

NEW EDGAR WALLACE NOVEL COMPLETE IN THIS WEEK'S ISSUE!

# THE THRILLER

THE NEW PAPER  
with a THOUSAND  
THRILLS

2<sup>d</sup>  
WEEKLY

"Red  
aces"

GRIPPING NEW  
BOOK-LENGTH  
STORY by

# EDGAR WALLACE

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

# RED ACES



# BY EDGAR WALLACE

"LOOK! BLOOD!"  
HE SCREAMED.  
"BLOOD! I DIDN'T TOUCH  
HIM! I AIN'T BEEN  
NEAR HIM!"



**THRILLS! MYSTERY! DRAMATIC ADVENTURE!**

*A gripping NEW book-length  
story complete in this issue.*

## Chapter I. THE THREAT.

WHEN a young man is very much in love with a most attractive girl he is apt to endow her with qualities and virtues which no human being has ever possessed. And at rare and painful intervals there enter into his soul certain wild suspicions, and in these moments he is inclined to regard the possibility that she may be guilty of the basest treachery and double dealing.

Everybody knew that Kenneth McKay was desperately in love. They knew it at the bank in Beaconsfield where he spent his days in counting other people's money, and a considerable amount of his lunch-hour writing impassioned and—it must be confessed—rather ill-spelt letters to Margot Lynn. His taciturn father, brooding over his vanished fortune in his gaunt riverside house at Marlow, may have devoted a few moments' thought to the consideration of his son's new interest. Probably he did not, for George McKay was entirely self-centred, and had little thought but for the folly which had dissipated the money he had accumulated with such care, and the development of fantastic schemes for its recovery.

All day long, summer and winter, McKay, senior, sat in his study, a pack of cards before him, working out averages and what

he called "inherent probabilities," or at a small roulette wheel, where, alternately, he spun and recorded the winning numbers.

Kenneth McKay went over to the bank in Beaconsfield every morning on his noisy motor-bicycle and came back every night. Sometimes very late, because Margot lived in London. She had a small flat where she could not receive him, but they frequently dined together at the cheaper restaurants and sometimes saw a play. Kenneth was a member of an inexpensive London club which sheltered at least one sympathetic soul. Except Mr. Rufus Machfield, the confidant in question, he had no friends.

"And let me advise you not to make any here," said Rufus.

He was a military-looking man of forty-five, and most people found him rather a bore, for the views which he expressed so vehemently, on all subjects from politics to religion, he had acquired that morning from the leading article of his favourite daily. Yet he was a genial person and a likeable man.

He had a luxurious flat in Park Lane, a French valet, a couple of hacks which he rode in the Park, and no useful occupation.

"The Leffingham Club is cheap," he said, "the food's not bad, and it is near Piccadilly. Against that you have the fact that almost anybody who hasn't been to prison can become a member."

"The fact that I'm a member—" began Ken.

"You're a gentleman and a public school man," interrupted Mr. Machfield a little sonorously. "You're not rich, I admit—"

"Even I admit that," said Ken, rubbing his untidy hair.

Kenneth was tall, athletic, as good-looking as a young man need be, or can be without losing his head about his face. He had called at the Leffingham that evening especially to see Rufus and to confide his worries to that amiable gentleman. And Kenneth's worries were, at the moment, enormous. He looked haggard and ill; Mr. Machfield thought it possible that he had not been sleeping very well. In this surmise he was right.

"It's about Margot—" began the young man.

Mr. Machfield smiled. He had met Margot, had entertained the young people to dinner at his flat, and twice had invited them to a theatre party.

"We're had a row, Rufus. It began a week ago. For a long time her reticence has been bothering me. Why this devil couldn't she tell me what she did for a living? I wouldn't say this to a living soul but you—it is horribly disloyal to her, and yet it isn't. I know that she has no money of her own, and yet she lives at the rate of a thousand a year. She says that she is

secretary to a business man, but the office where she works is in her own name. And she isn't there more than a few days a week, and then only for a few hours."

Mr. Machfield considered the matter.

"She won't tell you any more than that?"

Kenneth looked round the smoke-room. Except for a servant counting the cigars in a small mahogany cabinet, they were alone. He lowered his voice.

"She'll never tell me any more. I've seen the man," he said. "Margot meets him surreptitiously!"

Mr. Machfield looked at him dubiously.

"Oh—what sort of a man?"

Kenneth hesitated.

"Well—to tell you the truth, he's elderly.

It was queer how I came to see them at all. I was taking a ride round the country on Sunday morning. Margot told me that she couldn't come to us—I asked her to lunch with us at Marlow—because she was going out of London. I went through Burnham and stopped to explore a little wood. As a matter of fact, I saw two animals fighting—I think they were stoats—and I went after them—"

"Stoats can be dangerous," began Mr. Machfield. "I remember once—"

"Anyway, I went after them with my camera. I'm rather keen on wild life photographs. And then I saw two people, a man and a girl, walking slowly away from me. The man had his arm round the girl's shoulder. It rather made a picture—they stood in a patch of sunlight, and with the trees as a background—well, it was rather an idyllic sort of picture. I put up my camera. Just as I pressed the button the man looked over his shoulder, and then the girl turned. It was Margot!"

He dabbed his brow with a handkerchief. Rufus was slightly amused to see anybody so agitated over so trifling a matter.

Kenneth swallowed his drink; his hand trembled.

"He was elderly—fifty—not bad-looking. God! I could have killed them both! Margot was coolness itself, though she changed colour. But she didn't attempt to introduce me or offer any kind of explanation."

"Her father—" began Rufus.

"She has no father—no relations except her mother, who is an invalid and lives in Florence—at least, I thought so," snapped Kenneth.

"What did she do?"

"The young man heaved a deep sigh.

"Nothing; just said 'How queer meeting you!' talked about the beautiful day, and when I asked her what it all meant and what this man was to her—he had walked on and left us alone—she flatly refused to say anything. Just turned on her heel and went after him."

"Extraordinary!" said Mr. Machfield.

"You have seen her since?"

Kenneth nodded grimly.

"That same night she came to Marlow to see me. She begged me to trust her—she was really wonderful. It was terribly surprising to see her there at all. When I came down into the dining-room and found her there, I was knocked out—the servant didn't say who she was, and I kept her waiting."

"Well?" asked his companion, when he paused.

"Well," said Kenneth awkwardly, "one has to trust people one loves. She said that he was a relation—she never told me that she had one until then."

"Except her mother who lives in Florence—that costs money, especially an invalid mother," mused Rufus, fingering his long, clean-shaven upper lip. "What is the trouble now? You've quarrelled?"

Kenneth took a letter out of his pocket and passed it across to his friend, and Mr. Machfield opened and read it.

"Dear Kenneth—I'm not seeing you any more. I'm broken-hearted to tell you this. Please don't try to see me—please!" M.

"When did this come?"

"Last night. Naturally, I went to her flat. She was out. I went to her office—she was out. I was late for the bank, and got a terrible roasting from the manager. To make matters worse, there's a fellow dunning me for two hundred pounds—everything comes at once. I borrowed the money for dad. What with one thing and another, I'm desperate."

Mr. Machfield rose from his chair.

"Come home and have a meal," he said

"As for the money—"

"No, no, no!" Kenneth McKay was panic-stricken. "I don't want to borrow from you—I won't! God! I'd like to find that old swine and throttle him! He's at the back of it! He has told her not to have anything more to do with me."

"You don't know his name?"

"No. He may live in the neighbourhood, but I haven't seen him. I'm going to do a little detective work. And then, abruptly—" "Do you know a man named Reeder—J. G. Reeder?"

Mr. Machfield shook his head.

"He's a detective," explained Kenneth. "He has a big bank practice. He was down at our place to-day—queer-looking devil. If he could be a detective anybody could be!"

Mr. Machfield said he recalled the name. "He was in that railway robbery, wasn't he? J. G. Reeder—yes. Pretty smart fellow—young?"

"He's as old as—well, he's pretty old. And rather old-fashioned."

"Why do you mention him?" Mr. Machfield was interested.

"I don't know. Talking about detective work brought him into my mind, I suppose."

Rufus snapped his finger to the waiter, and paid his bill.

"You'll have to take pot luck; but Lamontaine is a wonderful cook. He didn't know that he was until I made him try."

So they went together to the little flat in Park Lane, and Lamontaine, the pallid, middle-aged valet who spoke English with no trace of a foreign accent, prepared a meal that justified the praise of his master. In the middle of the dinner the subject of Mr. Reeder arose again.

"What brought him to Beaconsfield? Is there anything wrong at your bank?"

Rufus saw the young man's face go red.

"Well, there has been money missing; not very large sums. I have my own opinion, but it isn't fair to—well, you know."

He was rather incoherent, and Mr. Machfield did not pursue the inquiry.

"I hate the bank, anyway—I mean the work. But I had to do something, and when I left Uppingham the governor put me there—in the bank, I mean. Poor old governor, he lost his money at Monte Carlo or somewhere—enormous sums. You wouldn't dream that he was a gambler. I'm not grousing, but it is a little trying sometimes."

Mr. Machfield accompanied him to the door that night, and shivered.

"Cold! Shouldn't be surprised if we had snow," he said.

In point of fact the snow did not come until a week later. It started as rain and became snow in the night, and in the morning people who lived in the country looked out upon a white world; trees that bore a new beauty, and hedges that showed their heads above sloping drifts.



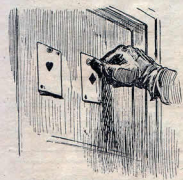


## MURDER!

THERE was a car coming from the direction of Beaconsfield. The horse-man, sitting motionless in the centre of the snowy road, watched the lights grow brighter and brighter. Presently, in the glare of the headlamps, the driver of the car saw a mounted policeman in the centre of the road, saw the lift of his gloved hand, and stopped the machine. It was not difficult to stop, for the wheels were racing on the surface of the road, which had frozen into the worst qualities of glass. And snow was falling on top of this.

"Anything wrong?"

The driver began to shout the question, and then he saw the huddled figure on the



ground. It lay limply like a fallen sack; seemed at first glimpse to have nothing of human shape or substance.

The driver jumped out and went ploughing through the frozen snow.

"I just spotted him when I saw you," said the policeman. "Do you mind turning your car just a little to the right—I want the lamps full on him."

He swung himself to the ground, and went, heavy-footed, to where the man lay. The second inmate of the car got to the wheel and turned the machine, with some difficulty, so that the light blazed on the dreadful thing. The policeman's horse strayed to the side of the car and thrust in his nodding head. He alone was unconcerned.

Taking his bridle with a shaking hand, the second man stepped out of the car and joined the other two.

"It is old Wentford," said the policeman.

"Wentford! Good God!"

The first of the two motorists fell on his knees by the side of the body and peered down into the grinning face.

Old Benny Wentford!

"Good God!" he said again.

He was a middle-aged lawyer, unused to such a horror. Nothing more terrible had disturbed the smooth flow of his life than an occasional quarrel with the secretary of his golf club. And here was death, violent and hideous—a dead man on a snowy road—a man who had telephoned to him two hours before begging him to leave a party and come to him. Though the snow had begun to fall all over again.

"You know Mr. Wentford. He has told me about you."

"Yes, I know him. I've often called at his house; in fact, I called there to-night, but it was shut up. He made arrangements with the chief constable that I should call. H'm!"

The policeman stood over the body, his hands on his hips.

"You stay here. I'll go and 'phone the station," he said.

He hoisted himself into the saddle. "Is that you think we'd better go?" Mr. Edward, the lawyer, asked nervously. He had no desire to be left alone in the night with a battered corpse and a clerk whose trembling was almost audible.

"You couldn't turn your car," said the policeman, which was true, for the lane was very narrow.

They heard the jingle and thud of his horse's canter, and presently they heard it no more.

"Is he dead, Mr. Edward?" The young man's voice was hollow.

"Yes, I think so. The policeman said so."

"Oughtn't we to make sure? He may only be injured?"

Mr. Edward had seen the face now in the shadow of an uplifted shoulder. He did not wish to see it again.

"Better leave him alone till a doctor comes. It is no use interfering in these things. Wentford! Good God!"

"He's always been a little bit eccentric, hasn't he?" The clerk was young, and, curiously being the tonic of youth, he had recovered some of his courage. "Living alone in that tiny cottage with all his money. I was bicycling past it on Sunday—a concrete box; that is what my young lady called it. With all his money—"

"He is dead, Henry," said Mr. Edward severely, "and a dead person has no property. I don't think it quite—um—seemly to talk of him in—um—his presence."

He felt the occasion called for an emotional display of some kind. He had never grown emotional over clients; least of all could this tetchy old man inspire such. A few words of prayer perhaps would not be out of place. But Mr. Edward was a churchwarden of a highly respectable church, and for forty years had had his praying done for him. If he had been a Dissenter—but he was not. He wished he had a Prayer Book.

"He's a long time gone." The policeman could not have been more than two hundred yards away, but it seemed a very long time since he had left.

"Has he any heirs?" asked the clerk professionally.

Mr. Edward did not answer. Instead, he suggested that the lights of the car should be dimmed. They revealed this thing too plainly. Henry went back and dimmed the lights. It became terribly dark when the lights were lowered, and eyesight played curious tricks; it seemed that the bundle moved. Mr. Edward had a feeling that the grinning face was lifting to leer slyly at him over the humped shoulder.

"Put on the lights again, Henry," the lawyer's voice quavered. "I can't see what I am doing!"

He was doing nothing; on the other hand, he had a creepy feeling that the thing was behaving oddly. Yet it lay very still, just as it had lain all the time.

"He must have been murdered. I wonder where they went to?" asked Henry hollowly, and a cold shiver vibrated down Mr. Edward's spine.

Murdered! Of course he was murdered. There was blood on the snow, and the murderers were—

He glanced backward nervously, and almost screamed. A man stood in the shadowy space behind the car; the light of the lamps reflected by the snow just revealed him.

"Who—who are you, please?" croaked the lawyer.

He added "please" because there was no sense in being rough with a man who might be a murderer.

The figure moved into the light. He was slightly bent, and even more middle-aged than Mr. Edward. He wore a flat-topped felt hat, a long ulster, and large, shapeless gloves. About his neck was an enormous yellow scarf, and Mr. Edward noticed, in a numb, mechanical way, that his shoes were large and square-toed, and that he carried a tightly-furled umbrella on his arm, though the snow was falling heavily.

"I'm afraid my car has broken down a mile up the road."

His voice was gentle and apologetic; obviously he had not seen the bundle. In his agitation, Mr. Edward had stepped into the light of the lamps, and his black shadow sprawled across the deeper shadow.

"Am I wrong in thinking that you are in the same predicament?" asked the newcomer. "I was unprepared for the—condition of the road. It is lamentable that one should have overlooked this possibility."

"Did you pass the policeman?" asked Mr. Edward.

Whoever this stranger was, whatever might be his character and disposition, it was right and fair that he should know there was a policeman in the vicinity.

"Policeman?" The square-hatted man was surprised. "No, I passed no policeman. At my rate of progress it was very difficult to pass anything—"

"Going towards you—on horseback—a mounted policeman," said Mr. Edward rapidly. "He said that he would be back soon. My name is Edward—solicitor—Edward, Caterham & Edward."

He felt it was a moment for confidence. "Delighted!" murmured the other.

"We've met before. My name—er—is Reeder—R, double E, D, E, R."

Mr. Edward took a step forward.

"Not the detective? I thought I'd seen you—look!"

He stepped out of the light, and the heap on the ground emerged from the shadow. The lawyer made a dramatic gesture. Mr. Reeder came forward slowly.

He stooped over the dead man, took an electric torch from his pocket and shone it steadily on the face. For a long time he looked and studied. His melancholy face showed no evidence that he was sickened or pained.

"H'm!" he said, and got up, dusting the snow from his knee. He fumbled in the recesses of his overcoat, produced a pair of eyeglasses, set them crudely on his nose, and surveyed the lawyer over their top.

"Very—um—extraordinary. I was on my way to see him."

Edward started.

"You were on your way? So was I! Did you know him?"

Mr. Reeder considered this question. "I—er—didn't—er—know him. No; I had never met him."

The lawyer felt that his own presence needed some explanation.

"This is my clerk, Mr. Henry Green."

Mr. Reeder bowed slightly.

"What happened was this—"

Mr. Edward gave a very detailed and graphic description which began with the recounting of what he had said when the telephone call came through to him at Beaconsfield, and how he was dressed, and what his wife had said when she went to find his boots (her first husband had died through an ill-judged excursion into the night air on as foolish a journey), and how much trouble he had had in starting the car, and how long he had had to wait for Henry.

Mr. Reeder gave the impression that he was not listening. Once he walked out of the blinding light and peered back the way the policeman had gone; once he went over

to the body and looked at it again; but most of the time he was wandering down the lane, searching the ground with his hand-lamp, with Mr. Edward following at his heels lest any of the narrative be lost.

"Is he dead? I suppose so!" suggested the lawyer.

"I—er—have never seen anybody—er—deader," said Mr. Reeder gently. "I should say, with all reverence and respect, that he was—er—extraordinarily dead."

He looked at his watch.

"At nine-fifteen you met the policeman? He had just discovered the body? It is now nine-thirty-five. How did you know that it was nine-fifteen?"

"I heard the church clock at Woburn Green strike the quarter."

Mr. Edward conveyed the impression that the clock struck exclusively for him. Henry valued the glory; he also had heard the clock.

"At Woburn Green—you heard the clock? It's—nine-fifteen!"

The snow was falling thickly now. It fell on the heap, and lay in the little folds and creases of his clothes.

"He must have lived somewhere about here?"

Mr. Reeder asked the question with great deference.

"My directions were that his house lay off the main road—you would hardly call

this a main road—fifty yards beyond a notice-board advertising land for sale—desirable building land."

Mr. Edward pointed to the darkness.

"Just there—the notice-board. Curiously enough, I am the—er—solicitor for the vendor."

His natural inclination was to emphasise the desirability of the land, but he thought it was hardly the moment. He returned to the question of Mr. Wentford's house.

"I've only been inside the place once—two years ago, wasn't it, Henry?"

"A year and nine months," said Henry exactly.

His feet were cold, his spine chilled. He felt sick.

"You cannot see it from the lane," Mr. Edward continued. "Rather a small, one-storey cottage. He had it specially built for him, apparently. It is not exactly—a palace."

"Dear me!" said Mr. Reeder, as though this were the most striking news he had heard that evening. "In a house he built himself! I suppose he has, or had, a telephone?"

"He telephoned to me," said Mr. Edward; "therefore he must have a telephone."

Mr. Reeder frowned, as though he were trying to pick holes in the logic of this statement.

"I will go along and see if it is possible to get through to the police," he suggested.

"The police have already been notified," said the lawyer hastily. "I think we all ought to stay here together till somebody arrives."

The man in the square hat, now absurdly covered with snow, shook his head. He pointed.

"Woburn Green is there. Why not go on and arouse the—um—local constabulary?"

That idea had not occurred to the lawyer. His instinct urged him to return the way he had come and regain touch with reality in his own prosaic parlour.

"But do you think—" He blinked down at the body. "I mean, it's hardly an act of humanity to leave him—"

"He feels nothing," said Mr. Reeder, and added: "Probably. Anyway, the police will know exactly where they can find him."

There was a sudden screech from Henry. He was holding out his hand in the light of the lamp.

"Look! Blood!" he screamed.

There was blood on his hand certainly.

"Blood! I didn't touch him. You know that, Mr. Edward! I ain't been near him!"

Alas for our excellent system of secondary education! Henry was reverting to the illiterate stock whence he sprang.

"The policeman stood over the body, his hands on his hips." Edgar Wallace dictates a thrilling incident of his remarkable story "Red Aces."



## HOW D'YOU DO? THE EDITOR GREET'S YOU

IT WOULD be folly for me to imagine any reader of "Red Aces" pausing in the beam of J. G. Reeder's torch to peruse my editorial chat. No doubt each one of you has previously turned this page without a thought beyond the solution of the murder of old Wentford.

I am not offended. In passing on you have paid me the compliment of providing you with a story so absorbing, so tense, so thrilling that it held your whole attention from first to last.

Fine! I wanted it that way. So did Edgar Wallace. When sending along this manuscript he wrote: "Bob (his secretary) agrees with me that this is the best story I have written for a very long time."

I am certain this week will bring a deafening "Hear! Hear!" from all parts of the land, and, later on, from every corner of the earth.

In "Red Aces," Edgar Wallace gives of his own brilliant best, and this thrilling yarn, coupled with a powerful first instalment of "The Trapper," from the pen of George Dinos, and our first "Baffler" problem, makes the publication of No. 1 of THE THRILLER a red-letter day in the lives of all lovers of good mystery stories.

In the preparation of "The Thriller," neither money nor pains have been spared to secure a really first-class programme. The

best "thriller" writers of the day have been secured.

Authors whose work is eagerly sought after have rallied around and given of their best for the success of the new venture. Edgar Wallace—Sydney Harter—Hugh Clevely—John G. Brandon—Stacey Blake—Leslie Charteris—mention only a few of the famous names amongst our contributors.

From the pens of these masters of mystery have come stories thoroughly up to the standard of their well-known books, so that for a modest twopenny a week readers of "The Thriller" will be able to secure yarns of a type and quality hitherto only available at bound-novel prices.

You will find details of our immediate programme on page 22. Next week's issue will contain a thrilling book-length complete story of the underworld, by Hugh Clevely. I have no hesitation in saying that Mr. Clevely's story—under the title of "Lynch Law"—reaches fully as high a standard as the one you have just read.

You will revel in the amazing adventure of Michael Lynch, the problem of whose identity sets the underworld in a ferment of fear and bewilderment.

More star stories follow. In our third issue we have the return of Edgar Wallace and the inimitable J. G. Reeder, whilst further yarns from this world-famous author will follow at intervals. Never previously in the history of popular weekly journalism has such a galaxy of talent been brought together. Never before has the work of so celebrated a group of authors been available at such a price.

Without a doubt "The Thriller" is the last word in up-to-date popular fiction. It thrills! It baffles! It entertains! On no account must you miss a single issue! Avoid disappointment by asking your newsagent to reserve you a copy every week.

Sincerely yours, until we meet again amidst the thrills of next week's issue,

*The Editor*

"Not near him I ain't been! Blood!"  
 "Don't squeak, please!" Mr. Reeder was firm. "What have you touched?"  
 "Nothing! I only touched myself."  
 "Then you have touched nothing," said Mr. Reeder, with unusual acidity. "Let me look."

The rays of his lamp travelled over the shivering clerk.

"It is on your sleeve! H'm!"

Mr. Edward stared. There was a red, moist patch of something on Henry's sleeve. "You had better go on to the police-station," said Mr. Reeder. "I will come and see you in the morning."

#### THE RED ACES.

Mr. Edward climbed into the driver's seat gratefully, keeping some distance between himself and his shivering clerk. The car was on a declivity, and would start without trouble. He turned the wheels straight and took off the brake. The machine skidded and slithered forward, and presently Mr. Reeder, following in its wake, heard the sound of the running engine.

His lamps showed him the notice-board in the field, and fifty yards beyond he came to a path so narrow that two men could not walk abreast. It ran off from the road at right angles, and up this he turned, progressing with great difficulty, for he had heavy nails in his shoes. At last he saw a small garden gate on his right, set between two unkempt hedges. The gate was open, and this methodical man stopped to examine it by the light of his lamp.

He expected to find blood, and found it; just a smear. No bloodstains on the ground, but, then, the snow would have obliterated those. It had not obliterated the print of footmarks going up the winding path. They were rather small, and he thought they were recently made. He kept his light upon them until they led him into view of the squat house with its narrow windows and dormers. As he turned he saw a light gleam between curtains. He had a feeling that somebody was looking out at him. In another second the light had vanished. But there was somebody in the house.

The footsteps led up to the door. Here he paused and knocked. There was no answer, and he knocked again more loudly. The chill wind sent the snowflakes swirling about him. Mr. Reeder, who had a secret sense of humour, smiled. In the remote days of his youth his favourite Christmas card was one which showed a sparkling Father Christmas knocking at the door of a wayside cottage. He pictured himself as a felt-hatted Father Christmas, and the whimsical fancy slightly pleased him.

He knocked a third time and listened, and, when no answer came, he stepped back and walked to the room where he had seen the light, and tried to peer between the curtains. He thought he heard a sound—a thud—but it was not in the house. It may have been the wind. He looked round and listened, but the thud was not repeated, and he returned to his ineffectual stargazing. There was no sign of a fire. He came back to knock for the fourth time, then tried the other side of the building, and here he made a discovery. A narrow casement window, deeply recessed, and made of iron, was swaying to and fro in the wind, and beneath the window was a double set of footmarks, one coming and one going. They went away in the direction of the lane.

He came back to the door, and stood debating with himself what steps he should take. He had seen in the darkness two small white squares at the top of the door, and had thought they were little panes of toughened glass such as one sees in the tops of such doors. But, probably in a gust of wind, one of them became detached and fell at his feet. He stooped and picked it up; it was a playing-card—the ace of diamonds. He put his lamp on the second; it was the ace of hearts. They had both apparently been fastened side by side to the door with pins—black pins. Perhaps the owner of the house had put them there. Possibly they had some significance, fulfilled the function of mascots.

No answer came to his knocking, and Mr. Reeder heaved a deep sigh. He hated climbing; he hated more squeezing through narrow windows into unknown places; more especially as there was probably somebody inside who would treat him rudely. Or they may have gone. The footprints, he found, were fresh; they were scarcely obliterated though the snow was falling heavily. Perhaps the house was empty, and its inmate, whose light he had seen, had got away whilst he was knocking at the door. He would not have heard him jump from the window; the snow was too soft. Unless that thud he had heard—

Mr. Reeder gripped the sill and drew himself up, breathing heavily, though he was a man of considerable strength.

There were only two ways to go into the house; one was feet first, the other head first. He made a reconnaissance with his lamp, and saw that beneath the window was a small table standing in a tiny room which had evidently been used as a cloak cupboard, for there were a number of coats hanging on hooks. It was safe to go in head first, and he wriggled down on to the table, feeling extraordinarily undignified.

He was on his feet in a second, gripped the handle of the door gingerly, and opened it. He was in a small hall, from which one room opened. He tried this; it was fast, and yet not fast. It was as though somebody were leaning against it on the other side. A quick jerk of his shoulder, and it flew open. Somebody tried to dash past him, but Mr. Reeder was expecting that, and worse. He gripped the fugitive.

"I'm extremely sorry," he said, in his gentle voice. "It is a lady, isn't it?"

He heard her heavy breathing, a little sob.

"Is there a light?"

He groped inside the listel of the door, found a switch, and turned it. Nothing happened for a second, and then the lights came on suddenly. There was apparently a small light-making machine at the back of the house which operated when any switch was turned.

"Come in here, will you, please?"

He pressed her very gently into the room. Pretty, extraordinarily pretty. He did not remember ever having met a young lady who was quite as pretty as this particular young lady, though she was very white and her hair was in disorder, and on her feet were snow-boots, the impression of which he had already seen in the snow.

"Will you sit down, please?"

He closed the door behind him.

"There's nothing to be afraid of. My name is Reeder."

She had been terrified for that moment; now she looked up at him intently.

"I seem to have heard of you." She shivered. "I'm so frightened—I'm so frightened!"

And then she drooped over the table at which she sat, her face buried in her folded arms.



He peered into the house of death.

Mr. Reeder looked round the room. It was pleasantly furnished—not luxuriously so, but pleasantly. Evidently a sitting-room. Except that the mantelboard had fallen, or had been dragged on the floor, there was no sign of disorder. The hearth was littered with broken china pots and vases; the board itself was still held in position at one end by some attachment to the mantelpiece. That and the blue hearthrug before the fire, which was curiously stained. And there were other little splotches of darkness on the surface of the carpet, and a flower-pot was knocked down near the door.

He saw a waste-paper basket and turned over its contents. Covers of little books, apparently—there were five of them—but no contents. By the side of the fireplace was a dwarf bookcase. The books were dummies. He pulled one end of the case, and it swung out, being hinged at the other end.

"H'm!" said Mr. Reeder, and pushed the shelves back into their original position.

There was a cap on the floor by the table, and he picked this up. It was wet. This he examined, thrust into his pocket, and turned his attention to the girl.

"How long have you been here, Miss—?"

"I think you had better tell me your name."

She was looking up at him; he saw her wet her dry lips.

"Half an hour. I don't know—it may be longer."

"Miss—?" he asked again.

"Lynn—Margot Lynn."

He pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"Margot Lynn. And you've been here half an hour. Who else has been here?"

"Nobody," she said, springing to her feet. "What has happened? Did he—did they fight?"

He put his hand on her shoulder gently and pressed her down into the chair.

"Did who fight whom?" asked Mr. Reeder. His English was always very good on those occasions.

"Nobody has been here," she said inconsequently.

Mr. Reeder passed the question.

"You came from—?"

"I came from Bourne End Station. I walked here. I've often come that way. I am Mr. Wentford's secretary."



"You walked here at nine o'clock because you're Mr. Wentford's secretary? That was a very odd thing to do."

She was searching his face fearfully.

"Has anything happened? Are you a police detective? Has anything happened to Mr. Wentford? Tell me—tell me!"

"He was expecting me—you knew that?" She nodded. Her breath was coming quickly. He thought she found breathing a painful process.

"He told me—yes. I didn't know what it was about. He wanted his lawyer here, too. I think he was in some kind of trouble."

"Where did you see him last?"

She hesitated.

"I spoke to him on the telephone—once from London. I haven't seen him for two days."

"And the person who was here?" asked Mr. Reeder after a pause.

"There was nobody here! I swear there was nobody here!" She was frantic in her desire to convince him. "I've been here half an hour—waiting for him. I let myself in—I have a key. There it is."

She fumbled with trembling hands in her bag and produced a ring with two keys, one larger than the other.

"He wasn't here when I came in. I—I think he must have gone to town. He is very—peculiar."

Mr. J. G. Reeder put his hand in his pocket, took out two playing-cards, and laid them on the table.

"Why did he have those pinned to his door?"

She looked at him round-eyed.

"Pinned to his door?"

"The outer door," said Mr. Reeder. "or, as he would call it, the street door."

She shook her head.

"I've never seen them before. He is not the kind of man to put up things like that. He is very retiring, and hates drawing attention to himself."

"He was very retiring," repeated Mr. Reeder. "and hated drawing attention to himself."

#### J. G. REEDER'S THEORY.

SOMETHING in his tone emphasised the tense he used. She shrank back.

"Was?" Her voice was a whisper. "He's not dead? Oh, my God—he's not dead?"

Mr. Reeder smoothed his chin.

"Yes, I'm afraid—um—he is dead."

She clutched at the edge of the table for support. Mr. Reeder had never seen such horror, such despair in a human face before.

"Was it an accident—or—?"

"He's been trying to say 'murder,' said Reeder gently. "Yes, I'm very much afraid it was murder."

He caught her in his arms as she fell, and, laying her on the sofa, went in search of water. The taps were frozen, but he found some water in a kettle, and, filling a glass with this, he returned to sprinkle it on her face, having a vague idea that something of the sort was necessary; but he found her sitting up, her face in her hands.

"Lie down, my dear, and keep quiet," said Mr. Reeder, and she obeyed meekly.

He looked round the room. The thing that struck him anew was the revolver which hung on the wall near the right-hand side of the fireplace just above the bookcase. It was placed to the hand of anybody who sat with his back to the window. Behind the armchair was a screen, and, tapping it, Mr. Reeder discovered that it was of sheet-iron.

He went outside to look at the door, turning on the hall light. It was a very thick door, and the inside was made of quarter-inch steel plate, screwed firmly to the wood. Leading from the kitchen was the bed-room, evidently Wentford's. The only light here was admitted from an oblong window near the ceiling. There were no other windows, and about the narrow window was a stout steel cage. On the wall by the bed hung a second pistol. He found a third weapon in the hall, and, behind a coat hanging in the hall, a fourth.

The cost of the square box of concrete. The roof, as he afterwards learned, was tiled over sheet-iron, and, except for the window through which he had squeezed, there was none by which ingress could be had.

He was puzzled why this man, who evidently feared attack, had left any window so large as that through which he had come. He afterwards found the broken wire, which must have set an alarm-bell ringing when the window was opened.

There was blood on the mat in the hall, blood in the tiny lobby. He came back to where the girl was lying, and sniffed. There was no smell of cordite—and, having seen the body, he was not surprised.

"Now, my dear."

She sat up again.

"I am not a police officer. I am a—er—a gentleman called in by your friend, Mr. Wentford—your late friend," he corrected himself. "to do something—I know not what! He called me by 'phone; I gave him my um—terms, but he offered me no reason why he was sending for me. You, as his secretary, may perhaps—"

She shook her head.

"I don't know. He had never mentioned you before he spoke to me on the telephone."

"I am not a policeman," said Mr. Reeder again, and his voice was very gentle; "therefore, my dear, you need have few qualms about telling me the truth, because these gentlemen, when they come, these very active and intelligent men, will probably discover all that I have seen, even if I did not tell them. Who was the man who went out of this house when I knocked at the door?"

Her face was deathly pale, but she did not flinch. "He wondered if she was as pretty when she was not so pale. Mr. Reeder wondered all sorts of queer little things like that; his mind could never stagnate."

"There was nobody in this house—since I have been here—"

Mr. Reeder did not press her. He sighed, closed his eyes, shook his head, shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a great pity," he said. "Can you tell me anything about Mr. Wentford?"

"No," she said, in a low voice. "He was my uncle. I think you ought to know that. He didn't want anybody to know. He made me swear to tell no one, but that must come out. He has been very good to us. He sent my mother abroad; she is an invalid. I conducted his business." All this very jerkily.

"Have you been here often?"

She shook her head.

"Not often," she said. "We usually meet somewhere by appointment, generally in a lonely place where one wouldn't be likely to meet anybody who knew us. He was very shy of strangers, and he didn't like anybody coming here."

"Did he ever entertain friends here?"

"No." She was very emphatic. "I'm sure he didn't. The only person he ever saw was the police patrol, the mounted man who rides this beat. Uncle used to make him coffee every night. I think it was for the company—he told me he felt lonely at

nights. The policeman kept an eye on him. There are two—Constable Steele and Constable Verity. My uncle always sent them a turkey at Christmas. Whoever was on duty used to ride up here. I was here late one night, and the constable escorted me to Bourne End."

The telephone was in the bed-room. Mr. Reeder remembered he had promised to 'phone. He got through to a police-station and asked a few questions. When he got back he found the girl by the window, looking between the curtains.

Somebody was coming up the path. They could hear voices, and, looking through the curtain, he saw a string of lanterns, and went out to meet a local inspector and two men. Behind them was Mr. Enward. Reeder wondered what had become of Henry. Possibly he had been lost in the snow. The thought interested him.

"This is Mr. Reeder." Enward's voice was shrill. "Did you telephone?"

"Yes, I telephoned. We have a young lady here—Mr. Wentford's niece."

Enward repeated the words, surprised.

"His niece here? Really? I knew he had a niece. In fact—"

He coughed. It was an indelicate moment to speak of legacies.

More practical and less delicate:

"She'll be able to throw a light on this business," said the sergeant.

"She could throw no light on any business," said Mr. Reeder, very firmly for him. "She was not here when the crime was committed—in fact, she arrived some time after. She has a key which admitted her. Miss Lynn acts as her uncle's secretary, all of which facts, I think, gentlemen, you should know."

The sergeant was not quite sure about the propriety of noticing Mr. Reeder. To him he was almost a civilian, a man without authority, and his presence was therefore irregular. Nevertheless, some distant echo of J. G. Reeder's fame had penetrated into Buckinghamshire. The police officer seemed to remember that Mr. Reeder either occupied or was about to occupy a semi-official position remotely or nearly associated with police affairs. If he had been a little clearer on the subject he would also have been more definite in his attitude. Since he was not so sure, it was expedient, until Mr. Reeder's position became established, to ignore his presence. A peculiarly difficult course to follow when an officially absent person is standing at your elbow, murmuring flat contradictions of your vital theories.

"Perhaps you will tell me why you are here, sir?" said the sergeant, with a certain truculence.

Mr. Reeder felt in his pocket, took out a large leather case, and laid it carefully on the table, first dusting the table with the side of his hand. This he unfolded and took out, with exasperating deliberation, a thick pad of telegrams. He fixed his glasses and examined the telegrams one by one, reading each through. At last he shook one clear and handed it to the officer. It ran:

"Wish to consult with you to-night on very important matter. Call me Woburn Green 971. Very urgent.—WESTRORD."

"You're a private detective, Mr. Reeder?"

"More intimate than private," murmured that gentleman. "In these days—or of publicity one has—er—little more than the privacy of a goldfish in his—er—crystal habitat."

The sergeant saw something in the waste-paper basket, and pulled it out. It was a





small, loose-leafed book. There was another, indeed many. He piled five on the table, but they were merely the covers and nothing more.

"Diaries," said Mr. Reeder gently. "You will observe that each one is dingier than the other."

"But how do you know they're diaries?" demanded the police officer testily.

"Because the word 'diary' is printed on the inside covers," said Mr. Reeder, more gently than ever.

This proved to be the case, though the printing had been overlooked. Mr. Reeder had not overlooked it; he had not even overlooked the two scraps of burnt paper in the hearth, all that remained of those diaries.

"There is a safe let into the wall behind that bookcase," He pointed. "It may or may not be full of clues. I should imagine it is not. But I shouldn't touch it if I were you, sergeant," he said hastily, "not without gloves. Those detestable fellows from Scotland Yard will be here eventually, and they'll be ever so rude if they photograph a finger-print and find it is yours."

Gaylor of the Yard came at half-past two. He had been brought out of his bed through a blinding snowstorm and along a road that was thoroughly vile.

The young lady had gone home. Mr. Reeder was sitting meditatively before the fire which he had made up, smoking the cheapest kind of cigarette.

"Is the body here?"

Mr. Reeder shook his head.

"Have they found that mounted policeman, Verity?"

Again Mr. Reeder signalled a negative.

"They found his house. He was discovered on the Beaconsfield Road. There were bloodstains on the saddle."

"Bloodstains?" said the startled officer.

"Stains of blood," explained Mr. Reeder.

He was staring into the fire, the cigarette drooping limply from his mouth, on his face an air of settled melancholy; he did not even turn his head to address Inspector Gaylor.

"The young lady has gone home, as I said. The local constabulary gave you particulars of the lady, of course. She acted as secretary to the late Mr. Wentford, and he appears to have been very fond of her, since he has left his fortune as to two-thirds to the young lady and one-third to his sister. There is no money in the house as far as can be ascertained, but he banks with the Great Central Bank, Beaconsfield branch." Reeder fumbled in his pocket. "Here are the two aces."

"The two what?" asked the puzzled inspector.

"The two aces." Mr. Reeder passed the playing-cards over his shoulder, his eyes still upon the fire. "The ace of diamonds, and, I believe, the ace of hearts. I am not very well acquainted with either."

"Where did you get these?"

The other explained, and he heard Gaylor's exasperated chuckle.

"What's this, a magazine story murder?" he asked contemptuously.

"I seldom read magazine stories," said Mr. Reeder, between yawns, "but these cards were put up after the murder."

The detective examined the aces interestedly.

"Why are you so sure of that? Why shouldn't they have been put up before?"

J. G. groaned at his scepticism, and, reaching out, took a pack of cards from a little table.

"You will find the two aces missing from this pack. You would have also found that two cards had been stuck together. Blood does that. No finger-prints. I should

imagine the cards were sorted over after the untimely demise of Mr. Wentford, and the two significant aces extracted and exhibited."

The inspector made a very careful search of the bed-room, and came back to find Mr. Reeder nodding himself to sleep.

"What did they do to the girl—these local blokes?" asked Gaylor coarsely.

Reeder's right shoulder came up in a lazy shrug.

"They escorted her to the station and took a statement from her. The inspector was kind enough to furnish me with a copy—you will find it on this table. They also examined her hands and her clothes, but it was quite unnecessary. There is corroborative evidence that she arrived at Bourne End Station at twelve minutes past eight, as she says she did—the murder was committed at forty minutes past seven, a few minutes before or after."

"How the dickens do you know that?" asked the astonished officer. "Is there any proof?"

Mr. Reeder shook his head.

"A romantic surmise." He sighed heavily. "You have to realise, my dear Gaylor, that I have a criminal mind. I see the worst in people, and the worst in every human action. It is very tragic. There are moments when —" He sighed again. "Forty minutes past seven," he said simply. "That is my romantic surmise. The doctor will probably confirm my view. The body lay here—he pointed to the hearthrug—"until—well, quite a considerable time."

Gaylor was skimming two closely-written sheets of foolscap. Suddenly he stopped.

"You're wrong," he said. "Listen to this statement made at the station by Miss Lynn: 'I rang up my uncle from the station, telling him I might be late because of the snowy road. He answered: 'Come as soon



as you can." He spoke in a very low tone; I thought he seemed agitated! That knocks your theory about the time a little bit askew, eh?"

Mr. Reeder looked round and blinked open his eyes.

"Yes, doesn't it? It must have been terribly embarrassing."

"What was embarrassing?" asked the puzzled police officer.

"Everything," mumbled Mr. Reeder, his chin falling on his breast.

#### THE MISSING POLICEMAN



"The trouble about Reeder," said Gaylor to the superintendent in the course of a long telephone conversation, "is that you feel he does know something which he shouldn't know. I've never seen him in a case where he hasn't given me the impression that he was the guilty party—he knew so much about the crime."

"Humour him," said the superintendent. "He'll be in the Public Prosecutor's Department one of these days. He never was in a case that he didn't make himself an accessory by pinching half the clues."

At five o'clock the detective shook the sleeper awake.

"You'd better go home, old man," he said. "We'll leave an officer in charge here."

Mr. Reeder rose with a groan, splashed some soda-water from a siphon into a glass and drank it.

"I must stay, I'm afraid, unless you have any very great objection."

"What's the idea of waiting?" asked Gaylor in surprise.

Mr. Reeder looked from side to side, as though he were seeking an answer.

"I have a theory—an absurd one, of course—but I believe the murderers will come back. And honestly I don't think your policeman would be of much use, unless you were inclined to give the poor fellow the lethal weapon necessary to defend himself."

Gaylor sat down squarely before him, his large gloved hands on his knees.

"Tell papa," he said.

Mr. Reeder looked at him pathetically.

"There is nothing to tell, my dear Mr. Gaylor; merely suspicion, bred, as I said, in my peculiarly morbid mind, having perhaps no foundation in fact. Those two

cards, for example—that was a stupid piece of bravado. But it has happened before. You remember the Teignmouth case, and the Lavender Hill case with the man with the slashed chest? I think they must get these ideas out of books," he said, bending over to stir the embers of the fire. "The craze for that kind of literature must necessarily produce its reaction."

Gaylor took the cards from his pocket and examined them.

"A bit of tomfoolery," was his verdict.

Mr. Reeder sighed and shook his head at the fire.

"Murderers as a rule have no sense of humour. They are excitable people, frightened people, but they are never comic people."

He walked to the door and pulled it open. Snow had ceased to fall. He came back.

"Where is the policeman you propose leaving on duty?" he asked.

"I'll find one," said Gaylor. "There are half a dozen within call. A whistle will bring one along."

Mr. Reeder looked at him thoughtfully.

"I don't think I should. Let us wait until daylight—or perhaps you wish to go? I don't think anybody would harm you. I rather fancy they would be glad to see the back of you."

"Harm me?" said Gaylor indignantly, but Reeder took no notice of the interruption.

"My own idea is that I should brew a dish of tea, and possibly fry a few eggs. I am a little hungry."

Gaylor walked to the door and frowned out into the darkness. He had worked with Reeder before, and was too wise a man to reject the advice summarily.

Besides, if Reeder was curious, or had entered the Public Prosecutor's Department, he would occupy a rank equivalent to superintendent.

"I'm all for eggs," said Gaylor, and bolted the outer door.

The older man disappeared into the kitchen and came back with a kettle, which he placed upon the fire, went out again, and returned with a frying-pan.

"Do you ever take your hat off?" asked Gaylor curiously.

Mr. Reeder did not turn his head, but shook the pan gently to ensure an even distribution of the boiling fat.

"Very rarely," he said. "On Christmas Days sometimes."

And then Gaylor asked a fatuous question; at least, it sounded fatuous to him, and yet subconsciously he felt that the other might supply an immediate and dramatic answer.

"Who killed Wentford?"

"Two men, possibly three," said Mr. Reeder instantly; "but I rather think two. Neither was a professional burglar. One, at any rate, thought more of the killing than of any profit he might have got out of it. Neither found anything worth taking, and even if they had opened the safe they would have discovered nothing of value. The young lady, Miss Margot Lynn, could, I think, have saved them a lot of trouble in their search for treasure—I may be mistaken here, but I rarely fall into error. Miss Margot is—"

He stopped, looked round quickly.

"What is it?" asked Gaylor, but Reeder put his finger to his lips.

He rose, moved across the room to the door which led to the tiny lobby through which he had made his entrance. He stood with one hand on the knob, and Gaylor saw that in the other was a Browning pistol. Slowly he turned the handle. The door was locked from the inside.

In two strides Reeder was at the front door, turned the key, and pulled it open. Then, to the inspector's amazement, he

saw his companion take one step and fall sprawling on his face in the snow. He ran to his assistance. Something caught him by the ankle and flung him forward.

Reeder was on his feet and assisted the other to rise.

"A little wire fastened between the door-posts," he explained.

A bright beam shot out from his electric torch as he turned the corner of the house. There was nobody in sight, but the window, which he had fastened, was open, and there were new footprints in the snow leading away into the darkness.

"Well, I'm damned!" said Gaylor.

J. G. Reeder said nothing. He was smiling when he came back into the room, having stopped to break the wire with a kick.

"Do you think somebody was in the lobby?"

"I know somebody was in the lobby," he said. "Dear me! How foolish of us not to have had a policeman posted outside the door! You notice that a pane of glass has been cut? Our friend must have been listening there."

"Was there only one?"

"Only one," said Mr. Reeder gravely. "And was he the one who came that way before I don't think so."

He took the frying-pan from the hearth where he had put it, and resumed his frying of eggs, served them on two plates, and brewed the tea. It was just as though death had not lurked in that lobby a few minutes before.

"No, they won't come back, there is no longer reason for our staying. There were two, but only one came into the house. The roads are very heavy, and they may have a long way to travel, and they would not risk being anywhere near at daybreak. At six o'clock the agricultural labourer of whom the poet Gray wrote so charmingly will be on his way to work, and they won't risk meeting him, either."

They had a solemn breakfast, Gaylor playing the other with questions which in the main he did not answer.

"You think that Miss Lynn is in this—in the murder, I mean?"

Reeder shook his head.

"No, no," he said. "I'm afraid it isn't as easy as that."

Daylight had come greyly when, having installed a cold policeman in the house, Reeder had retired to his lane. Reeder's car had been retrieved in the night, and a more powerful machine fitted with chain-wheels was waiting to take them to Beaconfield. They did not reach that place for two hours, for on their way they came upon a little knot of policemen and farm labourers looking sombrely at the body of Constable Verity. He lay under some bushes a few yards from the road, and he was dead.

"Shot," said a police officer. "The divisional surgeon's just seen him."

Stiff and cold, with his booted legs stretched wide, his overcoat turned up and his snow-covered cap drawn over his eyes, was the officer who had ridden out from the station courtyard so unsuspectingly the night before. His horse had already been found; the bloodstains that had puzzled and alarmed the police were now accounted for.

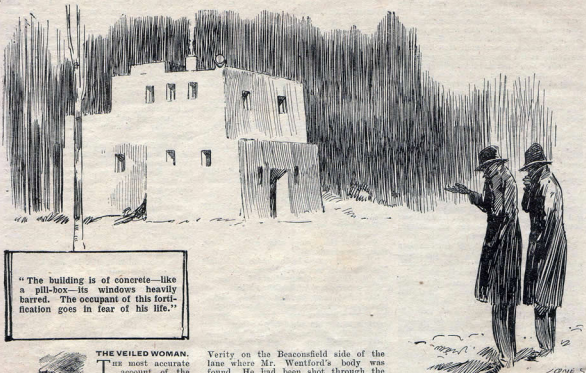
Gaylor and Reeder drove on into Beaconfield. Gaylor was a depressed and silent man; Mr. Reeder was silent, but not depressed.

As they came out into the main road he turned to his companion, and asked:

"I wonder why they didn't bring their own cars?"



Through the secret panel they saw something which terrified them.



"The building is of concrete—like a pill-box—its windows heavily barred. The occupant of this fortification goes in fear of his life."

#### THE VEILED WOMAN.

THE most accurate account of the double tragedy appeared in a late edition of the "Evening Post-Courier."

"At some hour between eight and ten,

James Verity, a member of the mounted branch of the Buckinghamshire Constabulary, and Benny Wentford, an eccentric, and, it is believed, a rich recluse, were done to death in or in the vicinity of a lonely cottage in the neighbourhood of Beaconsfield. At a quarter past nine Constable Verity was patrolling the road and came upon a body which was afterwards identified as that of the late Mr. Wentford, who lived in a small cottage some hundred yards from the spot where the body was found. Mr. Wentford had been brutally bludgeoned, and was dead when the discovery was made. Simultaneously with the discovery there appeared upon the scene Mr. Walter Edward, a well known Beaconsfield solicitor, and his clerk, who, at Mr. Wentford's request, were on their way to visit him. It is believed Mr. Wentford intended making a will, though no documents were found in the house to support this supposition.

"Leaving Mr. Edward to watch the body, Constable Verity rode toward Beaconsfield to summon assistance. He was never seen alive after that moment.

"The dead man's niece, who also acted as his secretary, Miss Margot Lynn, had been summoned from London, and she, arriving at the cottage a few minutes after the body had been taken away by the unknown murderers, discovered the place in disorder, though she did not at that time suspect a tragedy.

"The mystery was still further complicated in the earlier hours of the dawn, when a cow-boy, on his way to work, discovered the dead body of Constable

Verity on the Beaconsfield side of the lane where Mr. Wentford's body was found. He had been shot through the heart at close range. No sound of the shot had been heard, but it may be explained that there are very few houses in the neighbourhood, and snow was falling heavily. A carter in the employment of a neighbouring farmer thought he had heard a shot fired much earlier in the evening, but this may be accounted for by the fact that snow was falling so thickly on the railway line, which is situated a mile away, that fog signals were being used.

"Chief Detective-Inspector Gaylor has been called in by the Buckinghamshire police, and he is being assisted by Mr. J. G. Reeder, of the Public Prosecutor's Department.

"The timetable, so far as can be ascertained, is as follows:

7.0. Constable Verity leaves police station on patrol.

9.15. Constable Verity discovers the dead body of Mr. Wentford.

9.15. Mr. Edward and his clerk drive up by motor-car and are stopped by the constable, who rides into Beaconsfield for assistance.

6.45 a.m. The body of Constable Verity is found shot dead 120 yards north of where the body of Mr. Wentford was found."

Mr. Kingfether, the sub-manager of the Beaconsfield branch of the Great Central Bank, read this account, and was rightly agitated. He got to the bank very early that morning, for he had a letter to write, and his managerial office gave him the privacy he required. He was a serious man with serious-looking spectacles on a pale, plump face. He had a little, black moustache, and his cheeks and chin were invariably blue, for he had what barbers call a "strong beard."

The newspapers arrived as he was writing. They were pushed under the closed outer door of the bank, and, being

at the moment stuck for the alternative to an often reiterated term of endearment, he rose and brought the newspapers into the office, put a new coal on the fire, and sat down to glance through them. There were two papers, one financial and one human.

He read the latter first, and there was the murder in detail, though it had only occurred the night before. The discovery of the constable's body was not so fully described, because it had not been discovered until just before dawn.

He read and re-read, his mind in a whirl, and then he took the telephone and called Mr. Edward. That gentleman was also in his office that snowy morning, though the hour was eight.

"Good-morning, Kingfether. Yes—yes, it's true—I was practically a witness. They've found the poor policeman—dead—yes, murdered—yes, shot. I was the last person to speak to him. Dreadful—dreadful—dreadful! That such horrors can be—I say that such horrors can be—I said that such — What's the matter with your 'phone? He barks with you? Really? Really? I'll come over and talk with you!"

Mr. Kingfether hung up the telephone and wiped his face with his handkerchief. It was a face that became moist on the least provocation. Presently he folded the newspaper and looked at his unfinished letter. He was on the eighth page, and the last words he had written were:

"—can hardly live the day through without seeing your darling face, my own—"

It was obvious that he was not writing to his general manager, or to a client who had overdrawn his account.

He added "beloved" mechanically, though he had used the word a dozen times before. Then he unfolded the paper and read of the murder again.



A knock at the side door; he went out to admit Edward. The lawyer was more important than usual. Participation in public affairs has this effect. And a news agency had telephoned to ask whether they could send a photographer, and Mr. Edward, shivering at the telephone in his pyjamas, had said "Yes," and had been photographed at his breakfast-table at 7.30 a.m., poisoning a cup of tea and looking excessively grave. He would presently appear in one hundred and fifty newspapers above the caption, "Lawyer who discovered his own client murdered."

"It is a terrible business," said Mr. Edward, throwing off his coat. "He banked with you? I'm in charge of affairs, Kingfether, though Heaven knows I am ignorant about 'em! I don't know how he stands—what is his credit here?"

Mr. Kingfether considered.

"I'll get the ledger from the safe," he said. He locked the centre drawer of his desk because his letter to Ena Burslem was there and other documents, but Mr. Edward saw nothing offensive in the act of caution; rather was it commendable.

"Here is his account," Kingfether laid the big ledger on the desk and opened it where his thumb marked a page. "Credit, three thousand four hundred pounds."

Mr. Edward fixed his glasses and looked. "Has he anything on deposit? Securities—no? Did he come often to the bank?"

"Never," said Kingfether. "He used the account to pay bills. When he wanted ready money he posted a bearer cheque and I posted back the money. He has, of course, sent people here to cash cheques."

"That six hundred pounds withdrawn five days ago," Mr. Edward pointed to the item.

"It is strange that you should point that out—it was paid over the counter four days ago. I didn't see the person who called for it—I was out. My clerk, McKay, cashed the cheque. Who is that?"

There was a gentle tapping at the door. Mr. Kingfether went out of the room and came back with the caller.

"How fortunate to find you here!" said J. G. Reeder. He was spruce and lively. A barber had shaved him, somebody had cleaned his boots. "The account of the late Mr. Wentford?" He nodded to the book.

It was generally known that J. G. Reeder acted for the Great Central Bank, and the manager did not question his title to ask questions. Mr. Edward was not so sure.

"This is rather a serious matter, Mr. Reeder," he said, consciously grave. "I am not so sure that we can take you into our confidence."

"Haden't you better see the police and ask them if they are prepared to take you into their confidence?" asked Mr. Reeder, with a sudden ferocity which made the lawyer recoil.

Once more the manager explained the account.

"Six hundred pounds—h'm!" Mr. Reeder frowned. "A large sum. Who was the drawer?"

"My clerk, McKay, said it was a lady—heavily veiled."

Reeder stared at him.

"Your clerk, McKay? Of course—a fair young man. How stupid of me! Kenneth—or is it Karl—Kenneth, is it? H'm! Heavily veiled lady. Have you the number of the notes?"

Kingfether was taken aback by the question. He searched for a book that held the information, and Mr. Reeder copied them down—an easy task, since the tens and the fives ran consecutively.

"When does your clerk arrive?"

Kenneth was supposed to arrive at nine. As a rule he was late. He was late that morning.

Mr. Reeder saw the young man through a window in the manager's office, and thought that he did not look well. His eyes were tired; he had shaved himself carefully, for his chin bore a strip of sticking plaster. Perhaps that accounted for the spots on the soiled cuff of his shirt, thought Mr. Reeder, when he confronted the young man.

"No, I will see him alone," said Reeder.

"He is rather an insolent pup," warned Mr. Kingfether.

"I have tamed lions," said Mr. Reeder.

When Kenneth came in:

"Close the door, please, and sit down."

"You know me, my boy?"

"Yes, sir," said Kenneth.

"That is blood on your shirt cuff, isn't it. Cut your chin, did you? You haven't been home all night?"

Kenneth did not answer at once.

"No, sir; I haven't changed my shirt, if that is what you mean."

Mr. Reeder smiled.

"Exactly."

He fixed the young man with a long, searching glance.

"Why did you go to the house of the late Mr. Wentford last night between the hours of eight-thirty and nine-thirty?"

He saw the boy go deathly white.

"I didn't know he was dead—I didn't even know his name until this morning. I went there because—well, I was blackguard enough to spy on somebody—follow them from London and sneak into the house—"

"The young lady, Margaret Lynn. You're in love with her? Engaged to her, perhaps?"

"I'm in love with her—I'm not engaged to her. We are no longer—friends," said Kenneth in a low voice. "She told you I had been there, I suppose? And then, as a light broke on him: 'Or did you find my cap? It had my name in it.'"

Mr. Reeder nodded.

"You came down on the same train as Miss Lynn? Good. Then you will be able to prove that you left Bourne End Station."

"No, I shan't," said Kenneth. "I slipped out of the train on to the line. Naturally

I didn't want her to see me. I got out through the level crossing. There was nobody about—it was snowing heavily."

"Very awkward," Mr. Reeder pursed his lips. "You thought there was some sort of friendship between Mr. Wentford and the young lady?"

Kenneth made a gesture of despair.

"I don't know what I thought—I was just a jealous fool."

A very long silence, broken by a coal falling from the fire on to the iron bottom of the fender.

"You paid out six hundred pounds the other day to a lady on Mr. Wentford's cheque?"

"I didn't know that Wentford was—" began Ken, but Mr. Reeder brushed aside that aspect of the situation. "Yes—a veiled lady. She came by car. It was a large sum of money, but the day before Mr. Kingfether had told me to honour any cheque of Mr. Wentford, no matter to whom the money was paid."

"Will you tell me something about your quarrel with the young lady?" Mr. Reeder asked. "It is, I realise, a delicate subject."

Kenneth hesitated, then told his story as he had told it to Mr. Machfield.

"Miss Lynn called on you that night—did she ask you to destroy the photograph you had taken?"

The young man was surprised at this query.

"No, I had forgotten all about the photograph till the other day. I must have sent the pack to be developed or put them aside to send them. I've no idea what's happened to them. Would the picture of Mr. Wentford be any good to you?"

J. G. Reeder shook his head. He asked very little more. He was, it seemed, the easiest man in the world to satisfy. Before he left he saw the sub-manager alone.

"Did you tell Mr. McKay that he was to honour any cheque of Mr. Wentford's no matter to whom money was paid?"

The answer came instantly.

"Of course not! Naturally I should expect him to be sure that the person

Reeder swung open the dummy bookcase. Behind it was hidden a small safe.





who presented the cheque had authority. And another curious thing which I have not mentioned. I lunch at the inn opposite, and I usually have a seat in the window, where I can see these premises. And I have no recollection of any car drawing up to the bank."

"H'm" was all that Mr. Reeder said.

He made a few inquiries in Beconsfield and the neighbourhood, and went on to Wentford's house, where Gaylor had arranged to meet him. The inspector was pacing up and down the snowy terrace before the house, and he was in very good spirits.

"I think I've got the man," he said. "Do you know anybody named McKay?"

Mr. Reeder looked at him slyly.

"I know a dozen," he said.

"Come inside and I'll show you something."

Reeder followed him into the room. The carpet had been taken up, the furniture moved. Evidently a very thorough search had been in progress. Gaylor swung back the bookcase; the safe door was ajar.

"We got keys from the maker—quick work! They were down here by eighty-thirty."

He stooped down and pulled out three bundles. The first was made up of bills, the second of used cheques, the third was a thick bundle of French banknotes each to the value of 1,000 francs.

"That is surprise No. 1," began the detective, flourishing the money. "French money—"

"I am afraid it doesn't surprise me," said Mr. Reeder apologetically. "You see, I've been examining the gentleman's bank book. By the way, here are the numbers of notes drawn from Mr. Wentford's account." He handed over a slip of paper. "Six hundred pounds is a lot of money," said Gaylor. "I'll phone these through. Well, what else did you find in the bank-book?"

"I observed," said Mr. Reeder, "though I did not emphasise the fact, that all the money he paid in was in French banknotes. Number two is—"

The inspector extracted a sheet of headed paper from one heap. Written in pencil was what was evidently a memorandum from somebody who signed himself "D. H. Hartford."

"I have found that the man who is employing a private detective to find you is George McKay, of Sennet House, Marlow. I don't know what his intentions are, but they're not pleasant. There is nothing to worry about; he is employing one of the most incompetent private detectives in the business."

"Extraordinary!" said Mr. Reeder, and coughed.

"The first thing to do is to find Hartford," began Gaylor.

"He is in Australia," Mr. Reeder interrupted. "At the time that letter was written his office address was 327, Lamb's Buildings. He became bankrupt, and left the country hurriedly."

"How do you know?" asked Gaylor, astonished.

"Because I—um—was the incompetent private detective engaged to find Mr. Lynn, or, as he called himself, Mr. Wentford. And I did not find him," said Mr. Reeder.

"Why did McKay wish to find this man?"

"He owed him money. I know no more than that. The search fell off because—um—Mr. George McKay owed me money. One has to live."

"Then you knew about Wentford?"

Mr. Reeder took counsel with himself.

"Um—yes. I recognised him last night—I once had a photograph of him. I thought it was very odd. I also—er—drove over to Marlow and made inquiries. Mr. McKay—Mr. George McKay did not leave his house last night, and at the moment the murder was committed was entertaining the—um—vicer to dinner."

Gaylor scowled at him.

"You're a killjoy," he said, and Mr. Reeder sighed heavily.

"I'm going to have these developed." He held up a little film pack. "I found them in the old man's bed-room. I don't suppose they'll tell us anything."

"I fancy they will be very instructive," said Mr. Reeder, "especially if you are interested in natural history. There will also be a picture of Mr. Wentford, or Lynn, with his arm about the shoulder of his niece."

Gaylor sat down.

"Are you pulling my leg?" he demanded.

"Heaven forbid!" answered Mr. Reeder piously.

Gaylor got up and stood squarely before him.

"What do you know about these murders, Reeder?" he challenged.

Mr. Reeder spread his hands wide. His glasses, set askew, slipped a little farther down his nose; he was not a very imposing figure.

"I am a queer man, Mr. Gaylor; I am cursed, as you are aware, with a peculiarly evil mind. I am also intensely curious—I have always been. I am curious about criminals and chickens—I have perhaps the finest Wyandottes in London, but that is by the way. It would be cruel to give you my theories. The blood on the policeman's horse; that is interesting. And Henry Green—Mr. Edward's clerk—the blood on his coat, though he did not go near the body of the late Mr. Wentford, that is interesting. Poor Henry is suffering from a severe chill, and is in bed, but his mother, an admirable and hardworking woman, permitted me to see him. And the two aces pinned to the door, all very, very interesting indeed! Mr. Gaylor, if you will permit me to interview old George McKay I will undertake to tell you who committed these murders."

"The girl told you something—the girl Lynn?"

"The girl has told me nothing. She also may be very informative. I purpose spending a night or two in her flat—um—not, I hope, without a chaperon."

Gaylor looked at him, amazed. Mr. Reeder was blushing.

#### WHO KILLED WENTFORD?



THE last page of the letter which Mr. Eric Kingfether had begun with such ease in the early part of the morning was extremely difficult to compose. It had become necessary to say certain things; it was vital that he should not put his communication into writing.

In desperation he decided to make a break with practice. He would go to town. It was impossible to leave before the bank closed, but he could go immediately afterwards, though there was urgent work which should have kept him on the bank premises until six, and some private work of serious importance that should have occupied him until midnight. When the

bank closed he handed over the key of the safe to Kenneth.

"I've been called to town. Balance up the books and put them in the safe. I'll be back by six; I'd like you to write for me."

Kenneth McKay did not receive the suggestion favourably. He also wished to get away.

"Well, you can't!" said the other sharply. "The bank inspector will be in to-morrow to check the Wentford account. It will probably be evidence." Mr. Kingfether got out his little car and drove to London. He parked his machine in a Bloomsbury square and made his way on foot to a big mansion block behind Gower Street. The elevator man took him up grinned a welcome.

"The young lady's in, sir," he said.

The "young lady" herself opened the door to his ring.

"Look who's here!" she said in surprise, and stood aside to let him in.

She was dressed in an old kimono, and did not look as attractive as usual.

"In another half-hour I'd have been out," she said. "I didn't get up till after lunch. These late nights are surely hell!"

She led the way to a sitting-room that was hazy with cigarette smoke. It was a large room, its floor covered with a soft carpet that had once cost a lot of money and was now mottled with stains. Before the fire was a big divan, and on this she had been reclining. The furnishing and appointments of the room were of that style which is believed to be Oriental by quite a large number of people. The whole room was half-way to blowiness. It had a stale, sweet scent. Before the fire, in a shallow basket lined with red silk, a Pekinese dog opened his weary eyes to survey the newcomer, and instantly closed them again.

"Well, my dear, what brings you up to town? I told you to snatch a few hours' sleep—round about one you looked like a boiled owl, and that's not the state to be in when you're chasing money."

She was dark and good-looking by certain standards. Her figure was robust, and nature had given generously to the amplification of her visible charms. The red of her full lips was a natural red; the clear skin was of fine texture; her face was scarcely powdered.

For a very long time they talked, head to head. She was an excellent listener; her sympathy had a sincere note. At half-past five:

"Now, off you pop, and don't worry. The governor will be seeing you to-night—talk it over with him. I think you'd better, in case anything turns up—you know what I mean."

He took a letter out of his pocket and gave it to her with an air of embarrassment.

"I wrote it, or rather started it, this morning—I couldn't finish it. I mean every word I say."

She kissed him loudly.

"You're a darling!" she said.

Mr. Kingfether came back to his office to find only a junior in charge. Kenneth McKay, despite instructions to the contrary, had gone, and the sub-manager sat down to a rough examination of important books in no condition to do justice to his task. He possessed one of those slow-starting tempers that gathers momentum from its own weight. A little grievance and a long brooding brought him to a condition of senseless and unrestrainable fury.

He was in this state when Kenneth McKay returned.

"I asked you to stay in, didn't I?" He glowered at his subordinate.

"Did you? Well, I stayed in until I finished my work. Then the bank inspector came."

Mr. Kingfether's face went white.

"What—what did he want? Redman didn't tell me he called."

"Well, he did," Kenneth passed into the outer office.

Kingfether sat scribbling oddly on his blotting-pad for a minute, and then for the first time saw the letter that had been placed on the mantelpiece. It was marked "Urgent. Confidential. Deliver by hand," and was from head office.

He took it up with a shaking hand, and, after a long hesitation, tore the seal. There was a little scribble on the wall above the fireplace, and he caught sight of his face, and could hardly believe that that ghost of a man was he.

There was no need to read the letter twice through. Already he knew every word, every comma. He stood blinking at his reflection, and then went into the outer office. He found Kenneth collecting some personal belongings from his desk.

"I suppose the inspector came about the Wentford cheque?" he said.

The young man looked round at him.

"Wentford cheque? I don't know what you're talking about. You don't mean the cheque I cashed for the woman?"

It required an effort on the manager's part to affirm this.

"What was wrong with it?"

"It was forged, that is all."

"Forged?" Kenneth frowned at him.

"Yes. Didn't the inspector say anything? He left a letter for me, didn't he?"

Kenneth shook his head.

"No. He was surprised to find that you weren't here. I told him you had gone up to the head office. I'm getting a bit sick of lying about you. What is the yarn about this cheque?"

Again it required a painful effort on the manager's part to speak.

"It was forged. You've to report to head office to-morrow morning—some of the bank notes have been traced to you—the cheque was out of your office book."

It was out, yet he felt no relief.

McKay was looking at him open-mouthed.

"You mean the cheque that was changed by that woman?"

The word "woman" irritated Mr. Kingfether.

"A lady was supposed to have called—a veiled lady?"

"What do you mean by 'supposed'?" demanded Kenneth. "You say that the notes were traced to me—I issued them—is that what you mean?"

"You have them—some of them—in your private possession, that's all."

Incredulity in Kenneth's face.

"If you mean I stole them?"

Kingfether had reached the limit of endurance.

"How the hell do I know what you did?" he almost shouted.

"Head office have written to say that some of the notes you paid over the counter have been traced through a moneylender named Stuart to you."

The young man's face changed suddenly. "Stuart—oh!" was all that he said. A minute later he went blundering out of the side door, leaving Mr. Kingfether to continue his aimless scribbles on his blotting-pad.

Kenneth reached Marlow just before the dinner-hour, and he came into the study where old George McKay was usually to be found, working out his eternal combinations.

of cards and figures. To Kenneth's amazement, his father greeted him with a smile. Instead of the cards, his table was covered with packages of documents and the paraphernalia of correspondence.

"Hallo, son—we've had a stroke of luck. The arbitrators have decided in my favour. I knew jolly well I hadn't parted with my rights in the dyeing process when I sold out, and the company has to pay close on a hundred thousand back royalties."

Kenneth knew of this wrangle between his father and his late company that had gone on through the years, but had never paid very much attention to it.

"That means a steady income for years, and this time I'm going to look after things—here!"

He pointed to the grate. The fireplace was filled with half-burnt playing cards. "They've asked me to rejoin the board as chairman. What is the matter, Kenny?"

Kenneth was sitting on the opposite side of the table, and his father had seen his face.

Briefly he told his story, and George McKay listened without comment until he had finished.

"Wentford, eh? He is going to be a curse to me to the end of my days."

Kenneth gasped his amazement.

"Did you know him?"

Old George nodded.

"I knew him all right," he said grimly.

"Reader was here," this morning

"About me?" asked the other quickly.

"About me," said his father. "I rather gathered that he suspected me of the murder."

Kenneth came to his feet, horrified.

"You? But he's mad! Why should you—"

Mr. McKay smiled dourly.

"There was quite a good reason why I should murder him," he said calmly; "such a good reason that I have been expecting the police all the afternoon."

And then, abruptly, he changed the subject.

"Tell me about these banknotes. Of course, I knew that you had borrowed the money from Stuart, old boy. I was a selfish old fellow to let you do it. How did the money come to you?"

Kenneth's story was a surprising one.

"I had it a couple of days ago," he said.

"I came down to breakfast and found a letter. It was not registered and the address was hand-printed. I opened it, never dreaming what it contained. Just then I was terribly rattled over Stuart. I thought head office might get to know

about my borrowing money. And when I found inside the letter twenty ten-pound notes you could have knocked me out."

"Was there any letter?"

"None. Not even 'from a friend.'"

"Who knew about your being in debt?" One name came instantly to Kenneth's mind.

"You told your Margot, did you—Wentford's niece? His real name was Lynn, by the way. Would she have sent it?"

"It was not she who drew the money. And though she was veiled I could not recognise her again if I met her. Kingfether's line is that no woman came; he is suggesting that the cheque was cashed by me. He even says that the cheque was out of a book which I keep in my drawer for the use of customers who come to the bank without their cheque-books."

George McKay fingered his chin, his keen eyes on his son.

"If you were in any kind of trouble you'd tell me the truth, old boy, wouldn't you? All this worry has come through me. You're telling me the truth now, aren't you?"

"Yes, father."

The older man smiled.

"Fathers have the privilege of asking 'Are you a thief?' without having their heads punched! And most young people do stupid things—and most old people, too!"



Lordy! I once carried a quarter of a million bank at bacarat! Nobody would believe that, but it's true. Come and eat and then go along and see your Margot."

"Father, who killed that man Wentford?"

There was a twinkle in McKay's eyes when he answered:

"J. G. Reeder, I should think. He knows more about it than any honest man should know!"



#### REEDER—THE DEVIL!

WHEN her visitor was gone, Ena opened the letter he had left with her, read a few lines of it, and threw letter and envelope into the fire. Funny, the sameness of men!

They all wrote the same sort of stuff—raw stuff dressed up being different from all other men. She did not resent these stereotypes of passion, nor did she feel sorry for those who used them. They were just normal experiences. She sat clasping her knees, her eyes alternately on the fire and the sleeping dog. Then she got up, dressed quickly, and, going into Gower Street, found a cab.

She was set down at a house in a fashionable Mayfair street, and a liveried footman

admitted her and told her there was company. There usually was in the early evening. She found twenty men, and women sitting round a green table, watching a croupier with a large green shade over his eyes. He was turning up cards in two rows, and big monies, staked in compartments marked on the green table, went into the croupier's well or was pushed, with additions, to the fortunate winner.

The usual crowd, she noted. One pretty girl looked up and smiled, then turned her eyes quickly and significantly to the young man by her side.

Ena found the governor in his room. He was smoking alone and reading the evening newspaper when she came in.

"Shut the door," he ordered. "What is wrong?"

"Nothing much. Only 'Feathers' is a bit worried." She told him why.

Mr. Macfield smiled.

"Don't you worry, my pet," he said kindly. "There has been a murder down his way. Did he tell you anything about

that? I've just been reading about it. I should be surprised if old Reeder didn't get to the bottom of it. Clever fellow, Reeder."

He picked up his newspaper from the floor and his cigar from the ashtray where he had laid it.

"Rather a coincidence, wasn't it, Ena? Feathers' pickin' on that account—Wentford's?"



"Don't move—I beg of you!" There was a gun in Reeder's right hand, its muzzle directed at the croupier. In his left he held the red aces.









"Who said so?" asked Ena curiously. "A copper—policeman, I mean? Don't take any notice of that kind of trash. They'd like to save a car fare! We know that Kenneth didn't forge the cheque—"

Margot's eyes opened wide in amazement.

"Forged a cheque—what do you mean? I don't understand what you are talking about."

For a moment Ena was nonplussed. If this girl did not know about the forgery what was agitating her? The solution of this minor mystery came in a flash. It was the murder! Kenneth was in it! She went cold at the thought.

"Oh, my God! I didn't think of that!" she gasped.

"Tell me about this forgery," began Margot, and then her visitor remembered her errand.

"I want you to come along and see Kenneth. He's waiting for you at my flat—naturally, he can't come here. He'll tell you everything."

Margot was bewildered.

"Of course, I'll come, but—"

"Don't 'but,' my dear—just slip into your things and come along. Kenneth told me to ask you to bring all the keys you have. He said they can prove his innocence!"

"Dear, dear, dear!" said a gentle voice, and Ena flung round to face the man who had come into the room.

She was trapped, and knew it. That old devil!

"The key of the larder, now, would that be of any use to you?" asked Mr. Reeder in his jocular mood. "Or the key of Wormwood Scrubbs?"

"Hallo, Reeder!" The girl was coolness itself. "I thought you were alone, young lady. I did not know you were entertaining Mr. and Mrs. Reeder."

Such an outrageous statement made Mr. Reeder blush, but it did not confuse him. Nor did Mrs. Gribble seem particularly distressed.

"This lady is Mrs. Gribble, of my department," he said gravely.

"She must have some use," said Ena. She picked up her coat, which she had taken off. "I'll phone you later, Miss Lynn."

The cells at Bow Street police station are hygienically equipped, but they have no telephones. In many years Ena lost her nerve.

"What's the idea—'cells'?" she demanded loudly. "You've got nothing on me—"

"We shall see. Will you step this way?" He opened the door of the drawing-room. "I should like to have a few words with you."

He heard a knock at the outer door, and looked at Margot.

"I shall be on hand," he said.

She went to the door—and fell back at the sight of her visitor. It was Kenneth McKay. He looked at her gravely, and without a word, took her into his arms and kissed her. He had never kissed her that way before.

"Can I see you?"

She nodded, and took him back to her room. The other three had disappeared.

"It is only right that you should know, darling, that I'm in terrible trouble. I've just come from home, and I suppose the police are after me. They may be after my father, too. He knew Wentford—hated him. I didn't dream that—"

"Ken—what about you? Why do the police want you?"

He looked at her steadily.

"It is about a forged cheque. Some of

the money has been traced to me. Darling, I've come to ask you something, and I want you to tell me the truth. Kingfether as good as told me I was a liar when I said I'd cashed it for a veiled woman. I don't mind really what he says—he's a crook, that fellow! Money has been missing from the bank—they sent old Reeder down weeks ago!"

"How did they trace money to you?" she interrupted. "And what do you want me to tell you?"

"You knew that I owed money—I told you." She nodded. "And how worried I was about it. I can't remember whether I told you how much I owed."

She shook her head.

"You didn't," she said, and he drew a long breath.

"Then it wasn't you," he said.

He described the arrival of the letter containing the banknotes.

"Two hundred pounds, and, of course, I wanted the money lady."

"Who else knew that you were short of money?" she asked.

"Oh, everybody." He was in despair. "I blabbed about it. Kingfether said that he never ordered me to cash any cheque that came, and that the story of a veiled woman who arrived by car from London when he was out at lunch was all moonshine. Hallo!"

He saw the door of the drawing-room opening, and gasped at the sight of Mr. Reeder.

"It wasn't moonshine, my young friend," said Mr. Reeder. "In fact, I—er—have interviewed a garage keeper who filled up the tank of the lady's car, and, incidentally, saw the lady."

He turned to the room and beckoned Ena. Kenneth stared at her.

"Well," she said defiantly. "Do you think you'll know me again?"

"I know you now!" he said huskily.

"You're the woman who cashed the cheque!"

"That's a damned lie!" she almost screamed.

"Ssh!" said Mr. Reeder, shocked.

"I've never seen him before!" she said, and Margot gasped.

"But you told me—"

"I've never seen him before," insisted the woman.

"You'll see him again," said Mr. Reeder gently. "You on one side—the wrong side—of the witness-box, and he on the other!"

And then she lost her head.

"If there was a swindle, he was in it!" she said, speaking rapidly. "You don't suppose any clerk would pay out six hundred pounds to somebody he had never seen before unless he had his instructions and got his corner! How did I know the cheque was forged? It seemed all right to me."

"May it continue to seem all right," said Mr. Reeder piously. "May you be consoled through the long period of your incarceration with the—er—comfort of a good conscience. I think you will get three years—but if your previous convictions influence the judge I fancy you will get five!"

Ena collapsed.

"You can't charge me," she whimpered. "I didn't forge anything."

"There is a crime called 'uttering,'" said Mr. Reeder. "Uttering—knowing to be forged. Will you take the young lady's arm, Mrs. Gribble? I will take the other—probably we will meet a policeman *en route*. And did I say anything about 'conspiracy'? That is also an offence. Mind the mat, Mrs. Gribble."



## THE RAID.

THERE WAS SOME rather heavy play at Mr. Machfield's private establishment—  
—heavier than usual—and that gave the proprietor of the house cause for uneasiness. If Mr. Reeder had reported his visit that afternoon to the police, and they thought the moment expedient, there would be a raid to-night, and in preparation for this all the doors leading to the mews at the back were unfastened, and a very powerful car was waiting with its engine running. Mr. Machfield might, or might not, use that method of escape. On the other hand, he could follow his invariable practice, which was to appear amongst those present as a guest—a fairly simple matter, because he was not registered as the proprietor of the house, and he could trust his servants.

Certainly the car would have its uses if everything went right and there was no untoward incident. Just lately, however, there had been one or two little hitches in the smooth running of his affairs, and, being superstitious, he expected more.

He looked at his watch; his appointment with Ena was at midnight, but she had promised to "phone through before then. At a quarter to nine, as he stood watching the players, there came at the tail of three others a newcomer. He was in evening dress, as were the majority of people round the board, and he looked strangely out of place in those surroundings, though his blue chin was newly shaved and his black hair was glossy with pomade, and in the lapel of his coat he wore a dazzling gardenia.

Mr. Machfield watched him wander aimlessly around the table, and then caught his eye and indicated that he wished to see him. Soon afterwards he walked out of the room, and Mr. Kingfether followed.

"You're rather silly to come to-night, K," said Mr. Machfield. "There's just a chance of a raid; Reeder was here this afternoon."

The manager's jaw dropped.

"Is he here now?" he asked, and Mr. Machfield smiled at the foolishness of the question.

"No; and he won't be coming to-night unless he arrives with a flying squad. We'll keep that bird out at any rate."

"Where is Ena?" asked Kingfether.

"She'll be in later," lied Machfield. "She had a bit of a headache and I advised her not to come."

The bank manager helped himself to a whisky from a decanter on the sideboard.

"I'm very fond of that girl," said Kingfether.

"Who isn't?" asked the other.

"To me—there was a tremor in the younger man's voice—"she is something outside of all my experience. Do you think she's fond of me, Machfield?"

"I am sure she is," said the other heartily; "but she's a woman of the world, you know, my boy, and women of the world do not carry their hearts on their sleeves."

He might have added, that, in the case of Ena she carried the business equivalent of that organ up her sleeve ready for exhibition to any susceptible man, young or old.

"Do you think she'd marry me, Machfield?"

Mr. Machfield did not laugh. He had played cards a great deal, and had learned to school his countenance. Ena had two husbands, and had not gone through the formality of freeing herself from either.

Both were officially abroad, the foreign country being that stretch of desolate moorland which lies between Ashburton and Tavistock. Here, in the gaunt convict establishment of Princetown, they laboured for the good of their souls, but with little profit to the tax-payers who supported them and even supplied them with tobacco.

"Why shouldn't she? But mind, she's an expensive kind of girl, K," said Macfield very seriously. "She costs a lot of money to dress, and you'd have to find it, from somewhere. Five hundred a year doesn't go far with a girl who buys her dresses in Paris."

Kingfether strode up and down the apartment, his hands in his pockets, his head on his chest, a look of gloom on a face never touched with brightness.

"I realise that," he said; "but if she loved me she'd help to make both ends meet. I've got to cut out this business of the bank; I've had a fright, and I can't take the risk again. In fact, I thought of leaving the bank and setting up a general agency in London."

Mr. Macfield knew what a general agency was when it was run by an inexperienced man. An office to which nobody came except bill collectors. He didn't, however, wish to discourage his client; for the matter of that, Kingfether gave him little opportunity for comment.

"There is going to be hell's own trouble about that cheque," he said. "I had a letter from head office. I have to report to the general manager in the morning and take McKay with me. That is the usual course."

Such details were distasteful to Mr. Macfield. He needed all the spare room in his mind for other matters much more weighty than the routine of the Great Central Bank, but he was more than interested in the fate of McKay.

Kingfether came back to Ena because Ena filled his horizon.

"The first time I ever met her," he said, "I knew she was the one woman in the world for me. I know she's had a rough time and that she's had a battle to live. But who am I to judge?"

"Who indeed," murmured Mr. Macfield, with considerable truth. And then, pursuing his thought, "What will happen to Mr. Kenneth McKay?"

Only for a second did the manager look uncomfortable.

"He is not my concern," he said loudly. "There is no doubt at all that the signature on the cheque—"

"Oh, yes, yes," said the other impatiently. "We don't want to discuss that, do we? I mean, not between friends. You paid me the money you owed me and there was an end to it so far as I am concerned. I took a bit of a risk myself, sending Ena down—I mean, letting Ena go," he corrected when he saw the look on the other's face. "What about young McKay?"

The manager shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know and I really don't care. When I got back to the bank this afternoon he'd gone, though I'd left instructions that he was to stay until I returned. Of course, I can't report it because I did wrong to go away myself, and it was rather awkward that one of our bank inspectors called when I was out. I shall have to work all night to make up arrears. McKay might have helped me. In fact, I told him—"

"Oh, he came back, did he?"

"For five minutes, just before six o'clock. He just looked in and went out again. That is how I knew the inspector had called. I had to tell this pup about the cheque and the banknotes. By the way, that is

a mystery to me how the notes came into his hands at all. I suppose there is no mistake about them? If he was in the habit of coming here he might have got them from the table. He doesn't come here, does he?"

"Not often." Mr. Macfield might have added that nobody came to that place unless they had a certain amount of surplus wealth or the means by which easy money could be acquired.

There were quite a number of his clients who were in almost exactly the same position as Mr. Kingfether—people in positions of trust, men who had the handling of other people's money. It was no business of Macfield's how that money was obtained, so long as it was judiciously spent. It was his boast that his game was straight; as indeed it was—up to a point. He had allowed himself throughout life a certain margin of dishonesty, which covered both bad luck and bad investments. Twice in his life he had gone out for big coups. Once he had failed, the other time he had succeeded but had made no money.

He was not persona grata in all the countries of the world. If he had arrived at Monte Carlo he would have left by very nearly the next train, or else the obliging police would have placed a motor-car at his disposal to take him across to Nice, a resort which isn't so particular as to the character of her temporary visitors.

"I'm sorry for McKay in a way, although he is such an impossible swine, but it's a case of his life or mine, Macfield. Either he goes down or I go down—and I'm not going down."

Nothing worried Mr. Macfield worse than heroics. And yet he should have been hardened to them, for he had lived in an atmosphere of hectic drama, and once had seen a victim of his lying dead by his own hand across the green board of his gaming table. But it was years ago.

"You'd better slide back to the room," he said. "I'll come in a little later. Don't

play high. I've still got some of your papers, dear boy."

When he returned to the room, the manager had found a seat at the table and was punting modestly and with some success. The croupier asked a question with a flick of his eyelids, and almost imperceptibly Macfield shook his head, which meant that that night, at any rate, Kingfether must pay his losses in cash, that neither his IOU's nor cheques would be accepted.

From time to time the players got up from the tables, strolled into the buffet, had a drink, and departed. But there was always a steady stream of newcomers to take their places. Mr. Macfield went back to his study, for he was expecting a telephone message. It came at a quarter past ten. A woman's voice said: "Ena says everything is O.K."

He hung up the telephone with a smile. Ena was a safe bet. You could always trust that girl, and he did not question her ability to keep her visitor occupied for at least two hours. After that he would do a little questioning himself. But it must be he, and not that other fool.

There was no sign of raiders. He had special scouts posted at every street corner approaching the house, and a man on the roof (no sirence this on a night of rain and sleet) to take and transmit their signals in case of danger. If there was a raid he was prepared for it. More likely the police,



"The cells at Bow Street police station have no telephones," said Mr. Reeder.



following their inevitable custom, would postpone the visitation until later in the week. And by that time, if all went well, the house would be closed and the keys in the hands of the agents.

Kingfether was winning; there was a big pile of Treasury and five-pound notes before him. He looked animated, and for once in his life pleased. The bank was winning, too; there was a big box recessed into the table, and this was full of paper money, and every few minutes the pile was augmented.

A dull evening! Mr. Machfield would be glad when the time came for his loud-speaking, graminophone to play the National Anthem. He always closed down on this patriotic note—it left the most unlucky of players with the comforting sense that at least they had their country left to them.

He was looking at the long folding door of the room as it opened slowly. It was second nature in him to watch that opening door, and until this moment he had never been shocked or startled by what it revealed. Now, however, he stood dumbfounded, for there was Mr. Reeder, without his hat, and even without his umbrella.

Nobody noticed him except the proprietor, and he was frozen to the spot. With an apologetic smile, Mr. Reeder came tiptoeing across to him.

"Do you very much mind?" he asked in an urgent whisper. "I find time hanging rather heavily upon my hands."

Machfield flicked his dry lips.

"Come here, will you?"

He went back to his study, Reeder behind him.

"Now, Mr. Reeder, what's the idea of your coming here? How did you get in? I gave strict instructions to the man on the door—"

"I told him a lie," said Mr. Reeder in a hushed tone, as though the enormity of his offence had temporarily overcome him. "I said that you had particularly asked me to come to-night. That was very wrong, I am sorry. The truth is, Mr. Machfield, even the most illustrious of men have their little weaknesses; even the cleverest and most law-abiding their criminal instincts, and, although I am neither illustrious nor clever, I have the frailties of my—er—humanity. Not, I would add, that it is criminal to play cards for money—far from it. I, as you probably know, or may have heard, have a curiously distorted mind. I find my secret pleasures in such places as these."

Mr. Machfield was relieved, immensely relieved. He knew detectives who gambled, but somehow he had never associated Mr. J. G. Reeder with this peculiar weakness.

"Why, certainly, we're glad to see you, Mr. Reeder," he said to himself.

He was so glad, indeed, that he would have been happy to have given this odd-looking man the money wherewith to play.

"You'll have a drink on the house—not," he added quickly, "that I am in any position to offer you a drink. I am a guest the same as yourself, but I know the proprietor would be annoyed if you came and went without having one."

"I never drink. A little barley water, perhaps."

There was, unfortunately, no barley water in the establishment, but this, as Machfield explained, would be remedied in the future—even now if he wished. Mr. Reeder, however, would not hear of putting "the house" to trouble. He was anxious to join the company, and again, by some extraordinary quality of good luck, he managed to insinuate himself so that he sat opposite the croupier. Somebody rose from their chair as he approached, and Mr. Reeder took the vacant seat.

He might have taken a chair on the opposite side of the table, for at the sight of him a pallid Kingfether had whipped out his handkerchief and covered the lower part of his face, as though he were suffering from a bad cold.

Stealthily he rose from his seat and melted into the fringe of people standing behind the players.

"Don't let me drive you away, Mr. Kingfether," said Reeder's voice, and everybody heard him.

The manager dropped back till he stood against the wall, a limp, helpless figure, and there he remained through the scene that followed.

Mr. Reeder had produced a bundle of Treasury notes, which he counted with great care. It was not a big bundle. Mr. Machfield, watching, guessed he was in the temporary line of business so far as "punting" was concerned.

One by one those little notes of Reeder's disappeared, until there was nothing left. And then a surprising thing happened. Mr. Reeder put his hand in his pocket, groped painfully, and produced something which he covered with his hand. The croupier had raised his cards ready to deal—the game was treated, *à quarante*—when the interruption came.

"Excuse me," J. G. Reeder's voice was gentle, but everybody at the table heard it. "You can't play with that pack; there are two cards missing."

The croupier raised his head. The green shade strapped to his glossy head threw a shadow which hid the top half of his face.

He stared blandly at the interrupter—the dispassionate and detached stare which only a professional croupier can give.

"Pardon?" he said, puzzled. "I do not understand, *m'sieur*. The pack is complete. It is never questioned."

"There are two cards, without which, I understand, you cannot play your game," said Mr. Reeder, and suddenly lifted his hand.

On the table before him were two playing cards—the ace of diamonds and the ace of hearts. The croupier looked down at them, and then, with an oath, pushed back his chair and dropped his hand to his hip.

"Don't move—I beg of you!"

There was an automatic pistol in Mr. Reeder's hand, and its muzzle was directed towards the croupier's white waistcoat.

"Ladies and gentlemen, there is nothing to be alarmed about. Stand back from the table against the wall, and do not come between me and Monsieur Lamontaine!"

He himself stepped backward.

"Over there!" He signalled to Machfield.

"Look here, Reeder—"

"Over there!" snarled J. G. Reeder.

"Stand up by your friend. Ladies and gentlemen!"—he addressed the company again without taking his eyes from the croupier—"there will be a few moments of acute unpleasantness. Your names and addresses will be taken, but I will use my best endeavours to avoid police court proceedings, because we are after something much more important than naughty people who play cards for money."

And then the guests saw strange men standing in the doorway. They came from all directions—from Mr. Machfield's study, from the hall below, from the roof above. They handcuffed Lamontaine and took away the two guns he carried, one in each hip pocket. Machfield was unarmed.

"What will the charge be?"

"Mr. Gaylor will tell you at the police-station. But I think the question is unnecessary. Honestly, don't you, Mr. Machfield?"

Machfield said nothing.



## DEDUCTION.

MR. REEDER kept what he called a case-book, in which he inscribed a passionless account of all the cases in which he was engaged. Some of these cases had no value except to the technician, and would not interest anyone except perhaps the psycho-pathologist. Under the heading "Red Aces" appeared this account, written in his own handwriting.

In the year 1919 (wrote Mr. Reeder), there arrived at the Hotel Majestic in Nice a man who described himself in the hotel register as Rufus Machfield. He had a number of other names, but it is only necessary that Machfield should be used to identify this particular character. The man had a reputation as a cardsharp, and, in the pursuit of his nefarious calling, had "worked" the ships plying between England and New York. He had also been convicted on two occasions as a professional gambler in Germany.

He was of Danish origin, but with a permanent address in Colvin Gardens, Bayswater. At the Majestic Hotel he had met with Benny Lynn, an adventurer who had also "operated" the ships on the North Atlantic. On one of these trips Lynn had become acquainted with Mr. George McKay, a prosperous woollen merchant of Bradford. There is no evidence that they ever played cards together, and Mr. McKay does not recall that they did. But the friendship was of value to Lynn—because Mr. McKay was in the habit of coming to Nice every year, and was in residence at the time Lynn and Machfield met. McKay was known as a resolute and successful gambler, and before now had figured in sensational play.

The two men, Lynn and Machfield, conferred together, and decided upon a scheme to rob McKay at the tables. Gambling in Nice is not confined to the recognised establishments. There was at the time a number of *Cercles Privés* where play was even higher than at the public rooms, and the most reputable of these was "Le Signe," which, if it was not recognised, was winked at by the French authorities.

In order to swindle McKay, a patron of this club, it was necessary to secure the co-operation and help of an official. Lynn's choice fell upon a young croupier named Lamontaine, and in this was to suborn two other croupiers, both of whom it was intended should receive a very generous share of the money.

Lamontaine proved to be a singularly pliable tool. He had married a young wife and had got into debt, and was fearful that this should come to the ears of the club authorities. An interview was arranged in Lyons; the scheme was put before the croupier by Lynn, and he agreed to come in, taking a half share for himself and his two fellow croupiers, the other half being equally divided between Lynn and Machfield. Lynn apparently demurred at the division, but Machfield was satisfied with his quarter share; the more so as he knew Mr. McKay had been winning very heavily, and providing he had the right kind of betting there would be a big killing.

The game to be played was baccarat, for McKay could never resist the temptation of taking a bank, especially a big bank. It was very necessary that arrangements should be hurried on before the merchant left the South of France, and a





and checked by the admissions of Machfield, Lynn never left his house except on the days when Machfield and Lamontaine were in Paris—they frequently went to that city over the week-end.

It was Lamontaine who formed the diabolical plan which was eventually to lead to Wentford's death. He knew that the only man admitted to the house was the mounted policeman who patrolled that part of the country, and he studied police methods, even got information as to the times on which the beat was patrolled,

and on the night of the murder, soon after it was dark, he travelled down to Beaconsfield by car through the storm, accompanied by Machfield.

Lamontaine at some time or other had been on the French stage—he spoke perfect English—and I have no doubt was in a position to make himself up sufficiently well to deceive Wentford into opening the door. At seven o'clock Constable Verity left the station and proceeded on his patrol. At seven-thirty he was ruthlessly murdered by a man who stepped out of his concealment and shot him point-blank through the heart.

The body was taken into a field and laid out, the two murderers hoping that the snow would cover it. Lamontaine was already wearing the uniform of a police constable, and, mounting the horse, he rode on to Wentford's house. The old man saw him through the window, and, suspecting nothing, got down and opened the door.

He may not have realised that anything was wrong until he was back in his parlour, for it was there that he was struck down. The two men intended leaving him in the cottage, but a complication arose whilst they were searching the place, or endeavouring to open the safe behind the bookcase. The telephone rang, and they heard Margot Lynn say that she was coming on, but was delayed. One of them answered in a disguised voice.

The thing to do now was to remove the body. Lifting it out, they laid it over the horse's saddle, and, guiding the nervous animal down to the road, led it towards Beaconsfield. Here a second complication arose; the lights of Mr. Edward's car were seen coming toward them. The body was dropped by the side of the road, and the constable took his place on the horse's back. The animal was smothered with the blood of the murdered man, and the clerk of Mr. Edward, the lawyer, taking the bride quite innocently, must have rubbed his sleeve along the shoulder, for it was afterwards discovered that his coat was stained. That gave me my first clue, and I was able, owing to my peculiar mind, to reconstruct the crime as it had been committed. The attachment of the red aces to the door of Wentford's cottage—a mere act of bravado—was also a very valuable clue.

The two men joined one another again in the vicinity of the cottage. They were able to make no further attempt that night. One of them, however, heard that the girl knew where the money was cashed. I am

fortnight after the preliminaries Lamontaine reported that everything was in trim, that he had secured the co-operation of his comrades, and it was decided that the coup should be brought off on the Friday night.

It was arranged that Lynn should be the player, that after play was finished the conspirators should meet again at Lyons, when the loot was to be divided.

The cards were to be stacked so that the bank won every third coup. It was arranged that the signal for the conspirators to begin their betting was to be the dealing of two aces, the ace of diamonds and the ace of hearts. Somebody would draw a six to these, and the banker would have a "natural nine," which means, I understand, that he would win.

Thereafter the betting was to be done by Lynn, and the first was a banco call—which meant, as the cards lay, that the bank would be swept into their pockets. They knew Mr. McKay would bid for the bank, but they would bid higher, and Lynn then took the bank with a capital of a million francs. Fourteen times the bank won, and had now reached enormous proportions, so much so that the table where this high play was going on was surrounded by curious watchers.

There were fourteen winning coups for the bank, and the amount gathered up at the finish by Lynn was something in the neighbourhood of £400,000. Lamontaine states that it was more, but Machfield is satisfied that it was in that region. The money was taken to the hotel, and the following night Lynn left for Lyons. He was to be joined the next day by Machfield, and on the Sunday they were to meet the croupier in Paris and pay him his share.

The night that Lynn left, however, one of the officials of the rooms made a statement to his chef. He had lost his nerve and he betrayed his comrades. Lamontaine, with the other croupier, was ar-

rested on a charge of conspiracy, and Machfield only got away from the South of France by the skin of his teeth. He journeyed on to Lyons and arrived there in the early hours of the following afternoon. He hoped that no news of the arrests would have got into the papers and scared his partner, and certainly he did not wire warning Lynn. When he got to the hotel he asked for his friend, but was told that he had not arrived, nor had he made reservation of the rooms which had been agreed upon.

From that moment he disappeared from human ken, and neither Machfield nor any of his friends were able to trace him. It was no accident; it was a deliberate double-cross. Machfield played the game as far as he was able, and when Lamontaine was released from prison and came to Paris, a broken man, for his young wife had died while he was in gaol, he helped the croupier as well as he could, and together they came to England to establish gaming-houses, but primarily to find Lynn and force him to disgorge.

There was another person on the track of Lynn. McKay, who had been robbed, as he knew after the French court proceedings, employed me to trace him, but for certain reasons I was unable to justify his confidence.

I do not know in what year or month Lamontaine and Machfield located their man. It is certain that "Mr. Wentford," as he called himself, lived in increasing fear of their vengeance. When they did locate him he proved to be an impossible man to reach. I have no doubt that the house was carefully reconnoitred, his habits studied, and that attempts were made to get at him. But those attempts failed. It is highly probable, though no proof of this exists, that he was well informed as to his enemy's movements, for so far as can be gathered from the statement of his niece,

afraid I was responsible for this, and it was intended that she should be taken away with the key of the safe deposit.

Machfield was already acquainted with Kenneth McKay, the son of the victim of the card-sharping episode at Nice. He also knew—on Kenneth's own confession—of his straitened circumstances. Probably to hit at the father, George McKay, whom he must have known was still hunting for him, Machfield used an opportunity which was offered by chance, to ruin him, as he believed.

Two hundred pounds, representing a portion of the money obtained from the bank by a fraudulent manager (3 years penal servitude; Central Criminal Court), through the instrumentality of his woman friend (5 years P.S., C.C.C.), was sent

anonymously to the younger McKay by Machfield, and was traced to the young man.

After this was a note also in Mr. Reeder's hand:

"Rufus John Machfield and Antonio Lamontaine (sentence: death, C.C.C.),

executed at Wandsworth Prison April 17th. Executioner, Ellis."

Mr. Reeder was a stickler for facts.

THE END.

(Another gripping adventure of the famous J. G. Reeder, Edgar Wallace's greatest detective character, the week after next. See page 28.)



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Chapter I.  
VERY NEAR TRAGEDY.

THE girl peered back her chair so that she might the more comfortably adjust her leg over the other. She smoothed her skirts demurely, tilted her chin a little, and laughed.

"Funny, ain't it? No a crook and you nunny's model boy! Gimme a cigarette!" With slow deliberation he passed his case. Her fingers hovered daintily over it as she made her choice, and then with hazy insistence she cast her eyes about the crowded restaurant. A hidden band played a waltz dance tune, and her foot tapped the floor in rhythm. She blew out a cloud of smoke, and her gaze returned to her companion.

"I've trimmed you," she said reflectively, "trimmed you good and proper. Say, if you lifted your little finger they'd knock a job's profits. No fuss, no worry. Everything quit and decent. That'd mean a year or two in sit for me. Ugh! Do you know what all is? If you had the blood of a white rabbit you'd do it, instead of buying me grub at a joint a month!"

The young man laughed his shoulders. "I don't know that kind of slang. I guess you mean plain. I had thought of it. Would that get me back my twenty thousand?"

Her lips parted in a content smile. "Not by a jugful it wouldn't." Her voice had a quality of soft melody that toned the smiling hardness of her words. "All the same it would be some satisfaction to me. It would show me that you were not the soft mark—that you are."

"I had considered it," he admitted. "That was one of the things I had in mind. I have thought of three alternatives. I might send you to jail. I might shoot you. I might marry you. I find it difficult to arrive at a conclusion."

He spoke softly, as one measuring a business problem in his mind.

"That is why I asked you to dine with me to-night."

She regarded him with a whimsical twist at the corners of her mouth.

"Alahoy! A gun in one pocket, a marriage licence in the other, and a 'too at the door."

He leaned his folded arms on the table between them, and stared her in the face, and I've told. I'm not whining about it. Watch my right hand." She caught a glimpse of a naked barrel under the sleeve of his coat, her colour weakened. "I might shoot you now," he went on coolly. "It might be better for you, better for me, if I did."

Her arms tightened, and her hands gripped nervously at the back of her chair. She had seen, but this unexpected menace had shaken her.

"Don't be a blasted fool, Dick!" she said, with an attempt to retain her smile. "You are trying to frighten me. Put that away. Someone might notice."

"That'll be the finish of us both," he commented grimly. "I'm not in the mood for explanations to outsiders. They'll not notice if you sit tight and listen. Stella, girl, smile! God! You've got enough of the actress in you, as I've been. That's better. Now I suppose that all this while you've thought that I'm a rich man with more money than sense. I don't blame you. I acted like that. It probably doesn't matter to you, but I've passed my watch to pay for this dinner tonight. You and your gang have cleaned me out. It's ticked you to own up that you're a crook, now that you think you've killed me white. But the game isn't over, Stella. I've got to have that twenty thousand back. You're got to help me."

Her companion had retained her. She puffed automatically at her cigarette.

"I'm sorry, boy," she declared. "If you shot me full of holes it wouldn't help. I couldn't do anything. I'd sooner go and take a lesson from a luxury agent than try to get money from Velvet, since he's had his hooks on it. Your father will see you right."

The man laughed harshly. "Old Blissen Harrowe doesn't know me from Adam. I'm so millionaire's son, I'm just a plain fool of a stockbroker's clerk, and every penny that you and your gang have had has come from dealings in shares that don't belong to me. That money has to go back, I'm a desperate man."

Stella Cliffe was not easily startled. Young though she was in years, those ingenious blue eyes, for all their naive depths, had looked far into many phases of life. She had confronted many crises with poise and philosophy. Yet, somewhere, this revelation threw her out of her stride.

"Do you mean to tell me that you're just a clerk who's been hitting the high spots with the bank's money?" she exclaimed. "Now, I see why you won't hand me over to the police. You're a bigger hood than I thought. Here's me at Velvet, and the boys, setting you up for one of the lads. And you want the stuff back. I'm sorry for you."

"I don't want your pity," he sneered. "I know," she agreed. "You just naturally hate me. Put that gun away, boy. You can't frighten me any longer, and it might get as bad as this."

Her voice was smooth, but, as though under some dominion that he could not resist, he reluctantly dropped the weapon back into his pocket.

"That's sensible. Now we can talk. You won't put me in jail. You can't shoot me. That leaves the third chance of your proposition. There you've got me guessing. Why marry me—me? I'm clever, but I'm crooked. Where's the idea! How would that help you?"

His fingers rattled a nervous tattoo on the tablecloth.

"You may laugh, but you've been nearer death in this life than I realize that were you alive in your life before. Make no mistake, I'm dead serious. If I married you, it would be because you would never allow me to become a diagnosed and ruined man. You'd get that money, wouldn't you?"

She gave a little chuckle, which she smothered as his smile from direct spoon her.

"You're just as much a crook at heart as I am, Dick. But you worship the great god respectability. You've got a suburban soul. You didn't mind pinching twenty thousand pounds, but you have to be found out. We'd make a fine couple, you and I. You'd strangle me if I put you within a week."

"You're not already married?" he demanded, struck by a sudden thought.

"No. I'm still in the market. But I don't know that I'm so gone on you, Dick. This evening suit—marry or your life—doesn't get me going. I want to hear something about my bright eyes and the rest of the goo-goo patter. I must be married for myself alone. You didn't think I was romantic, did you? No, sir, little Stella carries on, on her own, for a bit longer. I'll tell you what I will do, though—because, as I've said, I'm sorry for you. I'll give you a thousand. You can get a start with that in the States, and nobody will know you for a sucker visited by Scotland Yard, unless you give yourself away."

His face was pale. Up to a few months before Dick Ercolano had trodden the unimpaired path beaten by thousands of conceited young men. He'd begun with blazers or brimbo hats, gulped down heartily with weak and tepid tea at his cheap British lodgings. A cigarette—ten for sixpence—a glance at the general news, and a prolonged study of the sporting pages of a newspaper, with particular attention to the racing item. A fight for a trapeze in the Rixton Road. A dull meeting at the office. A frugal lunch at a marble-topped table in the crowded smoking-room of a wash-up in one hand and a domino poised reflectively in the other. Opposite, a party-faced colleague who most often was the twopenny on the game. An afternoon of interminable tedious with interminable figures, awaiting the hour of release.

Then they for the bright lights, a seat in the pit of a theatre, a game of billiards at a local saloon, where Dick was received with



reference as an authority on Stock Exchange affairs, a group of police—mostly a friend of Dick's—were dining in a little Soho restaurant—supper comes for two bob—or a rambling innery through the West End, where one might wince at the price of a few Scotchies.

There were a number of things one might do on six pounds a week if one were clever, and the landlord did not mind feeding his flat iron so that one might wear pretentiously trousers. On the other hand, there were a number of things one could not do.

No, it must not be assumed that Dick Estreban was a street-wise fellow. These might have been diagnosed by the letters he wrote irregularly to a little Hampshire town where his father—a pillar of the church—struggled with the duties of a tiny church's shop. Old Estreban would now and again proudly send a passage from one of these letters to a favoured intimate. Dick did not lie in so many words, but he conveyed an atmosphere which his parent was quite ready to interpret. The boy was deeply in the confidence of the money kings of London.

His own child, old Hint, Hint, Sore & Barter, relied implicitly upon him, and never asked without his advice. Was not Dick his most trusted assistant who, beyond doubt, would be a partner soon?

There was something about, too, of Dick's status in the firm he had been able to roam home of late, and old Estreban had, for the first time in a prosperous career, tucked away a few hundred pounds in the bank. This could not be far distant when he would retire, become a churchwarden, and watch his boy soar to meteoric heights in the realms of finance.

Now all this world of sham had coiled about Dick Estreban's arm. He saw himself steadily—a fool of a typewriter-pauper clerk—on the object of the meeting conference. Why even his casual, light girl, criminal herself, and confederate of criminals, whom he had patronized while he posed as a man of the world, despised him.

It did creep at the thought of this, but, casually enough, it was the hurt to his respectability that aroused his worst apprehension. He was strung to a point of desperation, willing to snatch at the hand of a devil that would keep his shame from becoming the sport of common tongues.

It was clear, even to his overworked brain, that to uphold under the conditions which the old offered would not solve his problem. There would be staring headlines in the papers. He would be labelled a sneaking embezzler and, spite of the girl's gay reassurance, it was not clear that he would be able to evade the hue and cry which would surely stretch to the uttermost ends of the earth.

His jaw stiffened.

"It is arranged."

She shook her head gently, and rising, rested her gleaming finger-tips on the tablecloth.

"Well, it's a pity. I can't do any more. But that girl and her crew is going to take care."

She waited for an instant, smiling tolerantly down at him while he gazed at her. Then with a nod of gracious farewell she turned and, as it seemed to him, carried her slim figure with an air of insolence, carelessness, and a bonny dash into the distance of the room.

Dick Estreban stared unseeing in the direction she had taken. In a little he, too, rose, his left hand clutching his forehead. He halted, momentarily irresolute, under the big pillars of the hotel, and a figure muffled in a heavy great coat clutched at his sleeve.

"May I have a word with you, Mr. Estreban?"

The young man froze on his feet. A tumultuous wave of apprehension left his faculties paralysed. He faced the stranger dumbly, and a bonny dash came from beneath the heavy coat collar.

"Don't be alarmed. I am not a detective."

"What do you want?" He found it an effort to speak.

"To help you find twenty thousand pounds," said the other casually. "We can't talk here. My car is at hand. If you will join me for a while I will explain."

Taking that for granted, he thrust his arm through that of Estreban, and led the way to a great Rolls-Royce drawn to the kerb-side. An alert chauffeur sprang to hold the door wide. Dick took his seat as one mesmerized, and the chauffeur followed and the chauffeur adjusted the rays about them.

"Get along," said the stranger curtly.

#### THE TRAPPER.

It was unexpected in part of the expected at Scotland Yard. Nevertheless, as in all well-ordered organizations, extraordinary emergencies are not welcomed. They tend to put a strain upon the machine, and they also tend to be inefficient and to be a source of disconcerting while working upon a problem, however pleasing it may be when a triumphant conclusion has been reached.

The trouble began when Winter, the veteran Chief Constable of the Criminal Investigation Department, received among his mail a typewritten envelope which contained nothing but a piece of wire, twisted in the form of a noose. Winter, who was a practical man with thirty years' experience of the underworld, took his very tools, his important little water-pipe basket. Scarcely a day passed but he received some such melodramatic communication among his letters, and he had little time to spare for such trifles.

"Some tom-fool who's been reading detective story tips," he commented.

A couple of days later had come the jewel robbery at Dalston. Old Dutby Ogil had been sent off at ten o'clock, and found a note pinned to his coat.

No, Old Dutby might be found ranking in the directories as a wholesale dealer in precious stones, and, in fact, was well known in Hatton Garden. He is also known to the law.

He was a consummate receiver—a fence—through whose paddy fingers had passed the proceeds of many a big haul of stolen jewels. More than once it had been tooth and go with him to check his place in the underworld. Always there had been that gap in the evidence.

Precious stones apart from their settings are hard to trace, hence leaving no record. It is certain, could have denounced this piece of rogues' more history; an one could have urged the Criminal Investigation Department more strongly to energetic measures to bring the law to justice than did Old Dutby, when he discovered a bare safe—bare, that is, but for a five wire noose lying at the bottom of one of the rifled drawers.

Winter regretted that he had thrown away the noose that he had received when this came to his knowledge. He regretted it still more when he learned that a wire noose had cropped up in still another business.

From the Old Jewry the City of London returned a note that a well-known firm of stockbrokers, Messrs. Hint, Hint, Sore & Barter, were concerned about the strange disappearance of a clerk, one Richard Estreban. He was the man they had been registered with a great deal of bonds to the value of twenty thousand pounds belonging to their clients. On the top of the package was a noose of thin wire.

No man could discuss law while talking with a thief, earnestness and honesty. Winter, as many newspaper men knew, by habit and training he was cautious of needless issues until he had thoroughly weighed them. At the moment, apart from the unknown distributor of wire nooses, he was the only person who had knowledge that in some way these cases were linked. Not even Crest, the divisional detective-inspector of the F Division, who with his staff was thrusting into certain avenues of the underworld, with a very clear idea that Old Dutby had been double-crossed by some of his acquaintances, knew that his chief was aware of facts which might lead to the discovery of that theory.

As for the City Police, they had merely passed on the singular facts of Estreban's disappearance as a matter of interest. So far as they knew, his employers did not accuse him of anything.

Still, the thing could not now be ignored. Winter twisted his cigar from one corner of his mouth to another as he ran over in his

mind the available men who might be able to get to the bottom of the matter. All detectives are not turned out in the mould. They have diverse temperaments and qualifications which cannot be ignored by a wise superior.

One man may excels by mere dogged tenacity of purpose; another may have close knowledge of certain classes of criminals; a third may have specialist acquaintance with what may be called the mechanical, scientific side of crime; a detective.

There is the ruthless, domineering type, and the sly, unscrupulous man who can win the friendship even of those whom duty compels him to scourge. One may excel by wit and because he has keen imagination, and another because he is utterly destitute of that quality. Thus it was on careful consideration that Winter sent for Martin Wilde. For Wilde, although he could make the conventional noose—which are pretty much the same in the general course of criminal investigation—could, when put to it, use a violin and an initiative that were beyond the power of most.

He was a tall, loose-jointed man, something under forty, with lean, clear-shaven face, eyes somewhat deep-set, and a thin, mobile mouth that betrayed a quick application of the business aspects of men and things. Except when business demanded otherwise, he paid a scrupulous attention to dress, and in his spare hours he had a strong leaning towards the dramatic. He estimated his own value, and he was no respecter of persons.

With a perfunctory tap at the door he strode into Winter's room, and tucked his lanky figure into the leather divan chair flanking the Chief Constable's desk.

"See you're closing up this coming business," observed Winter. "When do you think it will be through?"

Wilde contemplated the finger-tips of his left hand.

"A matter of days," he replied. "Bay a week. We're only waiting to get the three of them into the net and to look at 'em."

"Mustn't you finish that up, couldn't be?"

"Sure. We've got the place under observation, and are ready to pounce."

"Shove them on to it, then. I've got something else I want to look at."

"Like a bit out of a book. You may be wasting your time."

He briefly recounted the coincidence of the wire nooses.

Wilde listened with impassive face, his chin resting on his cupped hand.

"Funny business, guv'nor," he commented. "What do you think of it?"

The other adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses, and his eyes twinkled.

"I'm too old a bird to think," he declared, "I don't make anything out of it. That's your business. The crooks I've met don't advertise—most of them don't even say they are crooks and go to it. Not a word outside this room. If this is someone doing a bit of lip-lapping, we don't want anyone to know it but our two selves."

"The troops—do you mean say for the time, if you find that there's something behind it, we can then decide what to do."

Wilde closed his eyes in deep concentration thought. He shook his head slowly when he reopened them.

"Can't see how this can be a joke," he said. "Yet, as you say, ordinary crooks don't do this sort of thing. Seems to me as if someone's throwing out a challenge—kinda trap. The troops—do you mean say for the time, if you find that there's something behind it, we can then decide what to do."

Wilde closed his eyes in deep concentration thought. He shook his head slowly when he reopened them.

"I asked Crest to let me have it," he explained.

"Thank you, guv'nor, I'll just drop round and have a word with these Hint people."

Winter, who had the faculty of wiping a subject perceptibly from his mind, turned to other business, and Martin Wilde, whistling softly to himself, gave his way to the chief inspector's room to collect his coat and hat. Then he summoned Detective-Sergeant Mont, a silent and dogged officer, who received

(Continued on page 25.)

The Editor of "The Thriller" has the pleasure of introducing you to—

# Thrillers!

## THE NEW DETECTIVE STORY GAME

### READ THIS FIRST!

Thriller have become the rage in the United States and have now reached Britain, where they will speedily become as great a craze as Cross Word Puzzles.

Thriller, like golf, is a game you can play by yourself as well as with your friends. The rules are simplicity itself. On this page you are given details of *Battle Problems No. 1*. There will be another sent next. Briefly, you are told the story of a crime and given all the data necessary for its solution. As your own detective, read the problem through very carefully, giving consideration to every detail, then try to answer the questions at the end.

Answers should be marked on indicated after comparing your answers with those given on page 17. These answers are printed upside down so that you may not catch your eye before you have had a chance to test your skill. Remember, it is the score of your solution, not its exact wording, that counts.

Try a thriller on your friends. Read the problem to them and see what they can make of it, awarding a small prize if you like—it is the first to give the correct solution.



## WHO MURDERED ELLINGTON BREEZE?

MANCHESTER was shocked one morning in June of last year by the news that a distinguished citizen, Ellington Breeze, chairman of the Breeze Chemical Works of that city, had been murdered by poison gas, generated in his bedroom during the night.

The police investigation revealed the following pertinent facts:

Breeze had been found dead in his bed at eight o'clock in the morning by his manservant, who for years had aroused him at that hour. On the mantelpiece—there was no fireplace—the police found a glass flask of about one quart capacity. Its stopper was missing. It was the kind of glass vessel familiar to any chemical laboratory. Experts said that too chemical poured upon another would have generated the poison gas immediately, and that diffusion in the room must have followed quickly. Neither on the glass flask or other objects were finger-prints found.

Although both windows, which were curtained, had been open eight inches at the bottom, the practically instantaneous effects of the gas had killed every living thing in the bedroom. Breeze's pet bullfinch lay dead in its cage. Half a dozen flies lay dead on the window-sills. The dark green blinds were found brown down nearly to the bottom of the lower window sash, disarranging the murder chamber, though the sun shone brightly outside.

The wavering finger of suspicion began to point with equal emphasis at two young men, each of whom was connected with Ellington Breeze's business, and had had enough laboratory experience to have manufactured the deadly gas.

E. Brown Walters, nephew and only surviving relative of the murdered man, was one suspect. Adam Boardman, Breeze's confidential secretary, was the other. Each professed his innocence, each to a degree had an alibi.

According to the police investigation, so far as could be determined, both had good records, no debts or extravagances. Both seemed deeply affected by the tragedy.

Neither man seemed capable of committing such a cowardly crime. Yet the police reflected upon the terms of Breeze's will, which divided half his estate—about £200,000—between the favourite nephew and the devoted employee, Boardman. The other half of the estate Breeze had bequeathed to charity. The terms of the will, drawn five years before, had never been a secret.

Walters and Boardman had maintained cordial but not close relations while in the employ of Breeze. Each expressed confidence in the innocence of the other.

A doctor examined the body at 9.30 a.m. and declared that Breeze had been dead at least four hours, possibly for as long as ten hours. The position of the body in the bed indicated to a certainty that death had overtaken Breeze while in his bed, in which he had been confined by a slight illness.

The police, cherishing a uniform suspicion of Walters and Boardman, decided that they would leave the murderer when they knew approximately the hour in which the poison gas was generated in Breeze's bedroom.

Boardman, the secretary, had been with Breeze until a little after 11.30. He admitted it, and his leaving the house about quarter to twelve was confirmed by the testimony of old Mrs. Grey, Breeze's housemaid and housekeeper, whose room was near Breeze's on the second floor. Boardman had been discussing business matters with his employer, who was laid up in bed convalescing from grippa. He admitted returning to Breeze's bedroom for a moment after first leaving it, in order, he said, to secure some written instructions which he had forgotten. At that time, he said, he put out the bed-room light at Breeze's request, and closed the door

upon leaving. And after leaving Breeze's house Boardman went straight to his own. He shared a flat with two other young men. Through the roof of the night and until the body was found his alibi was perfect.

Walters had returned unexpectedly early from Liverpool, at one o'clock in the morning. Mrs. Grey heard him enter, came out and spoke to him on the second-floor landing, and asked if there was anything she might do. Walters said he was not hungry and would go straight to bed. He asked about his uncle's health, heard that Boardman had been there until nearly midnight attending to details of the business, and observed that his uncle must be recovering nicely from his grippa if he could remain at work so late. He went up stairs to his room on the third floor.

Mrs. Grey, who was suffering from rheumatism, returned to her room on the second floor, read for a while, and then went to sleep—up until 2.30 a.m. he believed. From that time until the discovery of the murder, Walters' claim of innocence, like Boardman's, had no support from other testimony than his own.

In short, the police suspected, and their suspicions proved well founded, that if Breeze died before midnight it was Boardman who liberated the gas that killed him, and that if Breeze died after midnight, then Walters was the slayer of his uncle.

This is all the evidence from which the police shrewdly fixed the approximate time of the crime, and thereby the identity of the murderer.

Can you solve this problem by answering these questions?

1. Was it Walters or Boardman who liberated the gas? (Marks 5)

2. How did the police deduce it? (Marks 5)

(Continued from page 24.)

instructions to clear up the ceiling case with a comprehending nod. He asked no questions. If Wilde did not wish to say why he had so suddenly abandoned the case, he would do so. If not, he no doubt had his reasons. And it was none of Hint's affair to be curious.

So the chief inspector took a taxi to the City and dropping off at the Bank, made his way to Throgmorton Street, where he found the slightly old-fashioned offices of Hint, Hunt, Sons, & Barker. The clerk to whom he presented his card looked at him with something like awe and held a whispered consultation with a clerk at one of the high stools, who looked round with sudden interest. Chief detective-inspectors still hold a glamour even in Throgmorton Street. The clerk slipped from his stool and approached the counter.

"Which Mr. Hint did you wish to see—sir?" He was not exactly sure of the degree of deference with which such a personage as chief inspector from Scotland Yard should be addressed.

"One of the partners. I don't care whom. Is it in regard to Estrehan?"

"A very—yes might say so. Mr. Wilde never in fault, except that an obvious construction would be put on his visit. Besides, he might find the clerk even more useful than the principals. 'You are a friend of his?'"

"Yes, sir."

The clerk was a little flattered by the air of the great man. He was conscious, too, that every eye in the outer office was surreptitiously fastened on him.

"We had many interests in common. Queer thing for him to do, but he certainly has been rather funny of late. You don't think that there's been foul play, do you?"

The detective shook his head mechanically.

"No, young fellow, I think that scarcely likely. I suppose there's a number of lady friends. One of the lads, eh?"

A flicker of embarrassment crept into the other's face, and his voice dropped.

"Well, of course, you know, sir—that is, no kinked about town a bit together. Nothing out of the way, but he's a bit of a fun. It was about a month ago he brought me. He got in with some strange people, and I suppose I wasn't high-toned enough. Besides, I haven't a dinner-jacket. I met him one evening, coming out of a theatre, and he said a girl—no little bit of stuff she was too—and he absolutely cut me dead. Not that I minded then, I hope I've got tact, and there are times—about a week later I saw him with some men in evening dress in Shaftesbury Avenue, and, believe me, although I went up to him, he stared me through and through as though I was some strange kind of insect. I said it got with me, and he said he had, but once I was satisfied—that he had met her near Shaftesbury Avenue—but it was him right enough."

"Thank you," said Wilde. "If you take that card in your pocket."

He found Mr. Reginald Hint, the senior partner, an affable, red-checked old gentleman, who, beneath an air of levee indifference, tried to conceal what Wilde diagnosed as some slight nervousness.

"Yes—oh, yes! You've come about this fellow Estrehan. A nice boy, Mr. Wilde, though perhaps not perfectly thorough in the performance of his duties. I think he would have selected some of the best and have been a valuable man. We thought it best to report the facts, because he had not been here for some days, and his landlady—he had lodgings at Broxton—called to say that he had also disappeared from there. It seemed an odd sort for the police, so we just reported it to you. Nothing to do with us really, but awkward—very awkward, I must say. We're short-handed in it."

"There was a question about some leads," said Wilde.

"Ah, yes?" Hint shifted a paperweight quite needlessly from one end of his desk to the other. "That's quite all right. They're in the office."

Wilde leaned back in his chair, and, thrusting his hands deep into his trousers-pockets,

regarded the fire from under his shaggy eyebrows.

"You might be quite candid with me, Mr. Hint," he said. "These bonds? Were they the identical bonds that you had purchased for your clients, or only similar securities? Had they been in Estrehan's charge?"

"I won't pretend not to understand what is in your mind, Mr. Hint, said nervously. "I had—had it, I had hoped that there would be no necessity for police action. He rose and strode in short staccato paces about the room. "To tell you the truth Estrehan's duties were more or less mechanical. He should have had no chance to touch those particular securities, much less to dispose of them."

"Then he did do so?"

"I am afraid our inquiries have no doubt. I'll not deny that there has been gross laxity in the office securities. But the bonds returned to us are exactly similar, though not identical. There will be no loss to our clients."

"And if you initiated proceedings against this man, there would have to be disclosure of this—this laxity, which would hurt the credit of the firm?"

"Exactly," Mr. Wilde. There's really no harm done."

"You may save your mind, Mr. Hint, I have no intention of forcing you to prosecute even if I could. All I am anxious about is the discovery of what happened. I fancy I can give you no information on another matter. Have you the packing in which the bonds reached you?"

The stockbroker gave a sudden breath—it was almost a sigh—of relief as his visitor made his point clear.

"I am afraid they were thrown away. The address was typewritten, and the postmark was the E.C. district. They would scarcely have been delivered. I have heard that your gentlemen are with trifles. But there was a piece of twisted wire, which probably got into the package by accident. I have it here."

He pulled with one of the desk drawers, and pushed a thin wire needle into Wilde's hand.

The detective gave it a cursory glance, and dropped it between the pages of a small notebook, which he took from an inside pocket.

"And now," said the senior partner, "make a first stop. It was explainable that a clerk who had tampered with securities should be diffident about returning to an office from which, at the very best, he was certain to be dismissed. But for the wire scene, the thing would have resolved itself into one of those commonplace, everyday tragedies with which a lifetime at Scotland Yard had made Wilde familiar."

By the time he had left Hint's office he was satisfied that he had gained all that he was likely to be pleased with that quarter. He had questioned every one who had had association with the missing clerk, and, in a quiet conglomeration of shorthand and abbreviated language, had made notes of the names who had been favored, and the people with whom he was known to have acquaintance. He decided to draw Brexton.

A garbion loudly carried the information to the senior partner, a port or two farther. From a flood of words Wilde gathered that she had framed on Estrehan's late night habits, and had even ventured "a maternal reconnaissance." Because this has always been a respectable house, and I'm a respectable woman."

So far from this having effect, she explained, almost tearfully, the young man had been very kind and considerate. He had reported that he had taken to going out in a new dress suit "just as if he was a proper port." She made it clear that since her forbidding had haunted her, she never since her father had first been a doctor, a dinner, and a dinner. And now goodness knew what had happened.

The last time she had seen him he had come home, dressed according to his new habit, and he had spoken without saying a word. If he had intended to go away, why didn't he tell us some other things with him? There was his last and his second best suit still in his wardrobe, and his suitcase under the bed."

Wilde obtained permission to take a glance at Estrehan's apartment. A rigorously neat bed-

sitting-room, elegantly furnished, and with the walls shrouded in stiff photographs of bygone generations of the landlady's relatives, framed in plush, and crude specimens of amateur refreshment draughtsmanship depicted in inkwork apparently inspired by delirium tremens.

Wilde had no scruples in searching the place—not such an intensive prolonged search as he might in other circumstances have made—but a rough scratch of things at hand. In the breast-pocket of one of the suits he found a wallet. Taking it by one corner he shook its contents out on a small bedside table. There were a couple of letters beginning "My dear brother," and Estrehan's name, a photograph of a man's achievements and full of petty small town gossip. There were three book-makes' slips; a tailor's bill; a few receipts, among which Wilde took one for a gold watch; a money-order's circular; a faded photograph of an elderly woman; and a note of seven words addressed to "R. Harrow, Esq., the Grouse Club." "Will see you to-night. All yours, Stella."

"It's," commented the inspector, and storing the wallet in his pocket left the house.

"Stella," whoever she was, presented herself to him as the most obvious path to follow. So he made his way to the Grouse Club, which had its house and a laurel in its cellar in one of the streets running between Piccadilly and Oxford Street. There the manager received him with almost apocryphal politeness. When one is running a night club as a possible means of making money, it is well to be polite to police officers. Then Wilde was afforded instant access to the members' register and to the visitors' book, and his diplomatically framed inquiries were answered.

He emerged whistling, and with the complacency of a man who feels that all is well with the world, boarded a bus and made his way home. For once the name of Stella Cliffe had met his eye as an inhabitant of the club, and that he knew in his arm and end of the coil he was seeking to unravel.

It was eleven at night ere he returned. There was the clang of cymbals and the whine of the saxophone in the big main room of the club. The detective stood for a while in the shelter of a curtained recess watching the dancers. Half an hour passed, and he was impatiently more than once at his watch. At last he saw Stella, buoyant and vivacious, laughing into the face of her tall escort. The two were vividly outlined beneath the strong lights of an archway opposite the spot where he stood.

Then the lights flickered and went out. Martin Wilde heard the low-voiced reassurances of the men, the subdued chattering of the women above the crash of the band, which as some fashion continued to play. He waited till the light should be restored.

Someone switched on a hand-lamp, and its beam rested on the man with Stella Cliffe. The two were still in the same position, the tips of her fingers resting on his sleeve. Then even that thin ray went out and the darkness was split by a vicious needle of flame. A green blinding report mingled with the wild shriek of a woman. The music stopped abruptly.

Wilde flung his way forward, striking a match as he moved. As though at a signal the room was again flooded with light, and he then saw Stella Cliffe standing on the floor, a crimson bluish slowly spreading on her shirt front. Stella was standing rigid as marble with pale set face, and lips moving mechanically.

"What do believe it?" she was saying as the detective reached her. "Why, it's you, Mr. Wilde. Wouldn't believe it?"

#### THE MURDER OF VELVET.

STELLA CLIFFE stood over the dead body of Velvet Grisham, dry-eyed, incredulous.

The ordinary person who, however innocently, however remotely, has come into association with murder always feels as if she were a part of the crime. The MURDERERS are things that one reads about in the newspapers and in books. They are an unreal



as a stage spectacle, casualties which cannot be taken into account as personal contingencies. That a man can know should kill or be killed is incapable of conception. But when such a thing does happen those concerned are in the first shock as people suffering from a nightmare.

Stella, although her mature years had been spent in many illegitimate enterprises, had never come into contact with unexpected death in this form. Her reaction was entirely normal.

She had liked Velvet. He was a jolly, comfortable rascal. Superficially, at least, he took life as a joke. He needed money, so he used his not inconsiderable wits to get it, and, since an all-wise providence had seen to it that there was no element of risk in what he did, he had no difficulty in providing for his wants on a moderately magnificent scale. He had assimilated the maxim that business was business, and all was fair that came to his aid. He could handle a pack of cards as deftly as the most expert conjuror. His knowledge of horse racing had depth and profundity. Give him ten minutes start and he would sell a railway concession at the Royal Polo or a yacht race in New England to the hardest-headed, closest-tightened-up an Aborigine Jew who ever existed. More than that, he could laugh jovially when the job was over and demand of his awakened victims as a matter of course had done, "Well, what are you going to do about it?"

Stella had found it well to join the little coterie that revolved about this gentleman, and Velvet had welcomed her advent. A girl of her caliber could not only lure fat pigmees to destruction, but assist in their packing. True, Velvet somehow always got the lion's share of the take-off, but on the whole she did well, and he was pleasant to work with.

Do not be under any illusion—there was no question of love between them. Both professed a contempt for sentiment. Their intimacy was analogous to that which might exist between a prostitute and her leading lady.

This daughter of the underworld was, if you like, a mercenary, merciless trickster, but she was yet still young enough to feel occasional bursts of compassion. She had found delight in watching her fascination about Dick Estrehan, the whole she despised him as a rich, unsophisticated young fool. She had seen him gulp with avidity at the last thrown down by Velvet, who posed as the "Hon. Derek Vane," and his confederates.

The thing had been ridiculously simple, and it had been practically all done in one evening in a soft-carpeted, delicately lighted room in the Hon. Derek's flat. These Estrehan had been initiated into the inner mysteries of crime by a grand trainer—a file taken for the evening by one who was known in certain circles as Sleek Thomas, a graduate of Velvet's own school.

He was told how "jobs"—great racing coups—were carried out, and how easy it was to hide the true form of a horse by allowing it to lose a number of races until its handicap and the betting odds presented opportunity for a wholesale raid on the bookmakers. The thing was as simple as falling off a log. A wise man who wanted to make a fortune—

So Estrehan had fallen. At the bottom of her heart—though she would scarcely have admitted it even to herself—Stella had felt a sympathy for him. She had even become a little afraid of her emotions, and had faced the possibility of selfish reproaches by accepting his invitation to a last dinner with the intention of utterly disillusioning him about himself. The tragedy of that comedy ate deeper into her soul than she would have cared to disclose.

Velvet had given that infatuated amateur chucker of his wits the reins of the road. The poor fool! So he was a tinkering perquisite, after all. Well, he could sicken no in. Anyway, we've got the handle. Why worry?

He cut his laughter off abruptly and his eyes narrowed.

"See, Stella, this is not so good. They'll get on to this bird. I wish he'd taken your throat and hopped it. They're bound to have

him inside, and—I know the breed—he'll squeal."

Stella gave an expressive shrug of her shoulders.

"No, he won't," she said definitely.

The man eyed her shrewdly.

"Well, perhaps you know best. If you think you've not tickled anyone. Anyway, there's nothing to it. He got his money on a horse and the horse lost. We can't be blamed for that. It might happen to anyone. How were we to tell that he'd been dipping his fingers in the till. Let's forget it. Come on, I'll buy you some grub."

That had been all. She had tried to wipe the matter from her mind, to forget Estrehan. And now Velvet lay dead, and a detective was bounding over him. He had played a man for a sucker once too often.

"He's through," announced Martin Wilde, straightening himself up. "Where's the manager? Stand back, you people. I'm a police officer. Here, you!" He seized a



The blackness was split by a vicious needle of flame.

gaping waiter by the arm. "Slip to the door and say that no one's to be allowed to leave the building under any pretext. And then 'phone to Vice Street and tell 'em what's happened. Say that Mr. Wilde is here, and that I need half a dozen constables, the divisional surgeon, and two women scoundrels."

A moment later he repeated these instructions to the manager, and then his gaze wandered steadily over the kaleidoscopic throng of men and women who were now being despatched back from the little group about the dead man. Almost unconsciously one hand had closed about Stella's wrist. The girl gave a little moan and he turned on her abruptly.

"What do you know about this?" he asked. His tone was low and menacing.

"I never thought—I never dreamed that he'd do it," she faltered. "If I had known—"

"When do you mean? Who are you speaking of, girl?" His eyes, harsh and commanding, dwelt on her. "Tell me."

The girl's face twitched. She withstood in a feeble attempt to release her arm. Dully her half-glimpsed senses comprehended that she was being questioned by the master enemy of her class, and as it were instinctively, she summoned some of her old self-possession resolution.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Wilde. I don't know what I was saying."

He bent his lips to within an inch of her ear.

"I'll tell you," he said in a fierce whisper.

"You were saying that Dick Estrehan killed this man."

"I was not," she denied tremulously.

Her voice trailed off, and Stella Cliffe dropped in a dead faint beside the murdered man.

It was no moment for delicacy, Martin Wilde knew that he had his hands full for a while and he could not be bothered with attentions to a fainting woman. At his word some of the waiters carried the senseless girl into the manager's room, and Wilde with inward relief saw three men advancing towards him. Vice Street had acted promptly. They were a uniformed inspector, the divisional detective-inspector, and the divisional surgeon. While the medical man bent over the body the other three held a short consultation. Then Wilde mounted a chair while the others hurried away.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "most of

you have been witnesses of the crime that has just taken place. A man has been killed, and the murderer is still somewhere within this building. I have to ask you to assist my colleagues and myself. Both men and women will be searched before they can be permitted to leave. You will all be questioned and your names and addresses will be taken. I hope that you will follow the instructions that will be given you."

He dropped to the floor, and a man, wearing across his breast the red ribbon of some foreign order, detached himself from the crowd.

"I pass you ought to have this," he said, and by his accent Wilde discerned the educated and travelled American. "I have just picked it up. I suppose your friend the murderer was anxious to get rid of it."

He held out a small electric torch.

"Thank you," said the detective.

His eyes rested indifferently on the other, yet at that instant he took in a man somewhere about forty, of medium height, but with broad shoulders that gave indication of immense strength. The brown eyes were steady and inscrutable. Somehow, Martin Wilde had a vague impression that he ought to know that clean-cut, square-chinned face with its firm determined mouth. There was a hiatus in his memory and it irritated him. This man might conceivably be the assassin himself, making a bold bid to get rid of a piece of damning evidence.

"I'll be glad," went on Wilde, "if you will, as nearly as you can, show me the spot where you found this. It may be valuable evidence, Mr. . . . He raised his eyebrows in interrogation.

"Thorold. That's my name—Quenton Thorold."

A flood of recollection swept over Wilde. Quenton Thorold was in a sense an international figure. The attention of Scotland Yard had first been attracted to him during the great war, when he had taken marvellous personal risks and spent his millions freely in

the organization of a sort of unofficial secret service which had been of inestimable value to the allies.

Since the war he had found employment in an Antarctic expedition, headed and financed by himself; he had felt what would have been called a filibustering expedition, had it not been successful, into a Spanish American State; and lately it was understood that he had filled in some spare time with big game hunting.

"I have heard of you, sir," said Wilde, extending his hand.

Thorold led him to a spot which he indicated as approximately the place where he had found the arch. The detective with the point of a penknife scratched a cross on the polished floor.

"After I have finished with this gang"—with a sweep of his hand he thus discreetly referred to the members of the *Gnomes Club*—"I should like to have a chat with you, sir. Perhaps you will stay around."

"If I shan't be in the way," agreed the other.

Wilde strode away. His hasty arrangements were for clearing the place as quickly as possible, yet it was certain that a considerable time must be taken. Concealable separated the crowd into groups of each sex, and men and women were ushered one by one into different rooms where they were quickly and efficiently searched. As they emerged each person was subjected to a rapid examination by the detectives.

They were a mixed lot. There were a few men and women of title, many rich young men about town, a well-known actress or two,

and some not so well known—a number of business and professional men, a sprinkling of visitors from the suburbs, and a few ladies and gentlemen whose motive for presence at the festivities might be open to doubt. More than half of them had personal reasons for desiring their names linked with a night club, and this did not make the task of the police any easier. But in an hour the job was done. Four persons were detained while other inquiries were made about them, but this was a precaution from which no serious result was anticipated. The rest were turned out into the cold night, where newspaper men, hauled off by their official information, eagerly seized upon them for "eye-witness" stories.

None of the affair had filtered out in any direction, and Winter himself had reached the place before the last of the ribbioneers had been disposed of. There was no time for explanations, and the senior official contented himself for the while with the rôle of spectator. By now there had arrived enough detectives to make a rigorous search of the building simple. The premises were ransacked to their remotest recesses. If the *murderer* was still in hiding he had concealed himself well.

While groping his brow, across which a dark lock of hair had fallen, and directing the chief constable who absolutely explained the events of the day and night.

"There's only one way out of this place," he explained. "Even the trunkman's goods have to come in the front entrance. I'll assure that no person has gone out with a pistol. The outer doors I shan't open, never closed

immediately on my instructions, and no one left the building for at least ten minutes before. If the murderer has passed through our hands, what has he done with his gun?"

"Ask me," said Winter. "What about seeing this girl?"

"Not much use, I'm afraid," said the inspector, with a lift of his shoulders. "I had almost forgotten about her. She's been stored away somewhere. I don't think she can help us."

"But you say she believes that this is the work of Esteban? That looks likely to me. If I read the thing right, she'll be able to prove a motive."

"She believes it's that young fellow, yes. That's why I think she can't help us much. I might be tempted to suspect him myself but for one thing."

He opened and closed a hand, so that Winter caught a glimpse of yet another wire nose.

"I started to cross the room on the shot," he said. "The lights were out for a matter of seconds. Yet when I reached Velvet this was on the lapel of his coat."

"The Trapper again?" gasped Winter.

"Why did the *feeling* of Dick Esteban lead to the murder of Velvet? Was it just because we saw three something for some angle behind it all? Was it the Trapper, and why does he go out of his way to negatively the police?"

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