may get wind—"

"How shall we go?" interjected Bradford quickly.

"My car's ready at the garage—we'll be at the Manor within the hour."

"Good! We must go at once," said the solicitor. "I'm involved as deeply as you, Roper. If the truth comes out I'm utterly ruined. It'll mean penal servitude for the pair of us!"

"Hang it! We'll settle the thing somehow!" snapped Lord Roper.

Nipper heard footsteps, then a door creaked. The men had been talking in Lord Roper's study; the door had apparently been slightly open. The young

detective remained perfectly still. Another door opened, then slammed. Everything was completely silent.

Lord Roper and Sydney Bradford had gone.

"They're off to Roper Manor," Nipper told himself. "Howard is there—the real Lord Roper! Great winks! What a night! This'll be the biggest coup Miss Eileen's ever brought off! I'll rush and tell her—"

But Nipper checked his thoughts.

Eileen, clever as she was, could hardly act immediately. This was essentially a case for Nelson Lee himself. Bradford and his scoundrelly companion had gone down to Surrey, and Nipper was as pleased as Punch with the information he had gained. He and his master would be able to follow the rogues.

"But how?" Nipper muttered. "How can we follow? If I rush off to Gray's Inn Road half an hour will be wasted. We ought to go off at once. I can't go alone. My hat! I'll ring the guv'nor up—on Roper's giddy 'phone!"

Nipper wasn't the lad to hesitate.

He scrambled through the opening and tumbled head first upon the kitchen floor. Then he fished out his electric torch and quickly passed along the hall. In less than a minute he was at Lord Roper's telephone in the deserted study.

Every minute was precious, so Nipper wasn't wasting a fraction of one.

He got Nelson Lee's number at once, and the famous detective himself answered the call.

"Hallo!" came Lee's smooth voice. "Eh? Oh, it's you, Nipper? Got back from the pictures, then?"

"There's a terrific game on, guv'nor!" panted Nipper excitedly.

"A game? What on earth—"

"I can't explain here," interrupted the lad. "It's important, sir—absolutely vital. The biggest thing for months. Can you be at top of Haymarket with the car—the big racer—in about ten minutes?"

"You're serious, Nipper?" came Lee's voice sharply.

"It's fearfully urgent, guv'nor!"

"I'll be there, Nipper," said Nelson Lee curtly. "Top of Haymarket—in ten minutes. Tell me the rest when you see me. One moment. A long journey or a short one?"

"Fairly short, sir."

"Right! I needn't delay for more petrol. I'll be there, Nipper!"

Nelson Lee rang off, and Nipper, his face glowing, turned away from the in-

strument and left the study. He hadn't thought of the risks of entering Lord Roper's flat; he only thought of saving time.

As it happened, he left the flat without a soul seeing him, and in another minute he was in Piccadilly. And when he arrived at the top of the Haymarket, he was just in time to see Nelson Lee's big racing-car roar up.

CHAPTER III.

NIPPER EXPLAINS—AT ROPER MANOR—NO EVIDENCE—EILEEN PREPARES.

NELSON LEE had been as good as his word.

"You've been quick, guv'nor," said Nipper, as he hopped in beside his master.

"Didn't you tell me to be quick?" asked the great detective. "If you have been fooling me, you young rascal——"

"No, sir, it's deadly serious!" interjected Nipper quickly. "I'd like Miss Eileen to know, but we can't stop. She'll have to be told later on. Make straight for Fulham and Putney, guv'nor—the Portsmouth Road. We're off to Surrey."

Nelson Lee sent the great car forward.

"I'm in your hands, young 'un," he said calmly. "You don't act like this unless you have cause. When we get clear of this 'bus and taxi traffic I'll hear the yarn."

"It's a Combine affair."

"So I gathered. But wait a few minutes."

Lee could not very well listen attentively to Nipper while he was threading his way through the traffic of Piccadilly and Knightsbridge and Brompton Road. When the racer was speeding along Fulham Road, however, the traffic was practically of no account. Nelson Lee turned his head slightly.

"Fire away, Nipper," he said shortly.

"We're off to Roper Manor, to begin with, sir."

"Twenty-five miles out. We'll be there within the hour," said Lee. "But why are we going, young 'un? I must admit that I am curious. I was under the impression that you were with Miss Eileen and her aunt, sedately watching pictures in a cosy cinema. What's the trouble?"

Nipper told his master how Eileen had recognised Lord Max Roper in the New Elite Cinema, and how she had "placed" the strange man at King-

vale as Lord Howard Roper, the supposedly dead elder brother.

Then Nipper explained how he had shadowed Roper; how he had ascended the tradesmen's lift, and how he had overheard the vital conversation between Lord Max and Sydney Bradford.

Nelson Lee listened without comment until the end.

Then he turned a pair of approving eyes upon his young assistant.

"You've done excellently, Nipper," he said quietly.

"Thanks, guv'nor."

Lee's words were simple, but Nipper flushed with pleasure. He valued his master's praise above all else—except, perhaps, Eileen's praise. That would come later, of course.

"And Lord Howard Roper is alive!" said Nelson Lee, almost incredulously. "By James! What a revelation, Nipper! Max is a usurper—a scoundrelly impostor. This will be his finish, I imagine. And you say that he and Bradford only started a few minutes before us?"

"We might even be ahead of them," said Nipper.

"If so, we shall foil the game immediately," exclaimed Lee. "If we can arrive at the Manor first it will be an easy matter to release Lord Howard from the coal-cellar. I fancy Webster, the butler, will prove manageable."

"Suppose the rotters are there first?"

"Then we shall have to act with caution."

"I don't see it. Why not take the bull by the horns——"

"My dear Nipper, we have no warrant to arrest anybody, or to search Roper's house," put in Nelson Lee. "We can manage the butler—but not Bradford and Roper. He could have us thrown off his premises if we did as you say. No, Nipper. We shall have to suit ourselves to the circumstances."

"Let's hope we get there first, guv'nor," said Nipper fervently. "What a triumph if we do. Lord Roper will be rescued, and his rotten brother——"

"Don't anticipate, young 'un. It is never a wise policy."

So Nipper remained quiet.

The miles were eaten up by Lee's powerful car, and very soon it was speeding through the open country. The night was very dark, but beautifully fine. The dust upon the road left a

veritable fog behind the car, as it was whirled up.

Roper Manor, Nelson Lee knew, was situated a mile beyond a small village in the heart of the Surrey hills. It was on a by-road, and quite secluded. The Manor, in fact, was a fine old place, but not extensive. The grounds were excellent in every way, and—Lee believed—well kept.

The detective had never been to the Manor before, but he knew its whereabouts. In the darkness, however, he overshot the side road by about two miles, and this caused a delay. When Lord Roper's country seat was reached, too, Lee was obliged to go very carefully.

A few cottages were dotted about, with a farm here and there. Some high, wrought-iron gates, set between a well-clipped hedge, told the detective that he had reached his destination. And glancing beyond the gates, Nelson Lee caught a glimpse of a motor-car standing before a big house.

"Oh, rats!" muttered Nipper. "We're late!"

"It can't be helped, my boy. We shall have to do a little scouting work."

But Lee did not slacken the car's pace an atom.

"I say, sir, we've passed our mark," protested Nipper. "That was Roper Manor we just—"

"Of course it was. But we couldn't stop outside the gates, could we?" asked the detective. "We don't want to give the enemy the slightest inkling that we are so close behind them. If they heard our car they will think that we are merely passing motorists."

Just on the other side of a spinny, however, Nelson Lee brought the racer to a standstill. He and Nipper jumped out, and the car was left upon the wide stretch of grass which bordered the road. Lee extinguished all the lights.

"Now, young 'un, we'll get to work," said the detective briskly.

They walked back, and at length came to the Manor gates again. The car had now disappeared, but the sound of an engine told them that the automobile was being garaged at the rear somewhere.

The house was big, and well-kept gardens surrounded it. At present there were only one or two subdued lights showing. The lawns and paths were in deep gloom. Overhead the sky was

clouded, and no wind stirred the leaves of the trees.

"What's the programme, guv'nor?" whispered Nipper.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I hardly know," was Lee's reply. "We know nothing for certain, Nipper—"

"We know that Lord Roper is here—the real Lord Roper, I mean."

"We have not seen him," exclaimed Nelson Lee. "There is only the information you overheard to work upon. That would be useless to the police. Scotland Yard could, of course, send men down to this house and raid it; but that would take time, and before it could be accomplished the enemy would remove all traces. At the best, the police could only suspect villainy. And the police, my dear Nipper, are exceedingly loth to act upon a mere suspicion—especially when that suspicion is cast upon a man of Lord Max Roper's standing. It is really essential for us to obtain positive, concrete evidence before any definite action is taken."

Nipper nodded.

"Yes, I s'pose you're right, guv'nor," he agreed. "Detectives in stories—private detectives with really no authority at all—rush in and arrest chaps without the slightest justification. But this is real life—and we can't do those sort of things. All the same, we know what the game is, don't we?"

"There is no doubt whatever that Lord Howard Roper is alive, and that he is even now in this house," declared Nelson Lee. "We are sure of that, Nipper—but it would sound an extremely tall story if we went to Scotland Yard with the information. Before we leave this place, however, I hope to be in possession of much more definite facts. If there is any chance of Lord Roper being killed by his villainous brother, well, then, of course, you and I will have to act upon our own initiative."

"That's the idea!" said Nipper heartily. "Butt in on our own, so to speak?"

"Exactly."

Nevertheless, Nelson Lee had no wish to "butt" in. Such action might mean the ruination of the whole case. The Combine was almost disbanded, but Sydney Bradford and Lord Max Roper were clever scoundrels, and if they were given the slightest inkling that Nelson Lee was on their track, they would take

steps to safeguard themselves. Therefore it was necessary to act with caution.

So Nelson Lee and Nipper softly clambered over the gate—they didn't open it, for fear of an unwelcome creak—and padded across the edge of the lawn towards the house. Once there, they scouted round with great care.

But every window was tightly closed. Two had lights behind them, but these windows were as tightly closed as the others. No sound came out to the two intruders. The rear of the house presented no better conditions.

Lee could easily have entered the building had he chosen. But that expedient would have been very unwise. The position was really very difficult, and decidedly galling. Nipper chafed tremendously under the delay, and suggested that perhaps it would be better to "butt" in after all.

Before going to this length, however, Lee made his way through a dense plantation which was situated at the rear of the house. He had a mind to get a general idea of the house and grounds. Beyond the plantation a dim building loomed against the night sky. It seemed to be in ruins, for the top edge was jagged and uneven.

After a short survey at long range, as Nipper put it, they retraced their steps into the plantation. But, quite suddenly, Nelson Lee came to a halt.

"Did you hear voices?" he whispered softly.

"No, guv'nor."

"Then remain very quiet."

They both stopped and listened intently. And now, quite distinctly on the still air, they heard the low murmur of men's voices. They seemed to be proceeding from the direction of the ruined building Nelson Lee had noticed.

"They're coming this way, sir," murmured Nipper.

"So it seems."

"Along this path, too."

"Yes. We had better crouch into the bushes," whispered Lee. "Probably a couple of Roper's servants; but we must not allow ourselves to be seen. Strictly speaking, we are trespassing, and are liable to be thrown off the premises. We don't want any unpleasantness."

They noiselessly pushed their way between some thick bushes, and waited there, completely hidden. The voices were louder now, and more distinct.

The murmur, so far blurred and thick, now resolved itself into low-spoken words.

Nelson Lee gripped Nipper's arm, as a sign to keep perfectly still.

"... anxious, Bradford," came a few snatches of words. "I wish ... sure that everything ... safe. Webster ... worrying ..."

Nipper started.

"That's Roper's voice, guv'nor!" he breathed.

"Yes. He is with Bradford. Not a sound, young 'un."

The voices were more distinct now; the men were indeed coming along the pathway towards the house.

"... need for you to be anxious, Roper," came Bradford's low voice, as he walked. "So far as I can see, we have nothing to fear."

The pair were practically passing now; their words were very distinct.

"But supposing the thing gets known—" began Roper uneasily.

"My dear fellow, we have nipped the whole affair in the bud," said Sydney Bradford. "By coming down so promptly we have prevented any awkward consequence. Howard will be safe in that place for a couple of weeks—until he can be shifted back to his proper home. There's no fear of discovery whatever. Webster is squared, and he will look after the captive."

"By gad! It's been a near shave, though!" said Lord Max. "If Howard had gone somewhere else instead of here—"

"He didn't, so there's no sense in discussing ... a good thing the other servants know nothing ... butler is ... trusted."

Nelson Lee could hear no more.

The voices became a thick, blurred murmur once more, as the speakers passed along the path, and so, out of earshot. A minute later Nelson Lee and Nipper heard a door close. Dead silence followed.

"Rather a good thing we came here, Nipper," murmured Nelson Lee calmly.

Nipper grunted.

"I don't see it," he said. "We haven't learned anything fresh—not a thing! I'm glad you heard what the rotters said, of course. You know now that we're on a dead certainty. But we don't know any more than we did."

"Don't we?" smiled Lee. "I think we do."

"How?"

"As you say, I know for a positive certainty now that Lord Howard Roper is alive, and that Max is an impudent impostor," said Lee. "But we have learned something else, Nipper. When we came here we half-feared that Max and Bradford intended adopting drastic measures—possibly murder."

"They're capable of it!" commented Nipper grimly.

"Quite. But they do not intend to go to such terrible lengths," went on the great detective. "As we now know, they are going to keep Lord Howard imprisoned somewhere on this property—imprisoned for a week or two, until he can be shifted back to his 'proper home.' That means that there is no particular hurry."

Nipper nodded slowly.

"Yes, that's right enough," he said. "What's to be done, sir?"

"Nothing—to-night."

"Oh, that's rotten!" protested Nipper. "Do you mean to say that we've come down here for nothing?"

"Certainly not; we have gained a piece of very useful information," was Lee's reply. "My dear lad, it would be foolish to rush things. We have plenty of time. If we blundered ahead to-night we should probably achieve no good purpose—but would, on the other hand, warn the enemy."

"Then we're going back to London," asked Nipper glumly.

"Exactly. Strictly speaking, this is Miss Eileen's affair—it is one of her special cases. Surely you would not dream of taking the matter out of her hands, Nipper?" smiled Nelson Lee, with a twinkle. "You know how eagerly she will listen to your story—"

"By Jupiter! So she will!" said Nipper, recovering his spirits. "And it is her 'game' right enough. Besides, we can plan things thoroughly, can't we? We know that Lord Howard is here—but he might be in the collar, or the attic, or an outhouse, or hidden in a wood—or anywhere. We can't explore the whole giddy property to-night, can we? You're dead right, guv'nor—as usual. This affair must be planned very carefully."

Nelson Lee smiled again.

"And Miss Eileen must take a hand in it, if she wants to," he remarked.

"I should say so!" was Nipper's emphatic statement.

The lad realised the wisdom of Nelson Lee's decision. Nothing could be accomplished to-night—nothing further, at least their trip had been well worth while, and it now remained for them to acquaint Eileen Dare with the news, and then make plans for the exposing of the scoundrelly imposture.

Lee couldn't inform the police even; he had no direct evidence to offer them. A search of the premises would probably prove futile. Lord Max Roper and Sydney Bradford were astute, and they would certainly take every precaution against a surprise. They had no inkling that the whole scheme had leaked out—owing to Nipper's smartness—but they would, nevertheless, remain on their guard.

Accordingly, a swift return to London was the order.

Lee and Nipper arrived late. Eileen was probably anxious to hear news, for she had heard nothing whatever of Nipper's adventures. He had left the New Elite Cinema during the evening, and had been on the go ever since.

Eileen and Aunt Esther, of course, had gone home. The girl-detective was probably still awake, concerned as to Nipper's safety. She had sent him off after Lord Max Roper, and she knew that Nipper was a "sticker." He might have got into all sorts of perils.

So the first thing Nipper did on arrival home, was to ring up Eileen's number. He hoped, and expected, to receive an answer. Eileen would hardly have gone to bed; or, if she had, the telephone would be near her.

Nipper's expectation was realised, for Eileen answered at once. She was delighted to hear that Nipper was all serene, as he himself put it. He told her that he and the guv'nor would be round in the morning immediately after breakfast, as there was important news to tell.

True to Nipper's promise, the pair presented themselves at Eileen's flat a little after nine o'clock. The sun was shining hotly, and the streets were dusty and parched. The summer day promised to be a regular scorcher.

Nelson Lee smiled at Eileen's eagerness. Her delighted brown eyes were shining gloriously; her whole attitude and manner eloquent of her inward emotion and excitement.

"Oh, I know you've brought splendid news!" she said confidently.

"Right on the wicket, Miss Eileen!" was Nipper's cheerful reply. "Unless I'm mistaken, you'll be able to wipe Lord Max and Sydney Bradford off the map with one blow. They've laid themselves open to direct attack."

The lad told of his adventures; and Nelson Lee followed up this recital by a description of the happenings at Roper Manor. Eileen Dare was highly elated, and expressed her intention of following the affair up at once.

"How will you get to work, miss?" asked Nipper eagerly.

Eileen puckered her pretty forehead.

"Lord Howard is somewhere at Roper Manor," she said thoughtfully. "We don't know where he is being kept. Don't you think it would be a good idea for me to go down there—as a lady artist, say—and do some scouting? Once I find positive evidence, we can act."

"It'll be risky," began Nipper doubtfully.

"Haven't I undertaken risky projects before?" smiled Eileen. "Besides, I shall be able to communicate with Mr. Lee, Nipper, and you'll both rush down to my aid, if I need it."

"On the instant!" declared Nelson Lee quietly.

"The best thing will be for me to disguise myself a little, and then travel down to Roper Manor—or the village near by, at least," said the girl detective. "I can develop my plans when I'm there. You'll let me do this, won't you, Mr. Lee?"

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"How can I prevent you?" he asked. "I really think, too, that your plan is the best. You will not be suspected if Roper gets to know of your presence in the neighbourhood. There are plenty of lady artists in Surrey at this time of the year, I believe."

And so, after a long consultation, everything was arranged. Nipper had done his part, Nelson Lee had helped, and now Eileen Dare was anxious to take an active hand in the game.

CHAPTER IV.

EILEEN, GIRL GARDENER—DOWN IN THE VAULTS—EVENTS MOVE QUICKLY.

EILEEN met with splendid success. Her enterprise prospered from the very first moment. That very same evening the girl detective found herself in the village of Rathley, in the heart of the Surrey hills. Roper Manor lay nearly a mile beyond.

Eileen was slightly disguised. Her hair was coiffured quite differently to usual, and she wore pince-nez. A deft touch here and there, too, did much to alter her general appearance.

She had come down just for the evening, ostensibly intending to leave again for London by a later train. She was just an ordinary amateur lady water-colour painter, on the look-out for a few pretty scenes.

While roaming idly about the village, however, she was making all sorts of inquiries. She asked if it was permissible to paint on the Roper Manor Estate, and was told that Lord Max did not allow strangers there. The old village folk shook their heads, and said that Lord Max wasn't like his elder brother, who had been gone these five years, poor soul. It had been a sad day for Rathley when Lord Howard had been taken off. Max was not popular in any way, and Eileen was not in the least surprised to hear that.

It was after bidding good-bye to an old lady—the wife of the oldest inhabitant, Eileen believed—that she saw two girls swinging along the dusty lane. The spot was just on the outskirts of the village. The girls were coming along with easy, healthy strides.

They were both young—about Eileen's own age—and were attired in short, servicable skirts and high boots. Their coats were free and easy, with blouses that were open at the neck. They looked in the pink of condition, and were laughing and chatting merrily as they walked.

Eileen paused as they were about to pass.

"You'll excuse me, won't you?" she said, smiling. "Do you know if it's possible for me to find any pretty scenes—for painting, I mean—along this road? I don't want to trudge out of the village if there is nothing worth while."

The two girls halted, and looked Eileen over with true feminine interest.

"Why, there are plenty of perfectly sweet spots along by the Manor grounds,"

said one of the girls readily. "There's one in particular. Don't you remember, Phyllis? That little dell by the river?"

"Oh, yes!" said the other girl. "That would make a lovely picture. But I'm afraid this young lady wouldn't be permitted to go there. Lord Max is a bit of a rotter, you know, Ethel. I often feel like pulling his nose when he comes interfering with our work. He doesn't know a thing about gardening!"

The two girls laughed, and Eileen joined in.

"I have heard of the Manor," she said. "It belongs to Lord Max Roper, doesn't it?"

"He's our boss," said Phyllis, smiling.

"Oh, you work at the Manor?" asked Eileen quickly.

"We're the new-fashioned gardeners!" exclaimed Ethel, with a light-hearted little laugh. "War-time gardeners, you know. All the men have gone, so we're filling their places. It's not bad fun, is it, Phyl?"

Eileen was immensely pleased. This was a remarkable piece of luck. These two girls were gardeners at the Manor! Eileen felt that she would do well to cultivate their acquaintance a little more intimately. They were both jolly, refined-looking girls—not in the least common. City typists, probably, who preferred to spend the summer months in the country, doing light, profitable work. It was like a continual holiday for them, and they were earning good money.

Eileen decided quickly, and went straight to the point.

"Are you living in the village?" she asked.

"Yes, we've got a sweet little cottage all to ourselves," said Phyllis. "It's an awfully cute little place, and we have a ripping time. The rent is perfectly ridiculous, and we've——"

"Don't be so silly, Phyllis!" interrupted the other girl. "This young lady isn't interested in our cottage."

"But I am!" said Eileen quickly. "I am thinking of staying in Rathley for a week or two, and I simply can't stay at the inn, can I? You see, I'm all alone. I was wondering if one of the cottager's would take me in, but now that I've met you——"

"Mrs. Higson, a little way from us, would be glad to have you," said Ethel.

"But I was hoping that you'd like to have me," smiled Eileen.

"Oh!"

The two girls exchanged glances; then

they looked at Eileen with much greater interest. They could see, at a glance, that Eileen was a lady, and that she was apparently well supplied with cash. Those girls had an eye to business.

"Why, of course!" cried Ethel gaily. "There's a little spare bedroom, isn't there, Phyllis? We could easily shift one of our beds into it, and you and I could muddle through——"

"I don't want to put you out at all," smiled Eileen.

"You'll certainly put us out of one of the beds if you stay with us!" laughed Phyllis. "But that doesn't matter. We should be glad to have you, I'm sure. I am awfully keen on painting, and I should just love to watch you at work."

"I'll tell you what," said the other girl. "Let's go along to our cottage and talk things over. Mrs. Higson will have tea ready by now—the old lady looks after us, you know," she added to Eileen. "You'll come to tea, won't you?"

"It's very good of you!" said Eileen gladly.

To tell the truth, she was feeling highly elated. Already a scheme was taking shape in her fertile brain. Eileen was very quick to seize an opportunity, and she saw that a splendid field was opened before her. She must certainly persuade these two nice girls to take her in as a boarder.

The cottage wasn't far off, but before it was reached Eileen learned quite a lot. Her two new friends were—as she had suspected—City girl-clerks. They had seen an advertisement for two girl assistant gardeners, and had thrown up their London office work. They were getting higher wages at their present work, and thoroughly enjoyed the life. It wasn't like farm work. As one of the girls said, they practically did as they liked when Lord Max wasn't down—and his lordship only came for week-ends now and again, generally accompanied by questionable people.

Phyllis Earle and Ethel Middleton were refined girls, and Eileen knew that she would be able to get on with them. Meeting with them had been a splendid stroke of fortune.

Their cottage was a dear little creeper-covered place. Mrs. Higson, who lived a short distance away, looked after the cottage for the girls, and generally made herself useful. Eileen found her to be a wizened old soul, good-tempered and motherly. A splendid tea was prepared in the cottage parlour.

Eileen enjoyed that meal very much, for she was genuinely hungry. After tea she and the other girls discussed business. And in a very short time everything was arranged. Eileen was to stay at the cottage for a couple of weeks, and she agreed to pay a handsome sum for her board and lodging. The figure was named by herself, and she was pleased when Phyllis and Ethel protested that it was too much. The girls were not money-grabbers.

And Eileen came to a decision. She was a keen judge of character, and she saw that her two friends were girls of good upbringing, and were to be trusted. Eileen resolved to trust them.

Certain alterations were made in the bedrooms. There were two in the cottage, and one had been disused. Mrs. Higson came to the rescue with a little bedstead, and this was set up in no time. Very soon Eileen's bedroom presented a dainty, homely appearance, and she was delighted.

And in the cool of the evening the three girls sat in the little parlour. Phyllis and Ethel had changed into muslin frocks, and now, more than ever, Eileen could see that they were refined in every way.

"This is jolly, Miss Robinson!" declared Phyllis. "I'm ever so glad you came. You'll let me see you painting to-morrow, won't you? I'm as keen as anything to see how you get on. I love water-colours."

Eileen had given her name as "Pauline Robinson." Much as she was willing to trust her new friends, it would have been unwise to give them her real name. If Lord Max chanced to hear it, all her scheming would be of no avail.

"I'm afraid I can't paint much, Miss Earle," smiled Eileen.

"Oh, I say, I don't believe you!" laughed the other. "And don't call me 'Miss Earle,' please. We're all girls together, and it would be silly to be formal, wouldn't it? I'm going to call you Pauline, anyhow—although it may be impudent!"

Eileen laughed musically.

"Please do," she said, suddenly becoming serious. "I am going to tell you something that will surprise you. But I'm not going to tell you the whole truth. You see, I'm quite frank. If you agree, you'll have to wait in patience for the whole story until I can be quite open with you."

"Why, whatever do you mean?" asked Ethel Middleton.

"I am not a painter at all," replied Eileen quietly. "I am here, in Rathley, because I want to expose Lord Max Roper in his true colours. He is a scoundrel, and I mean to show him up!"

"There!" cried Ethel. "Didn't I tell you, Phyllis? I knew that Lord Max was a wicked man! Oh, I'm so interested! What has he done, Miss Robinson? I'll help you all I can, because I simply hate him. He insulted me horribly a week ago, and I swore to leave at once if he did anything like it again. He—he tried to kiss me, and then——"

"Oh, don't talk of that, Ethel!" interrupted the other girl. "Thank goodness Lord Max isn't often down here! We're really employed by old Elliott, the head gardener," she added, turning to Eileen. "Elliott's an old darling—quite sixty-five—and he really engaged us. Lord Max doesn't take any interest in the Manor at all."

Eileen was relieved. She had broken the ice, and the girls were interested and keen. Eileen had feared that they would eye her with suspicion when she told them that she was anxious to strike a blow at their employer.

"What I am going to do—or attempt to—will make no difference to your positions at the Manor," she said quietly. "If I am successful, there will be a change; but it will be for the better. Lord Max Roper is a rogue, and I want to find out a certain thing. He was instrumental in causing my father's death," added Eileen, with a little sigh. "I will tell you everything very soon."

"Oh, you poor dear!" exclaimed Phyllis tenderly.

Both the girls knew that Eileen was sincere—that she was not acting a part. And they were full of concern. Strangely enough, the trio were on the very best of terms already. And Eileen explained her idea in a few words.

"I want to take the place of one of you," she said quietly. "Can we arrange it? I will, of course, pay you."

"Don't talk of that now," said Phyllis. "You can take my place if you like. But how do you propose to manage it? Old Elliott may not like an alteration, and we should have to tell him, of course."

Eileen bent forward.

"Supposing you fell ill to-morrow morning?" she suggested. "Supposing you pretended to be unwell, and fell to

the ground? Ethel could bring you home. And you could arrange with Elliott for a substitute—a girl-friend of yours—to take your place while you were getting well again. If Elliott agreed, I could go back with Ethel in the afternoon and commence work. I should be one of the gardeners for the time being, and that would enable me to make my investigations."

"Oh, it's a lovely idea!" cried Phyllis, clapping her hands.

The girls regarded the whole thing as a splendid piece of excitement, and they fell in with Eileen's plan without hesitation. It would be absurd to state that Phyllis was not attracted by the reward Eileen offered—because she was. This was only natural. And, before bed-time came, everything was settled.

Eileen had said just enough. She made no mystery of anything. Mystery would have given rise to suspicion—and that would have been fatal. The girl detective handled the rather difficult problem with superb skill, and her companions were with her, heart and soul. Somehow, Eileen compelled them to believe in her. She was greatly assisted in her project by the fact that Lord Max was cordially hated by the girls, and that he had actually insulted Phyllis in a cadish manner. The girl was only too anxious to see him humiliated and exposed.

The scheme worked like a charm.

Phyllis played her part excellently, and Elliott, the head gardener, at once agreed to accept "Miss Robinson" as a substitute until Phyllis was better. The old man liked his girl assistants, and was ready to oblige them. He was glad to obtain a substitute, too, for important gardening work was in progress.

So, after Phyllis had been taken home by Ethel, Eileen commenced her duties. Ethel took her back to the Manor, and old Elliott was greatly pleased. To tell the honest truth, Eileen was a better worker than Phyllis, and knew much more of gardening. Elliott was by no means sorry for the change.

Lord Max Roper was not in the country, and he knew nothing of the alteration. Even if he had been at the Manor, he would have taken no notice. Elliott was in supreme command of the garden, and it was his duty to engage whom he chose. He did not want to be bothered with a girl who had to be kept in the house. Elliott's place to do the work was done properly

And so Eileen Dare became a girl gardener.

She was actually in the service of a member of the Combine! It was a curious position, and she wondered how long it would be before she achieved her object. She hoped to get on the track quickly.

But two days passed without any success.

In that time, however, Eileen had become familiar with every inch of the Manor grounds. The ruined building Nelson Lee had spoken of was an old chapel, which had at one time, been connected with the Manor House. The latter was ancient, and had been rebuilt more than once. But the chapel was nothing but an ivy-clad ruin, and possessed an interesting history.

A portion of it was now used for the prosaic purpose of stabling a horse. There were splendid stables attached to the Manor, of course, but Eileen soon learned the reason for this incongruous state of affairs.

The horse had contracted an infectious disease, and had therefore been placed in quarantine. The animal was isolated from his fellows. Every morning and evening Webster, the butler, visited the chapel, and took food and medicines for the ailing steed. Nobody else was allowed near the place.

On Eileen's third day she wandered near to the ruin, and received a surprise. Webster came hurrying towards her, full of concern. He told her, rather sharply, to keep away from the chapel. The horse was worse, and nobody was to approach the temporary stable. The disease was infectious, even to human beings.

Eileen promptly retreated, but the incident found a place in her busy mind. But it was not long before the significance of the butler's action struck her with full force.

Nobody was allowed near the ruin! Webster went there, night and morning, with food! Not even the groom himself was permitted to see the ailing horse—much to his indignation. And the animal had only been ill a few days.

"It's a trick!" Eileen told herself. "Of course—of course! Poor Horace is being kept a prisoner in the chapel—it is as clear as light. Webster is in the plot, and takes the captive food. The horse is

probably as well as I am myself. It is all a trick!"

The girl was sure that she had learned the exact whereabouts of the prisoner.

But she could not act—yet. The ruin was inaccessible by daylight, and after dark it was equally impossible to approach it. For a savage dog was kept there, and he would allow nobody within fifty yards of the place without creating a fearful uproar. He was undoubtedly a fine guardian. Eileen, who had hoped to explore the ruin after nightfall, found that the plan was impossible. She would be detected at once. And the dog's presence there convinced her, more than ever, that Lord Howard was within the ruin. Indeed, the truth was absolutely obvious.

And the next night events moved rapidly.

Eileen had been thinking of sending to Nelson Lee. The great detective, perhaps, would find a means of entering the ruin. Once Lord Howard was discovered, the rest would be simple.

But, before leaving off work in the evening, Eileen learned that Lord Max and Sir Sydney Bradford, his great friend, were expected down at the Manor that night. They would probably arrive at about nine o'clock by motor-car.

It was, in fact, just before nine when the car drove in at the big wrought-iron gates. Its occupants little imagined that this was to be their last night of liberty!

For the hour of disaster was perilously near.

CHAPTER V.

CAPTURED!—NELSON LEE RECEIVES A TELEGRAM—ACTION—CONCLUSION.

A DIM form stood quite still against a clump of bushes, midway between the big house and the ruined chapel.

The form belonged to Eileen Dare—and it was a trim, shapely form, too. The girl looked very fine in Phyllis Earle's gardening costume.

For an hour past she had been on the watch.

That evening she had returned to Rathley as usual, and had told her two friends that she would be absent for some time. She had sallied out in the dusk, and had arrived back at the Manor a few minutes before Lord Max and Bradford arrived.

Since then she had been waiting—waiting for action.

It was now after ten o'clock, and the grounds of the big house were in total darkness.

And then, at a quarter past ten, Eileen heard voices.

Three men had come out of the house, and were approaching her. All unknowingly, Eileen was almost on the identical spot that had been occupied by Nelson Lee and Nipper nearly a week earlier.

The men came closer, and Eileen was able to hear spoken words. For some reason the trio had come to a halt.

"Oh, I've just remembered," came Bradford's voice. "That infernal dog is guarding the chapel, isn't it, Webster?"

"Yes, sir. It was necessary——"

"Of course it was necessary—but it's not necessary now," said Bradford. "If we all approach the chapel the brute will kick up a frightful din. We don't want the servants in the house to know anything if we can help it."

Then Eileen heard Lord Roper's voice.

"That's right enough, Webster," he exclaimed. "You go on alone, and fetch the dog away. Lock him in the garage for the time being!"

"Very good, your lordship."

Eileen saw the butler pass her. Presently he came back, leading a big, vicious-looking dog. Three minutes later Roper, Bradford, and Webster passed. The dog was out of the way.

Without hesitation she broke from cover and followed in the rear of the three men. They went straight to the old ruin; Eileen's suspicions had been correct. She had deliberately waited in the bushes beside the path because she had felt convinced that her enemies would, sooner or later, visit their victim.

The chapel was a complete ruin in most respects; but one portion, furthest from the house, presented an appearance of solidity. At one time there had been a smaller room added to the main building—probably a couple of hundred years ago, for the newer stonework was as ivy-covered as all the rest.

But this small room was practically intact. The roof was flat, and was still weatherproof. All the rest of the roof had simply disappeared in the course of time. And it was in this place that the ailing horse was kept. There was a heavy door, and this was kept locked.

There were two slits of window, far from the ground, and too narrow for the passage of a human being.

Eileen had been wise to act promptly. For it was quite obvious that the old ruin was not being used for the mere purpose of stabling a diseased horse. In addition to the door being kept locked, the fierce dog had been placed on guard constantly. Lord Howard Roper was certainly here!

The girl saw Bradford and his companions enter the chapel. And she observed another point. The old oaken door had been recently repaired; and it was fitted with a patent lock! A stable with a patent lock was something of a novelty—especially a stable of this extraordinary type.

Eileen acted impulsively and without hesitation. She guessed that the door would be tightly closed, and then there would be no chance whatever of her hearing or seeing what occurred within. She was close behind her quarry, and she saw the three men pause in the little building to light a hurricane lamp.

Then Lord Max gave the door a kick and swung it to. Eileen, who was just outside, shot out her foot. The door snapped, but the girl's sudden movement just prevented the lock from snapping.

And Lord Max did not notice that the door was still unfastened. For he had turned his back at once, and Eileen heard some curious sounds. She could see nothing, because it would have been fatal to open the door immediately.

The men's whispered voices came to her in a blur, and she could distinguish no words. The horse was a little restive, and moved his feet constantly. But presently Eileen could detect no other sound save this. The men had either gone, or else they were silent.

Cautiously, very cautiously, Eileen pressed the door open and gazed within. The old ruin was in total darkness! Where had the men gone? Eileen knew well enough that there was no other exit of any sort—at least into the open.

Without a pause she pulled out a tiny electric torch from one of her pockets, and switched it on. Then she moved forward with a little gasp of understanding. At the far end of the old room a great slab of stone had been raised, and a narrow flight of steps lay revealed.

There were secret vaults—and Lord Howard was a prisoner there!

Eileen was very glad that the supposedly ailing horse was with her. Any slight noise she had made would have been attributed to the animal. Listening intently, Eileen could hear nothing.

So, gripping her teeth together firmly, she slowly and noiselessly descended the steps. They led down spirally—and this proved to be the girl's undoing. She could not see any distance down the stairway, owing to the constant twist.

And, quite abruptly, she found herself in total darkness. The torch had been knocked from her hand, and rough, cruel hands were gripping her tightly. She was in the hands of the enemy!

Eileen did not even struggle, for she knew that her position was really hopeless. Oh, how silly she had been to venture down those steps! She realised now that she had acted somewhat rashly in her eagerness to explore.

And she was taken through the darkness, along earthy, dank passages.

But Eileen had not been so foolish as to walk into the enemy's hands without having previously made certain arrangements. She had half-feared that she would be made a prisoner if she carried her investigation far enough.

Before leaving the cottage in Rathley she had arranged with her two girl friends to receive Nelson Lee and Nipper when they arrived. For Eileen had dispatched a telegram to the great detective asking him to come down. Previously, by letter, she had told him that she was staying at the little cottage under the name of Pauline Robinson.

That telegram had reached Nelson Lee's rooms in Gray's Inn Road at just about a quarter past nine.

As it happened, Nelson Lee and Nipper were out, but they arrived home twenty minutes later.

"Hallo! A wire!" exclaimed Nipper. Lee tore the envelope open, and whistled. The telegram had been handed in at Rathley, Surrey, and contained merely the one word—"Come!"

From that second things began to move rapidly. Nelson Lee and Nipper were off in their racing-car in five minutes. They did not immediately rush out of London, but stopped at Scotland Yard to fetch Detective-Inspector Fuller and two other C.I.D. men. Lee merely explained that there was something very big on, and that was quite sufficient for Fuller.

The party arrived in Rathley when the little village was asleep. But a light glowed dimly in one window—the window of the cottage occupied by Phyllis Earle and Ethel Middleton.

Both the girls were up and lively. They had been told to expect strangers, and had also been given certain instructions. If Eileen had not returned by eleven o'clock, they were to tell Mr. Lee to raid Roper Manor.

The time was now after eleven, and there was only one thing to be done. Eileen had not turned up, and it looked as though there was trouble.

At express speed the car rushed along the country road to the Manor. Lee had decided to act boldly. The car drove right in, and came to a halt before the imposing steps in front of the house. Nelson Lee led the "attack" by performing a brisk tattoo upon the door-knocker. The detective was prepared to burst the door down, but almost at once it was opened—by Webster.

At the sight of the grim party which confronted him he collapsed. He knew at once that they were police. He had been expecting them—dreading them—every hour of every day. The man simply shivered as he stood, and then one of the Yard men was forced to support him. Sick with fright, he stuttered out that his master and Sydney Bradford were in the old chapel vaults. And, quite abruptly, Webster became fierce.

"I've done with them!" he gasped hoarsely. "There's a girl they've got there—they captured her while I was with them! They're going to kill her, they say, and they expect me to keep quiet. They'll kill me if I don't! I've done with them—I'm not a man to stand by and see a helpless woman——"

"I don't think this chap's much use!" interjected the inspector. "He's just a tool. We'd better be quick, Mr. Lee!"

But Nelson Lee and Nipper had already dashed off at full speed for the ruined chapel. They found the door locked, but two shots from Lee's revolver demolished it completely. The poor horse within was frightened, but remained still. Nelson Lee and Nipper dashed past, and found themselves at the top of the winding stairs.

"I'll go first, guv'nor!" said Nipper.

"No! Stop where you are, lad!"

They both paused, and, quite clearly,

they heard the sound of hurried footsteps. Lord Max Roper and Sydney Bradford had heard the crash of the door, and were hurrying up to investigate. As they came up they were captured with perfect ease.

The coup was completely successful.

Lord Max Roper and Sydney Bradford were caught red-handed. Down below, at the foot of the stairs, Eileen Dare was found with her hands and feet bound together. She explained that the two scoundrels had actually planned to cast her into a disused well beneath the chapel vaults. It had been an act of desperation, for Eileen's presence had sent Max and Bradford into a furious panic.

Nelson Lee had arrived in the nick of time. In one of the vaults Lord Howard Roper was discovered. He was in no way harmed, and was quite cheerful when rescued. He seemed mildly surprised, but in no way astonished. He acted as though he were a helpless child.

The whole scoundrelly plot was revealed, and it was quite certain that Max and Bradford were doomed to long terms of penal servitude. By a strange trick of chance they had been exposed when safety seemed assured.

Later on an operation was performed upon the rescued man—an operation which turned out to be entirely successful. Lord Howard Roper became himself once more, and the country was provided with a mild sensation.

Incidentally, Dr. Hugo Starke was arrested and charged with taking part in the conspiracy. And Eileen's two girl friends, Phyllis and Ethel, were handsomely rewarded.

Lord Howard Roper returned to the Manor, and great was the rejoicing in the surrounding villages. For Howard was a totally different man to his scoundrelly brother. His most welcome guests were Eileen Dare, Nelson Lee, and Nipper.

Eileen was highly elated.

Once more she had been successful. The Combine was virtually smashed. There only remained Roger Haverfield upon her grim list. Haverfield was the man who had originally instigated the dastardly plot against Eileen's father.

And Roger Haverfield should be the last to meet his deserts!

GRAND NEW SERIAL—STARTS TO-DAY.

The Boxing Sailor

A STORY OF THE RING AND LIFE IN THE NAVY.

By ARTHUR S. HARDY.

SEA LIONS.

WHY, blow me, if it ain't the **Flyer!**"

"You're wrong, Bill!"

"Not me. I'd know that ship anywhere. It's the **Flyer**. I'll stake my **Alfred Davy** on it. And she's crippled like a bloke with a wooden leg. But what's it matter, skipper, when she's bringing your boy 'ome?"

The speaker, **William Riley**, mate of the fishing smack **Elsie Jane**, beamed on **Thomas Crawley**, the master of that trim little vessel, as he spoke, and winked, and laughed knowingly.

The skipper had his eyes focussed on the advancing vessels, for there were two of them, one towing the other, and both of them destroyers, and replied to the mate's sally with a grunt.

The vessels had passed the harbour's mouth, and now the cable was cast off, and the crippled ship astern swung onward by her own momentum while the other swerved aside. Into the great harbour of **Weathersea** the lamed warship slowly moved, with something of gracefulness left her still, though her bows had been flattened like the nose of a bulldog, and at last she anchored near the entrance of a dry dock into which she would later be moved to undergo repairs.

Then, in due course, from her sides boats were dropped, and breezy seamen within them, laughing and shouting in their glee, were pulled towards the steps and landing stages.

Work had been suspended aboard the **Elsie Jane** when these proceedings were going forward. Skipper, mate, first hand, second hand, and third didn't want upon the side, and eagerly watched the life and movement aboard the **Flyer**, the second hand being embodied in the graceful and charming personality of a decidedly prepossessing girl whose outskins and sou'wester suited her admirably.

"There's Tom!" said the girl ex-

citedly, as somebody waved from the distant **Flyer**, and she waved back again, while the skipper smiled grimly.

As she saw the boats being pulled across the harbour, the girl's face beamed. And when one of them turned towards the **Elsie Jane**, at the request of a sailor lad aboard her, she uttered a glad cry, and clapped her hands.

The boat grated against the side of the fishing-smack, a rope was thrown down and held, and an instant later, shouting a word of thanks to his pals who had done him this service, a lithe, active, and boyish figure scrambled hastily upwards and deposited itself on the deck of the **Elsie Jane**.

"Hello, dad!" said the seaman, flinging himself into the skipper's arms. "Fancy meeting you first go! Hello, Bill, old feller! Hello, Sambo!" to the boy. "And how are you, Mary, my dear?" reserving his greeting of the second hand to the last. "I never expected to see you, and aboard dad's ship, too! Here, give us a kiss," and, in spite of the second hand's cries and remonstrances, he caught hold of her, and took not only one kiss, but half-a-dozen, while master and crew looked grinning on.

"Well, you are——," said Mary, re-adjusting herself, her face crimson, her eyes flashing fire; and to punish him for his impertinence she gave him a smack across the cheek which only made him laugh the more. But somehow she didn't look altogether displeased.

"What's Mary doing aboard the **Elsie Jane**, dad?" asked Tom Crawley, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, while he took a good look round.

"Men are scarce to get. The U boats are givin' us a bad time. Army, Navy, shipyards, and munitions works have swallowed all the able chaps. Tommy, lad. And so Mary's doing National Service aboard the **Elsie Jane** as second hand along o' me."

"How's all at home, father?"
 "Grand, boy. Never bin better."
 "Any Zeppe over lately?"
 "No, and when they do come we'll pepper 'em."

"How's Bob Randle?"
 "Oh, helping his father."
 "Not gorn yet?" said the perky little sailor-boy, with withering scorn. "I thought not. He's a one to do his duty, he is."

"He's exempted," observed the father, and then he added, wishful to change the conversation, "Oh, I say, Tom, there's bin lots of promoters and London boxing agents down here after you. You could have earned some money if the Service hadn't wanted yer. That's the best of having beaten a boxing champion."

The diminutive Tom Crawley, who didn't look big enough or strong enough to hurt a fly, swaggered in conscious pride.

"I'll beat some more yet, dad," he cried. And if ever you're hard up for a bit o' brass, don't forget to make a call on your son Tom."

Then a thought flashed across his mind, and he observed sulkily:

"Have you seen Bob Randle lately?"

"I have," answered Mary.

"Bob's walkin' out with 'er," explained the fisherman.

Then Tom Crawley's face flushed.

"Let me catch him at it—let me only catch him at it," said he, "and I'll knock him into the middle of next week. He can use his dooks a bit, and he's a sight heavier and stronger than I am, but I can give him a bit to go on with, and I'll do it."

RIVALS.

THE destroyer *Eber* having gone to dock for repairs, her crew were given leave of absence, but had to hold themselves ready for an emergency call at any moment. As most of them were Weatherssea men, they remained in the seething seaport town whose streets day and night were thronged with soldiers, sailors, and dock-yards men, and a place where the awful business of war made itself daily felt.

Tom Crawley, bantam weight boxer, with his pay in his pocket, and full of animal spirits, laid himself out for a jolly good time.

He rounded up such of his old pals as remained, frequented the favourite boxing halls, made a fuss of his mother, and gave Mary, whenever she was free, the time of her life.

Tom was only a boy, a little chap with a funny face, and a crop of red hair, who was half-way through his sixteenth year.

He had grown up as much as he was ever likely to grow up, people said, and was a curious mixture of man and child.

He was very fond of Mary, though love had never entered his head, and very jealous of her. He was fond, too, of Fisherman Thwaites, her father, who ran a mine-sweeper, of Mrs. Thwaites, and of big Fred Thwaites, whom the Army had claimed and taken to France.

A day or two passed away, and then Tom Crawley discovered grounds for boyish jealousy where Mary was concerned. He asked Mary to go with him to a picture palace one night, but it was early closing, and she confessed that she had a prior appointment with Bob Randle.

"With him?" cried Tom angrily, for Bob, a nice fellow enough, had always somehow managed to get Tom's goat. "Well, give it up. You've got to. You've to come with me."

Mary arched her pretty eyebrows, flashed her eyes, and shook her pretty head.

"No, Tom," she cried. "Fair's fair. Bob was kind to me while you were at sea, and I haven't seen him since you came home. He's free to-night. I won't let him down. I won't. You shdn't like me to give you the go-by were you."

Tom took no notice of that. He argued, entreated, threatened, pouted his lips sulkily, and then said, finding that she was adamant:

"All right, I'll wait outside and punch his head." And he looked as if he would do it, too.

"If you do," threatened Mary, "I'll never speak to you again, Tom."

Tom didn't mind. Mary had often said that. Sometimes she'd acted upon the threat—for a bit. But they had always made it up.

"If a proper, full-fledged A.B. can't lick a tuppenny-halfpenny grocer who's dodging military service," he pronounced, "sell me to the Kaiser!" And he walked away with jealousy like the fumes of rich wine swimming in his head and vengeance swelling in his heart.

"If I meet him with her, I'll smash him," was his final resolution; and in order to carry his threat into execution he called on Mary's mother after dinner, and discovered that Mary and Bob Randle had gone to the Silver Cinema in Beach Street.

When the Silver Cinema discharged its crowd of eager enthusiasts into a thoroughfare plunged in Zeppelin darkness that night, Tom Crawley was waiting at the foot of the steps, with two or three of his pals from the Flyer, to keep him company and also to see fair play.

Mary had warned Bob Randle of possible trouble, but Bob had laughed at her fears.

"Tom and I are old pals," he declared, "and I haven't seen him since the Flyer was docked. He wouldn't raise his hand to hurt me."

And so he ignored Mary's request that they should leave by the side-door, and go back home by way of the by-streets.

And as a result he bundled into Tom just as he and Mary, who was hanging on to his arm, got free of the thinning crowd.

"Hello, Tom!" said Bob Randle, a tall, good-looking fellow in civilian's attire, who wore an armlet on his arm. "How are you?"

Mary drew apart with a low cry of "Don't, Tom."

"When are you going to join the Army, shirker?" asked Tom, his eyes blazing with indignation. "Sh'd have thought you'd have wanted something better to do than run about after Miss Thwaites——"

"Tom, don't be foolish," said Bob Randle, with an attempt at frankness which deserved a better reward than it got. "Look here——"

"Take your coat off!" shouted Tom, dancing round his rival. "I told Mary Thwaites—I'd knock your head off, and I'm going to do it——"

"Really, Tom, I—— This is hardly—look here——"

He got no further, for Tom, dancing in, planted his left fairly and squarely on the nose, then upper-cut the grocer's son with a beautiful right, next made a move for the body with both hands, so that the civilian had perforce to draw hurriedly back, whip off his overcoat, throw it on the pavement, and fight back.

He towered over the ubiquitous little sailor, and held himself nicely, too. Crawley, urged on by his pals, no sooner saw that Bob Randle meant fight, than he plunged into the thick of the fray.

It was dark, and so swift were their movements that one could hardly follow them. First Randle staggered backwards, then Tom gave ground, but the active little sailor was the quicker, and most of the effective blows fell to his share.

Mary screamed. The men from the Flyer roared encouragement to their champion. Tommies and fishermen came running along the street eager not to miss the fun, and in the midst of the trouble up came a bobby and a big red-faced man, who, ignoring the presence of the representative of law and order, began to marshal the crowd so as to form a ring.

"Give 'em plenty of room—don't crowd 'em—bless their hearts, let 'em have it out," said the red-faced man. "Nothing like a good stand-up fight when two lads has got a grievance."

Unhappily for him, the bobby stopped it, and as other well-intentioned persons also intervened, the belligerents postponed their activities to some future occasion, breathing defiance at each other the while.

And then the red-faced man recognised them both.

"What, Bob Randle—what ho, Tom Crawley, my old sports!" he cried. "Well, here is a lark! If you want to have a fight nice and comfy, why not patronise the old Ring, and give Dan Simmons a chance?"

"Dan!" cried Tom Crawley, rushing up to the red-faced man, and wringing him by the hand. "Eh, Dan. Here, will you give us a fight at your old boxing hall?"

"Yes. Next Saturday night, if you like; or Monday matinee."

"Give me next Saturday," shouted the pugilistic Jack Tar. "Here, Bob, are you game to face me in public in Dan Simmons's ring?"

The grocer's son wiped his lips, and answered quietly.

"Yes," said he, "but it'll have to be at ten o'clock—I'm busy in the shop till nine——"

"Ten o'clock—last fight," said Dan Simmons, clinching the bargain on the spot. "I'll have special bills printed announcing the attraction. and I'll put

you up a decent purse, I give you my word."

Tom then turned to Mary, his boyish face appeased.

"I did what I promised," said he, with a smile. "Now, Mary, let me see you home."

But Mary was angry with him. She snatched her arm away.

"No," she said; "I'm going home with Bob."

Bob Randle was in no way cowed. He drew Mary aside, and they hurried away together.

"Wait till I meet him at Dan Simmons's," growled the pugnacious sailor-boy, "and I'll skin him."

Which ferocious threat was uttered to keep his fighting spirits up until he met the luckless Bob in Dan Simmons's ring.

A BOXING BOUT.

DAN SIMMONS'S Boxing Hall was packed to suffocation on Saturday night, and the mingled reek of freshly dyed khaki, sea-stained slops, fishermen's sweaters, stale tobacco, and oranges made up an atmosphere that was not to be found in any other place on earth, being peculiar to Dan's Temple of Fistiana at Weathersea.

Not a seat was to be had, even before proceedings commenced, for the announcement of the appearance in the ring of champion Tom Crawley after a long absence drew the crowd like a magnet.

Dan Simmons beamed good nature on all and sundry, and ruled the audience with a rod of iron at the same time. His attendants kept order according to a plan devised by Dan himself, which comprised the summary ejection of every mischief-maker a second after he had opened his mouth.

The boxing was mixed, like the lookers-on, consisting of the good, the bad, and the indifferent. The latter bulked largest, the bad ran a good second, and the good was confined to two stiff contests between four men from the R.M.A. up at the big barracks.

At last, when the clock wanted a minute or two to ten, a roar announced the preparation of the ring for the event of the evening, and prompt to time little Tom Crawley, a mere child in appearance, a bantam of bantams, stripped to the waist, dodged between

the ropes, followed by his sailor seconds from the Flyer.

There was a pause of a minute or two, and then a shout announced the coming of Bob Randle.

Tom turned his eyes that way, and they bulged almost out of their sockets as he observed that Bob was not alone.

No, he had Mary with him, Mary Thwaites, who had gone to sea on the Elsie Jane, as Tom had fondly supposed. His father had left harbour that morning. He was going fishing. It was strange for him to sail without the second hand. What did it mean?

A heavy frown marred Tom's boyish features as Mary came and sat herself down at the ringside. She noticed the frown, and smiled.

That was too much for Tom, who leant across the ropes and glared at her.

"Wait," he said, "I'll fillet him."

The preliminaries were rapidly gone through, as the hour was getting late. The gloves were donned and adjusted. Then the referee announcing that all was in order, the timekeeper set his watch going.

"Seconds out!" he cried. "Time!" And lest there should be any misunderstanding, he rang a note on a deep-throated gong.

Bob Randle, a light-weight boxer, who shaped like a very likely sort of customer, and whose figure was of the neat and stylish order, advanced towards his opponent with a grim smile of resolution on his handsome face.

Tom saw it, and endeavoured to wipe it off with a sweeping punch that made Bob sniff. Bob sent in a pile-driver, which Tom dodged.

In came Tom, planting several body blows, driving a left home on the chin, and then swinging and turning and twisting his head as if it were attached to a piece of indiarubber, while Bob's fists followed its gyrations as they went in fierce pursuit.

In vain; he could not hit the wonderful little sailor-boy, and Tom darted away amid roars of admiration from the crowd.

At that Bob Randle got wild, set his lips viciously, and tried all out for a knock-out.

Tom Crawley took the honours of the round.

And so the contest went on, Tom show-

(Continued overleaf.)

ing bewildering speed, and indulging in strange, weird antics.

It was not until Bob Randle had lost his temper completely, been badly punished in consequence, and had almost thrown away the fight, that he listened to his seconds' advice, and decided to play safe.

From that moment he steadied himself, and safe he was, do what Tom Crawley would. Still he could not weaken, slow, or punish his man, and as the contest neared its allotted span, the murmuring crowd knew already what the verdict was going to be.

Tom had won. Outside a knock-out it was a cert, even though the civilian had put up a plucky fight.

Shouts, cat-calls, laughter, cheers punctuated the passing of the bout to its close.

And at last the breathless boxers dropped their hands, and fell into each other's arms, as the timekeeper called "Enough!"

"You are too quick and too artful for me, Tom," said Bob Randle, with a tinge of envy in his voice.

"Why don't you say too clever, Bob," returned the happy little sailor-boy. "But my, you put up a game show, and once you shook me badly with that right of yours. It was a grand fight. Won't you shake hands?"

Bob laughed happily. "I will, Tom. Put it there," said he, and they shook hands like the truest of old friends, while tears filled Mary's eyes as she realised what thorough good lads both of them were.

And then—then—something happened. There was a rush of men towards the ring, and under the ropes dived a

stalwart, broad-shouldered, striking figure, the figure of a bearded fisherman, with blue eyes, and the head of an ancient god.

It was Fisherman Thwaites, Mary's father.

"Why, Mr. Thwaites," said Bob Randle, in amazement, "what's the matter?" But the fisherman thrust him aside, and turned to the sailor-boy.

"Tom—Tom Crawley—my dear lad—the villains—the cold-blooded murderers! The scoundrels! If there's a God in heaven, He'll one day punish 'em——"

Tom's face went very white.

"What's the matter, Mr. Thwaites?" he asked, staring into the seaman's blue eyes.

"The Elsie Jane's gone down—they've sunk her—torpedoes. Your father went out mine-sweeping along o' some o' the others, or my girl would have been aboard, and they got her just off Stagg's Head Point. She went down like a stone, they say—her bottom blown clean out of her. I had to come here—I knew you'd want to know——"

Tom staggered back, aghast, unable to speak for a moment.

He clutched at his throat. For a moment he was able to gasp out the words.

"And father—Bill Riley—Sam, the boy—what of them——?"

"Gone to Davy Jones's locker, every one of 'em, for the devils never gave 'em a dog's chance," answered Fisherman Thwaites; and Tom, reeling back, found himself in the arms of pretty Mary.

"Tom—Tom—dear," faltered the girl through her blinding tears. "be brave—be brave. It's fate—it's fate——"

(To be continued.)

NEXT WEEK will appear

"LOOT!"

A Tale of NELSON LEE, NIPPER, and The "BLACK WOLF."

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