THE THRILLER

THE PAPER WITH A THOUSAND THRILLS

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The SECRET of BEACON INN

A BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL of SENSATIONAL MYSTERY

By Leslie Charteris

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Gripping revolvers, the weird, masked figures clambered up the side of the mystery ship and peered cautiously along the deck.

THE Secret of Beacon Inn

Chapter 1.
A GHASTLY PLOT.

ON a certain day in November, three men sat over the remains of dinner in the Italian roof garden of the Clarion Restaurant.

Outside, a thin drizzle of sleet and rain was falling. It lay like glistening oil on the streets, and made the hurrying throngs of pedestrians turn up the collars of their coats against the cold, and huddle numbed hands deep into their pockets. But in the roof garden all was warmth and light and colour. In the high, dim glass roof overhead, softly-tinted lights gleamed like bright artificial stars; and an artificial silver moon shone in the centre of the dome. Vine-decked loggias surrounded the room, and the whole of one wall was covered with a beautifully executed fresco of a Mediterranean panorama, bathed in sunshine. The Clarion had a reputation for luxury, and its Italian roof garden was the most elaborately comfortable of all its restaurants.

The three men sat at dinner in an alcove. The curtains of the window beside them were drawn, and they could look out on to Piccadilly Circus, a damp and striking contrast to the sybaritic warmth of the room in which they were seated.

The meal was over; and in front of each man was a cup of coffee, and a glass of the 1875 brandy of which the Clarion is justly proud, served in the huge-bowled, bottle-necked glasses which such a brandy merits. They smoked long, thin, expensive cigars.

The man at the head of the table spoke.

"By this time," he said, "you are justly curious to discover how many of my promises I have fulfilled. It gives me great satisfaction to be able to tell you that I have fulfilled them all. Every inquiry has been made, and every necessary item of information is docketted here." He tapped his forehead with a thin forefinger. "My plans are complete; and now that you have tasted the brandy, which I trust you find to your liking, and your cigars are going satisfactorily, I should like your attention while I outline the details of my project."

He was tall and spare, with a slight stoop—you would have taken him at first glance for a retired diplomat, or a University professor, with his thin, finely-cut face and mane of grey hair. He looked to be about fifty-five years of age, but the very pale blue eyes under the shaggy, white eyebrows were the eyes of a much younger man.

"I'm waiting to hear the story, professor," said the man on his left.

He was squat, bull-necked, and blue of chin; and his ready-made evening clothes

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A LONG COMPLETE NOVEL OF THRILLS AND MYSTERY

seemed to cause him considerable discomfort.

The third man signified his readiness to listen by a silent, expressive gesture with the hand that held his cigar. This third man was small and perky, his hair muddily grey, and in the state tactfully described by barbers as "a little thin on top." A long, scraggy neck protruded from a dress collar three sizes too large.

"It is quite simple," said the man who had been addressed as "professor," and leaned forward.

The other two instinctively drew closer.

He spoke for three-quarters of an hour, and the other two listened in an intent silence which was broken only by an occasional staccato query, a request for a repetition, or a demand for more lucid explanation of a point which arose in the recital. The professor dealt smoothly with each question, speaking in a low, well-modulated voice; and at the end of the forty-five minutes he knew that the alert brains of the other two had grasped the essential points of his plan, and adjudged it for what it was—the scheme of a genius.

"That is the method I propose to adopt," he concluded simply. "If either of you has any criticism to make, you may speak quite freely."

And he leaned back with a slight smile, as though he was convinced that there could not possibly be any valid criticism.

"There's one thing you haven't told us," said the man on his right. "That is—where are we going to get hold of the—well, of the stuff?"

"It cannot be bought," answered the professor. "Therefore, we shall make it."

The man appeared to continue in doubt.

"That's easy to say," he remarked. "Now consider it practically. Neither Crantor nor I knows anything about chemistry. And you're clever in many ways, I know, but I don't believe even you can do that."

"That is quite true," said the professor. "I can't."

"A chemist must be bought," said Crantor.

The professor shook his head.

"No chemist will be bought," he said. "We cannot afford to buy anybody. Bought men are dangerous. The man who can be bought by one party can be bought by another if the price is big enough, and I never take risks of that sort. We will *compel* a chemist to do what we require, and it will be so arranged that we shall be insured against betrayal. I have already selected the agent. Her name is Betty Tregarth. She is very young, but she has

taken a degree with honours, and she is a fully qualified analytical chemist. At present she is on the staff of Coulter's, the artificial silk people. I have made all the necessary inquiries, and I know that she has all the qualifications for the task."

The man with the long neck turned, and took his cigar out of his mouth.

"Do you mind telling us how you're going to make her do it, professor?" he asked.

"Not at all, my dear Marring," answered the professor, and proceeded to do so.

This plan also they were unable to criticise, but Gregory Marring remained dissentient on one point.

"It oughtn't to have been a woman," he declared with conviction. "You never know where you are with women."

The professor smiled.

"That remark only demonstrates the crudity of your intelligence," he said. "My contention is that with a woman one can always be fairly certain where one is, but men are liable to be obstinate and difficult."

The point was not argued further.

"I may take it, then," suggested the professor, "that we are prepared to start at once?"

"There's nothing to stop us," said Marring.

"Thasso," said Crantor.

The professor turned and gazed thoughtfully out of the window. It looked very cold and bleak outside, but what he saw seemed to please him, for he smiled.

"It could be done at no other season of the year," he said. "Winter is an annual occurrence, but I cannot help thinking that the gods have been particularly kind to us in sending us such a severe winter on this occasion. Cold is essential. It is very cold now—it may be even colder in December."

Hardened though they were, the other two shuddered.

The cold outside could have been no more bitter than the s m o o t h, ruthless, calculating frostiness of the professor's voice.

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Three nights later, at about nine o'clock, Betty Tregarth was roused from the book she was reading by the ringing of the telephone.

"Is that Miss Betty Tregarth?"

"Yes. Who is that?"

"I am speaking for your brother, Miss Tregarth. My name is Raxel — Professor Bernhard Raxel. Your brother was knocked down by a taxi outside my house a little while ago, and he was carried in here to await the arrival of an ambulance. The doctors, however, have decided against moving him."

The girl's heart stopped beating for a moment.

"Is he—is he in danger?"

"I am afraid your brother is very seriously injured, Miss Tregarth, but he is quite conscious. Will you, please, come at once?"

"Yes—yes!" She was frantic now. "What address?"

"Number seven, Cornwallis Road. It is only a few hundred yards from your front door."

"I know. I'll be round in five minutes. Good-bye!"

She hung up the receiver, and dashed off for a hat and coat.

Only an hour ago her brother had left the flat which they shared, having declared his intention of visiting a West End cinema. He would have passed down Cornwallis Road on his way to the Tube station. She dared not think how bad his injuries might be. She knew the significance of these quietly ominous summonses, for her father had been fatally injured in a street accident only three years before.

In a few minutes she was ringing the bell of Number seven, Cornwallis Road, and almost immediately the door was opened by a butler.

"Miss Tregarth?" he guessed at once, for there was no mistaking her distress. "Professor Raxel told me to expect you."

"Where's my brother?"

The man threw open a door.

"If you will wait here, Miss Tregarth, I will tell the professor that you have arrived."

She went in. The room was furnished as a waiting-room, and she wondered what the professor's profession was. There were a couple of armchairs, a bookcase in one corner, and a table in the centre littered with magazines. She sat down, and strove to possess herself in patience; but she had not long to wait.

In a few moments the door opened, and a tall, thin, elderly man entered. She sprang up.

"Are you Professor Raxel?"

"I am. And you, of course, are Miss Tregarth." He took her hand. "I am afraid you will not be able to see your brother for a few minutes, as the doctor is still with him. Please sit down again."

She sat down, struggling to preserve her composure.

"Tell me—what's happened to him?"

Before answering, the professor produced a gold cigarette-case and offered it. She would have refused, but he insisted.

Over their wine glasses they hatched the plot.

"It doesn't take a professor to see that you are in a bad state of nerves," he said kindly. "A cigarette will help you."

She allowed him to light a cigarette for her, and then repeated her demand for information.

"It is difficult to tell you," said Raxel slowly, and suddenly she was terrified.

"Do you mean——"

He placed the tips of his fingers together.

"Certainly not!" he said. "In fact, I have no doubt that your brother is in perfect health. I must confess, my dear Miss Tregarth, that I lured you here under false pretences. I have not seen your brother this evening, but I have been told that he went out a little over an hour ago. There is no more reason to suppose that he has met with an accident to-night than there would be for assuming that he had met with one on any other night that he chose to go out alone."

She stared.

"But you told me——"

"I apologise for having alarmed you, but it was the only excuse I could think of which would bring you here immediately."

At first he had been geniality itself; but now, swiftly and yet subtly, a sinister element had crept into his blandness. She felt herself go cold, but managed somehow to keep her voice at its normal level.

"Then I fail to see, Professor Raxel, why you should have brought me here," she remarked icily.

"You will understand in a moment," he said.

He took a small automatic pistol from his pocket, and laid it on the table in front of her. She stared at it in amazement mingled with fear.

"Please take it," he smiled. "I particularly want you to feel safe, because I am going to say something that might otherwise frighten you considerably."

She looked blankly at the gleaming weapon, but did not touch it.

"Take it!" insisted the professor, but in quite a kindly voice. "You are here in my power, in a strange house, and I am offering you a weapon. Don't be a fool. I will explain."

Hesitantly she reached out and took the automatic in her hand. Since he had offered it she might as well accept it—there could be no harm in that—and, as he had remarked, it was certainly a weapon of which she might be glad in the circumstances. Yet she could not understand why, in those circumstances, he should offer it to her. Certainly he could not imagine that she would make use of it.

"Of course, it isn't loaded," she said lightly.

"It is loaded," replied the professor. "If you don't believe me, I invite you to press the trigger."

"That might be awkward for you. A policeman might be within hearing, and he would certainly want to know who was firing pistols in this house."

The professor smiled.

"You could shoot me, and no one would hear," he said. "I ask you to observe that there are no windows in this room. The walls are thick, and so is the door—the room is practically soundproof. Certainly the report of that automatic would not be audible in the street. I can be quite positive about that because I have verified the statement by experiment."

"Then——"

"You m a y understand me better," said the professor quietly, "if I tell you first of all that I intend to keep you here for a few hours."

"Really?"

She was becoming convinced that the man was mad, and somehow the thought made him for a moment seem less alarming. But there was nothing particularly insane about his precise level voice, and his manner was completely restrained. She settled back in her chair, and endeavoured to appear completely unperturbed. Then she thought she saw a gleam of satisfaction light up in his eyes as she took another puff at the cigarette he had given her, and her fingers opened and dropped it suddenly as though it had been red hot.

"And I suppose the cigarette was doped?" she said shakily.

"Perhaps," said the professor.

He rose and went quickly to a bell-push set in the wall beside the mantelpiece, and pressed it.

Betty Tregarth got to her feet feeling strangely weak.

"I make no move to stop you going," said

Raxel quickly. "But I suggest that you should hear what I have to say first."

"And you'll talk just long enough to give the dope in that cigarette time to work," returned the girl. "No; I don't think I'll stay, thanks."

"Very well," said Raxel. "But if you won't listen to me, perhaps you will look at something I have to show you."

He clapped his hands twice, and the door opened. Three men came in. One was the butler who had admitted her, the other was a dark, heavy-jowled, rough-looking man in tweeds.

The third man they almost carried into the room between them. He was tall and broad-shouldered, and he was so roped from his shoulders to his knees that he could only move in steps of an inch at a time unaided. His face was divided into two parts by a black wooden ruler, which had been forced into his mouth as a gag, and which was held in position by cords attached to the ends, which passed round the back of his head.

"Does that induce you to stay?" asked Raxel.

"I think it means that I am induced to go out at once, and find a policeman," said the girl, and took two steps towards the door.

"Wait!"

Raxel's voice brought her to a stop. The command in it was so impelling that for a moment it was able to overcome the panicky desire for flight which was rapidly getting her in its grip.

"Well?" she asked, as evenly as she could.

"You are a chemist, Miss Tregarth," said Raxel, "and therefore you will be familiar with the properties of the drug known as bhang. The cigarette you half-smoked was impregnated with a highly-concentrated and deodorised preparation of bhang. According to my calculations the drug will take effect about now. You still have the automatic I gave you in your hand, and there in front of you is a man gagged and bound. *Stand away, you two!*"

The professor's voice suddenly cracked out the order with a startling intenseness, and the two men who had stood on either side of the prisoner hurried into the opposite corner of the room and left him standing alone.

Betty Tregarth stared stupidly at the gleaming weapon in her hand, and looked from it to the bound man who stood stiffly erect by the door.

Then something seemed to snap in her brain, and everything went black; but through the whirling, humming, kaleidoscope of spangled darkness that swallowed up consciousness, she heard, a thousand miles away, the report of an automatic, that echoed and re-echoed deliriously through an eternity of empty blackness.

. . . . . .

She woke up in bed with a splitting headache.

Opening her eyes sleepily, she grasped the general geography of the room in a dazed sort of way. The blinds were drawn, and the only light came from a softly-shaded reading-lamp by the side of the bed. There was a dressing-table in front of the window, and a washstand in one corner. Everything was unfamiliar. She couldn't make it out at first—it didn't seem like her room.

Then she turned her head, and saw the man who sat regarding her steadily, with a book on his knee, in the armchair beside the bed. The memory of what had happened, before the drug she had inhaled overcame her, returned in its full horror. She sat up, throwing off the bedclothes, and found that she was still wearing the dress in which she had left the flat. Only her shoes had been removed.

"Take it," insisted the Professor. "It's loaded. You are in my power, and may, perhaps, have cause to use it."

The effort to rise made the room swim dizzily before her eyes, and her head felt as if it would burst.

"If you lie still for a moment," said Raxel suavely, "the headache will pass in about ten minutes."

She put her hand to her forehead and tried to steady herself. All her strength seemed to have left her, and even the terror she felt could not give her back the necessary energy to leap out of bed and dash out of the door and out of the house.

"You'll be sorry about this," she said faintly. "You can't keep me here for ever, and when I get out and tell the police——"

"You will not tell the police," said Raxel soothingly, as one might point out the fallacies in the argument of a child. "In fact, I should think you will do your best to avoid them. You may not remember doing it, but you have killed a man. What is more, he was a detective."

She looked at him aghast.

"That man who was tied up?"

"He was a detective," said Raxel. "This is his house. I may as well put my cards on the table. I am a criminal, and I had need of your services. The detective you killed was on my trail, and it was necessary to remove him. I killed two birds with one stone. We captured him in the North, and brought him back here to his own house in London, a prisoner. His housekeeper's absence had already been assured by a fake telegram summoning her to the death-bed of her mother in Manchester. I then brought you here, drugged you with bhang, and gave you an automatic pistol."

She was aghast at a sudden recollection.

"I heard a shot—just as everything went black——"

"You fired it," said Raxel smoothly, "but you are unlikely to remember that part."

Betty Tregarth caught her breath.

"It's impossible!" she cried hysterically. "I couldn't——"

Raxel sighed.

"You will disappoint me if you fail to behave rationally," he said. "The ordinary girl might be pardoned for such an outburst; but you, with your scientific training, should not need me, a layman, to explain to you the curious effects that bhang has upon those who take it. A blind madness seizes them. They kill, not knowing who they kill, or why. That is what you did. Your first shot was successful. Naturally, you fired first at the unfortunate Inspector Henley, because I had so arranged the scene that he was the first man you saw at the instant when the drug took effect. I might mention that we had some difficulty in overpowering you afterwards, and taking the pistol away from you. Henley died an hour later."

It was true. She had to admit to herself that what Raxel had said was an absolute scientific fact. Granted that she had been drugged, as he said, she would easily have been capable of doing what he said she had done.

"The terrifying circumstances," Raxel went on unemotionally, "probably hastened your intoxication. Your immediate impulse was to escape from the room at all costs, and Henley was the one man who stood between you and the door. You shot your way out—or tried to. It is all quite understandable."

"Oh, Heaven!" said Betty Tregarth softly.

Raxel allowed her a full five minutes of silence in which to grasp the exact significance of her position, and at the end of that time the pain in her head had abated a little.

"I don't care," she said dazedly. "I'll see it through—I'll tell them I was drugged."

"That is no excuse for murder," said Raxel, "and taking drugs is, in itself, an offence."

"But I can tell them everything about it—how you brought me here. There's proof!

You telephoned. The Exchange can prove that."

"The Exchange can prove nothing," said Raxel. "I did not telephone—I should be a very poor tactician to have overlooked such an obvious error. Your line was tapped, and the Exchange has no record of the call. I must ask you to realise the circumstances. You will be taken away from here, and the house will be left exactly as we found it. The only finger-prints will be yours on the automatic you used."

"Nothing has been moved, and Inspector Henley will be found lying dead here when the police are summoned by his housekeeper on her return. We have treated him very gently during his captivity; and before we leave, the ropes that bound him will be removed, so that from an examination of his body it will be impossible to prove that he was not completely at liberty in his own house—as any man, even a detective, has every right to be. The scene will be staged in such a way that the detectives, unless they are absolute imbeciles, will deduce that Henley was entertaining a woman here, and that for some reason or other she shot him.

"The woman, of course, will be you. But your finger-prints are not known to the police, and there will be nothing to incriminate you unless I should write and tell them, in an anonymous letter, where they can find the owner of the finger-prints on the gun. I don't want to have to do that."

"Then what do you want?"

"Your loyal support," said Raxel. "Tomorrow you will go to Coulter's and tell them that your doctor has advised you to take a rest cure, as you are in danger of a nervous breakdown. You will tell your brother the same story. Then you will go down with me to an inn in South Wales, which I have recently purchased, and in which I have installed an expensive laboratory. There you will work for me—and it will only be for three weeks. At the end of that time, if you have done your work satisfactorily, you will be free to go home and return to your job, and I will pay you a thousand pounds for your services. Incidentally, I can assure you that you will not be asked to do anything criminal. I required a qualified chemist on whose silence I could rely—that is all. Therefore, I took steps to secure you.

"I do not think any jury would be likely to hang you, but you would certainly go to prison for a long time—if you were not sentenced to be detained at Broadmoor during His Majesty's pleasure—and fifteen years spent in prison would rob you of the best part of your life. As an alternative to such a punishment, I think you should find my suggestion singularly acceptable."

"And what am I supposed to do in this laboratory?"

Raxel looked straight at her.

"Have you ever heard of HA?" he asked.

She gasped.

"Yes—the poison gas!"

"The latest perfection of scientific warfare," said Raxel, with suppressed enthusiasm. "If you remember, it was only a few weeks ago that the British Secret Service succeeded in stealing the formula from France. The actual agent who obtained the documents, as it happened, was under my influence, and I was able to persuade him to allow me to make a copy before he sent them to the Government analysts. I want you to prepare me a considerable quantity of HA. I understand that the process is simple, and I have taken steps to instal the necessary apparatus."

The girl felt numb with horror. The newspapers at the time had been full of descriptions of the new gas; but all that had been revealed was that the formula had been stolen from France. It was Raxel who had told her what few people could possibly know—that it was the British Secret Service which had stolen them. And the newspapers had not been sparing of detail.

The gas was the most deadly yet known, one part in one hundred thousand of air being sufficient to cause death in five minutes. It was volatile, and yet sluggish—it was prepared as a liquid which evaporated rapidly, but once vaporised it would hang in the atmosphere almost indefinitely, and could only be removed by strong wind, for it was not subject to the ordinary forms of dispersal. And it was colourless, and without smell.

A whole division might pass into a tract of country into which HA was being flooded by the enemy, and know nothing of it until a few seconds before they died.

"What can you want HA for?" she whispered.

"That is no concern of yours," answered Raxel. "You will not be asked to associate yourself with my use of it, and so you need have no fear that you will be incriminating yourself. I promise you that, when you have made a sufficient quantity for my ends, I shall ask nothing more of you. Nothing shall be done to stop your return home, and no one need ever know what you have been doing. You can, if you like, adopt me as your physician, and tell any inquirers that you are taking a cure under my personal supervision. We can arrange that. Also, I give you my word of honour that no harm shall come to you while you are in my employ."

He looked at his watch.

"It is half-past ten," he said. "You have hardly been unconscious an hour, though I expect you have been wondering how many days it has been. There is plenty of time for you to give me your answer and be back at your flat by the time your brother returns. And there is only one answer that you can possibly give."

THE RIGHT TRACK.

THEY found the body of Inspector Henley, late of the Criminal Investigation Department, sprawled out in his waiting-room among a litter of magazines spilled from the overturned table; and the Assistant Commissioner himself came down to view the scene, for the murder of a detective is a serious affair.

They found a small piece of material, that might have been torn from a woman's dress, caught on a rough splinter of wood in the angle of the door, and there were finger-prints on the automatic pistol which they found lying on the floor.

Inspector Henley's pockets were emptied, and Kennedy took the collection back to Scotland Yard himself, in an attaché-case, for a more leisured consideration.

Within ten minutes it was established that the shot which killed Henley could have been fired from the gun they had found; and the discovery that the finger-prints on the gun were not filed in the index at Scotland Yard was made almost as quickly. That left the Assistant Commissioner with nothing but the contents of Inspector Henley's pockets to work on, for the time being.

The study was completely unproductive of results, and the mystery of the murder might have been a mystery to this day, but for the unforeseeable accident which is liable to upset the cleverest plan.

A fortnight later, Kennedy, searching for the fortieth time through the pockets in Henley's wallet for any document that might have been overlooked, and that might throw some light on the problem, felt his fingers slip through a rent in the lining, and was possessed of a forlorn hope.

He carefully cut the wallet open at the seams with his penknife, and stripped out the lining; and there, where it had slipped away out of sight, he found a small green oblong piece of cardboard.

It was a third-class ticket to Llancoed, in South Wales, and it had not been used. The reason for this was seen when the date was examined, for it was marked for use the day after the murder.

Assistant Commissioner Kennedy spoke on the telephone to the Chief Constable of Monmouthshire. The Chief Constable of Monmouthshire himself went to Llancoed, and made a few tactful inquiries. Then he spoke again on the telephone to Scotland Yard; and at the end of the conversation the Assistant Commissioner sent for Detective-Inspector Rameses Smith and told him the whole story.

"I think the case might suit you, Pip," said Kennedy. "You remember Henley?"

"Of course."

"He never really resigned from the C.I.D., you know," said Kennedy. "That was a bluff. The professor knew Henley was after him, and since Henley wanted to keep on with the job, and we thought he was one of the best men we could have on it, that resignation palaver was arranged. The private inquiry business that Henley started on his own as soon as he left the Force was just a blind also. Actually he was still working for us against the professor, and he reported from time to time.

"A week before he died he wrote from Liverpool that he was hot on the professor's trail there, and then we heard nothing of him until this. The thing I can't make out is how he could have been killed in his own house in London without our even knowing that he was back. But that's not the end you've got to handle. Probably the professor was behind the murder—I'm ready to suspect him, anyway—but your job is to go to Llancoed and find out what was taking Henley there.

"From what I've heard, you'll be starting on a hot scent. It's a big chance for you if you can land the professor. Now, when do you start?"

"This morning," said Smith. "I feel I've been worked much too hard lately, and Llancoed sounds like just the place for a rest cure."

"Carry on, then, Pip," said Bill Kennedy. "Let's hear how you get on—and good luck!"

They shook hands.

"You shall have the professor within a week," said Smith. "Provided all you've told me proves to be true, Bill, I don't see how we can help getting him this time."

The Assistant Commissioner said nothing. It would have served no useful purpose to remind Smith that Henley had been just as confident when he wrote from Liverpool. But Kennedy had a great personal liking for Rameses Smith, and he had no wish to see the younger man's promising career cut short unnecessarily. Therefore he insisted on a precaution, and Smith, after some argument, agreed.

Rameses Smith started for Llancoed that morning, as he had promised. In fact, he started as soon as the interview with the Assistant Commissioner was over.

He was whistling cheerfully when he left Scotland Yard, which was characteristic of Rameses Smith in the circumstances. He could not know that he was not the first

man who had thought of Llancoed as a suitable location for a rest cure, but he had a very good idea of just how restful the next few days were likely to be. Therefore he whistled cheerfully.

* * * *

Rameses Smith had a car which ran excellently downhill, and therefore he was able to descend upon Llancoed at a clear twenty miles an hour.

The car (he called it Hildebrand, for no reason that the chronicler, nor anyone else in this story, could ever discover) was of the model known to the expert as "Touring," which is to say that in hot weather you had the choice of baking with the hood down, or broiling with the hood up. In wet weather you had the choice of getting soaked with the hood down, or driving to the peril of the whole world and yourself while completely encased in a compartment as impervious to vision as it was intended to be impervious to rain. It dated from one of the vintage years of Mr. Morris, and it was the apple of Rameses Smith's eye.

On this occasion the hood was up, and the side-screens also, for it was a filthy night. The wind that whistled round the car, and blew frosty draughts through every gap in the so-called "all-weather" defences, seemed to have whipped straight out of the bleakest fastnesses of the North Pole. With it came a thin drizzle of rain that seemed colder than snow, which hissed glacially through a clammy sea-mist.

Smith huddled the collar of his leather motoring-coat up round his ears, and wondered if he would ever be warm again.

He drove through the little village, and came, a moment later, to his destination—a house on the outskirts, within sight of the sea. It was a long, low, rambling building of two storeys, and a dripping sign outside proclaimed it to be the Beacon Inn.

It was half-past nine, and yet there seemed to be no convivial gathering of villagers in any of the bars, for only one of the downstairs windows showed a light. In three windows on the first floor, however, lights gleamed from behind yellow blinds.

The house did not look particularly inviting, but the night was particularly loathsome, and Rameses Smith would have had no difficulty in choosing between the two, even if he had not decided to stop at the Beacon Inn nearly twelve hours before.

He climbed out and went to the door. Here he met his first surprise, for it was locked. He thundered on it impatiently, and after some time there was the sound of footsteps approaching from within. The door opened six inches, and a man looked out.

"What do you want?" he demanded surlily.

"Lodging for a night—or even two nights," said Smith cheerfully.

"We've got no rooms," said the man.

He would have slammed the door in Smith's face, but Smith was rather used to people wanting to slam doors in his face, and he had taken the precaution of wedging his foot in the jamb.

"Pardon me," said Smith pleasantly, "but you have got a room. There are eight bedrooms in this pub, and I happen to know that only six of them are occupied."

"Well, you can't come in," said the man gruffly. "We don't want you."

"I'm sorry about that," said Smith. "But I'm afraid you have no option. Your boss, being a licensed innkeeper, is compelled to give shelter to any traveller who demands it and has the money to pay for it. If you don't let me in I can go to the magistrate to-morrow and tell him the story, and if you can't show a good reason for having refused me you'll be slung out. You might be able to fake up a plausible excuse by that time, but the notoriety I'd give you, and the police attention I'd pull down on you, wouldn't give you any fun at all. You go and tell your boss what I said, and see if he won't change his mind."

"I want a room, and I'm going to get one," snapped Smith, forcing back the door.

At the same time Rameses Smith suddenly applied his weight to the door. The man inside was not ready for this, and he was thrown off his balance. Smith calmly walked in, shaking the rain off his hat.

"Go on—tell your boss what I said," Smith encouraged him. "I want a room here to-night, and I'm going to get one!"

The man departed, grumbling, and Smith walked over to the fire and warmed his hands at the blaze. The man came back in ten minutes, and it appeared at once that Smith's warning had had some effect.

"The guv'nor says you can have a room."

"I thought he would," said Smith comfortably, and peeled off his coat. There were seventy-three inches of him, and he looked very big in his plus-fours.

"There's a car outside," he said. "Shove it in your garage, will you, Basher?"

The man stared at him.

"Who are you speaking to?" he demanded.

"Speaking to you, Basher Tope," said Smith affably. "Put my car in the garage."

The man came closer, and scowled into Smith's face. Smith saw alarm dawning in his eyes.

"I know you," said Tope hoarsely. "You're Smith!"

"The Smith," admitted that same. "We wondered where you'd got to, Basher. You've no idea how we miss your familiar face in the dock, and all the warders at Wormwood Scrubs have been feeling they've lost an old friend."

Basher's mouth twisted.

"We don't want none of you cursed flatties here," he said. "The guv'nor'd better hear of this."

"You can tell the guv'nor anything you like, after you've attended to me," said Smith languidly. "My bag's in the car. Fetch it in. Then bring me the register, and push the old bus round to the garage while I sign. Then, when you come back, bring me a pint of beer. *After* that you can run away and do anything you like."

It is interesting to record that Rameses Smith got his own way. Basher Tope obeyed his injunctions to the letter before moving off with the obvious intention of informing his boss of the disreputable policeman that he was being compelled to entertain. Of course, Basher Tope was prejudiced against policemen; and it must be admitted that Rameses Smith used menaces to enforce obedience.

There was the little matter of a robbery with violence, for which Basher Tope had been wanted for the past month, which gave Smith what many would consider to be an unfair advantage in the argument.

Left alone, with a tankard of beer at his elbow, the register on his knee, a cigarette between his lips, and his fountain-pen poised, Smith read the previous entries with interest before making his own. The last few names were those which particularly occupied his attention.

A. E. Crantor	Bristol	British
Gregory Marring	London	British
Betty Tregarth	London	British
Professor Bernhard Raxel	Vienna	Austrian

All these entries were dated about three weeks before, and none had been made since.

Rameses Smith smiled, and signed his own name directly under the last entry.

Professor Rameses Smith-Smyth-Smythe Timbuctoo Patagonian

THREE BAD MEN.

RAMESES SMITH went to bed early that night, and he had not seen any of the men he hoped to find. That fact failed to trouble him, for he reckoned that the following day would give him all the time he needed for making the acquaintance of Messrs. Raxel, Marring, and Crantor.

He got up early the next morning and went out to have a look round. The mist had cleared, and although it was still bitterly cold, the sky was clear and the sun shone. Standing just outside the door of the inn, in the road, he could see on his left the clustered houses of the village of Llancoed, of which the nearest was about a hundred yards down the road. On the

other side of the road was a tract of untended ground which ran down to the sea, two hundred yards away.

A cable's length from the shore, a rusty and disreputable-looking tramp steamer, hardly larger in size than a sea-going tug, rode at anchor A thin trickle of black smoke wreathed up into the still air from her single funnel, but apart from that she showed no signs of life.

Smith walked into the village and found the post office, from which he sent a post-card to the Assistant Commissioner announcing his safe arrival and penetration into the fortress of the enemy. Then he returned to the inn, and discovered the dining-room.

It contained only three tables, and only one of these was laid. In the summer, presumably, it catered for the handful of holiday-makers who were attracted by the quietness of the spot, for there were green-painted chairs and tables stacked up under a tarpaulin outside; but in December the place was deserted except for the villagers, and those would be likely to eat at home.

The table was laid for four. Smith chose the most comfortable of the selection of uninviting chairs that offered themselves, and thumped on the table with the handle of a knife to attract attention. It was Tope who answered.

"Breakfast," said Smith laconically. "Two boiled eggs, toast, marmalade, and a pint of coffee."

Tope informed him that the table he occupied was engaged, and Smith replied that he was not interested.

"It's the only table that looks ready for use," he pointed out, "and I want my breakfast. You can be laying a table for the other guys while I eat. Jump to it, Basher, jump to it!"

Basher Tope muttered another uncomplimentary remark about interfering busies what thought they owned the earth, and went out again. Smith waited patiently for fifteen minutes, and at the end of that time Tope re-entered, bearing a tray, and banged eggs, toast-rack, and coffee-pot down on the table in front of him.

"Thank you," said Smith. "But you don't want to be so violent, Basher. One day you'll break some of the crockery, and then your boss will be very angry. He might even call you a naughty boy, Basher, and then you would go away into a quiet corner and weep, and that would be very distressing for all concerned."

Basher Tope was moved to further criticisms of the police force and their manners, but Smith took no further notice of him. After glaring sullenly at the detective for some moments, Tope turned on his heel and shuffled out again.

Smith was skinning the top of his second egg when the door opened and a girl came in She was wearing a plain tweed costume, and Smith thought at once that she must be the loveliest creature that had ever walked into that sombre room. He rose at once.

"Good-morning," he said politely. "I'm afraid I've pinched part of your table, but the cup-smasher who attends to these things couldn't be bothered to lay another place for me."

She came up hesitantly, staring at him in bewilderment. She saw a tall, broad-shouldered young man, with twinkling grey eyes, a mop of unruly fair hair, and a most engaging smile. Smith, realising that her amazement at seeing him was pardonable, bore her scrutiny without embarrassment.

"Who are you?" she asked at length.

Smith waved her to a chair, and she sat down opposite him. Then he resumed his own seat and the assault on the second egg.

"Me? Professor Smith, at your service.

"H'm?" grunted Smith, sniffing the drink. "Butyl chloride? Known as the knock-out drop, eh, Basher?"

If you want to call me by my first name, it's Rameses. The well-known Egyptian Pharoah of the same name was named after me."

"I'm sorry," she said at once. "I must have seemed awfully rude. But we—I mean, I wasn't expecting to see a stranger here."

"Naturally," agreed Smith conversationally. "One's never expecting to see strangers, is one? Especially of the name of Smith. But I'm the original Smith. Look for the trade-mark on every genuine article, and refuse all imitations."

He finished his egg, and was drawing the marmalade towards him when he noticed that she was still looking at him puzzledly.

"Now you'll be thinking I'm rude," said Smith easily. "I ought to have noticed that you weren't being attended to. The service is very bad here, don't you think?"

He banged the table with his knife, and presently Tope came to answer.

"The lady wants her breakfast," said Smith. "Jump again, Basher, and keep on jumping until further notice!"

The door closed behind the man, and Smith began to clothe a slice of toast with a thick layer of butter.

"And may one ask," he murmured, "what brings you to this benighted spot at such a benighted time of year?"

His words seemed to bring her back to earth with a jerk. She started, and flushed; and there was a perceptible pause before she found her voice.

"Couldn't one ask the same thing about you?" she countered.

"One could," admitted Smith genially. "If you must know, I, being Professor Rameses Smith, shall be very busy here for the next few days."

"The famous charlatan, humbug, and imitation humorist?" she suggested.

Smith regarded her delightedly.

"None other," he said. "How ever did you guess?"

She frowned.

"You were so obviously that sort."

"True," said Smith. "But in my spare time I am also a detective."

He was watching her closely, and saw her go pale. Her hands suddenly stopped playing with the fork which she had picked up, and with which she had been toying nervously. She sat bolt upright in her chair, absolutely motionless, and for the space of several seconds she seemed even to have stopped breathing. Smith was amazed.

"A—detective?"

"Yes." Smith was unconcernedly providing his buttered toast with an overcoat of marmalade. "Of course, I was sitting down when you came in, so you wouldn't have noticed the size of my feet."

She said nothing. Tope came in with a tray, and began unloading it. Smith went on talking in his quiet, flippant way without seeming to notice either the girl's agitation or the other man's presence.

"Being a detective in England," he complained, "has its disadvantages. In America you can always prove your identity by clapping one hand to your hip, and using the other to turn back the left lapel of your coat, thereby revealing your badge. It's a trick that always seems to go down very well—that is, if one can judge by the movies."

The colour was slowly ebbing back into the girl's face, but her hands were trembling on the table. She seemed to become conscious of the way they were betraying her, and clasped them together and began twisting her fingers together in a fever.

In the silence that followed, Tope shambled out of the room, but this time he did not quite close the door. Smith had no doubt that the man was listening outside, but he could see no reason why Basher Tope should be deprived of the benefits of a strictly limited broadcasting service.

As for the girl, it was plain that Smith's manner had started to convince her that he was pulling her leg, but he couldn't help that.

"Is there any reason," he asked, "why I shouldn't be a detective? The police force is open to receive any man who is sufficiently sound of mind and body. I grant you I have a superficial resemblance to a gentleman, but that's the fault of the way I was brought up."

She had no time to frame a reply before there came the sound of voices approaching outside, and a moment later the door swung open, and three men came in.

Smith looked up with innocent interest on their entry, but he also spared a glance for the girl. Obviously she was one of their party; but she did not strike Rameses Smith as being the sort of girl he would have expected to find in association with the men he was after. He had some hopes of getting a clue to her status with them by observing the way in which she greeted their arrival. And he was not unpleasantly surprised to find that she looked up furtively—almost, he would have said, in terror.

The three men, as Smith might have foreseen, showed no surprise at finding him at their table. They came straight over and ranged themselves before him, and Smith rose with his most charming smile.

"Good-morning," he said.

The tallest of the three bowed.

"Our table, I think, Professor Smith?"

"Absolutely," agreed Smith. "I've just finished, and you can step right in."

"You are very kind."

Smith screwed up his napkin, dropped it on the table, and took out his cigarette-case. His eyes focussed thoughtfully on the man who stood on the left of the tall man who appeared to be the leader.

"Mr. Gregory Marring, I believe?"

"Correct."

"Six months ago," said Smith, "a special messenger left Hatton Garden for Paris, with a parcel of diamonds valued at twenty thousand pounds. He travelled to Dover by the eleven o'clock boat train from Victoria. He was seen to board the cross-Channel packet at Dover, but when the ship arrived at Calais he was found lying dead in his cabin, with his head beaten in, and the diamonds he carried have not been heard of since. I don't want you to think I am making any rash accusations, Marring, but I just thought you might be interested to hear that I happen to know you travelled on that boat."

His leisurely gaze shifted to the man on the extreme right.

"Mr. Albert Edward Crantor?"

"Thasso."

"The Court of Inquiry could only find you guilty of culpable negligence," said Smith, "but Special Branch haven't forgotten the size of the insurance, and they're still hoping that it won't be long before they can prove you lost your ship deliberately. The case isn't ready yet, but it's tentatively booked for next Sessions. I'm just warning you."

The man in the centre smiled.

"Surely, Professor Smith," he remarked, "you aren't going to leave me out of your series of brief biographical sketches?"

"For the moment I prefer to," answered Smith steadily. "At any moment, however, I may change my mind. When I do, you'll hear from me soon enough. Good-morning, gentlemen."

He turned his back on them, and walked quietly to the door; but he opened the door with an unexpectedly sudden jerk, and the movement was so quick that Basher Tope had no time to recover his balance and fell sprawling into the room. Smith caught him by the collar, and yanked him to his feet.

"This reminds me," said Smith, turning. "There was another man skulking around when I came down this morning. I know him, too."

The other three were plainly surprised.

"Everyone here of importance is present in this room," said Raxel. "You must be suffering from a delusion."

"The man I saw was no delusion," Smith replied. "His name is Hardy, and his friends call him Pug. He killed a man in Canning Town three weeks ago, and he is one of the men I'm taking back to London with me when I go. It'll take a miracle to save him from hanging, and if you see him loafing around here again you can tell him I said so!"

With that parting shot he left them, and as he closed the door softly behind him he began to whistle.

"Now I guess I've rubbed the menagerie right on the raw!" Rameses Smith thought cheerfully. "If my after-breakfast speech doesn't ginger them up, I wonder what will?"

THE FIRST WARNING.

RAMESES SMITH spent the morning reading and smoking. The three men and the girl sat late over breakfast, and he guessed that his arrival had been the occasion for a council of war.

When they came out of the dining-room, however, they walked straight past him without speaking, and ignored his existence. They went upstairs, and none of them even looked back.

They did not appear again for the rest of the morning; but at about twelve o'clock the man he had seen earlier—Pug Hardy—was ushered upstairs by Basher Tope. He was there twenty minutes, and when he came down again he was peeling off his coat, and generally conveying the impression of being there to stay.

Smith shrewdly surmised that the congregation of the ungodly was now increased by one, but Basher Tope took no notice of Rameses Smith, and led Hardy round in the direction of the public bar without speaking a word

It must be recorded that Rameses Smith took a notably philosophic view of this sudden passion for ignoring his existence.

He lunched early, and Basher Tope returned exclusively monosyllabic replies to the cheerfully aimless conversation with which Smith rewarded his ministrations. After about the fourth unprofitable attempt to secure the observation of the conversational amenities, Smith sighed resignedly, and gave it up as a bad job.

After lunch, Smith put on his hat and went out for a brisk walk, for he had decided that there was nothing he could do in broad daylight as long as the whole gang were in the house.

With characteristic optimism, he refused to consider what particular form of unpleasantness they might be preparing for his entertainment that night, and devoted himself wholeheartedly to the enjoyment of his exercise.

He covered ten miles at a brisk pace, and ended up with a ravenous appetite at the only other inn which the village boasted.

They were clearly surprised by his demand for a meal, but after first being met with the information that they were not prepared to cater for visiting diners, he successfully contrived to blarney the proprietor and his wife into accommodating him.

Smith thought that that was only a sensible precaution to take, for by that time no one could tell what curious things might be happening to the food at Beacon Inn.

He ate simply and well, stood the obliging publican a couple of drinks, and went home about ten o'clock.

As he approached Beacon Inn he took particular note of the lighting in the upstairs windows. Lights showed in only two of them, and these were two of the three that had been lighted up on the night he arrived.

There were few lights downstairs—since the change of management Beacon Inn had become very unpopular. Smith had gathered the essential reasons for this from his conversation with the villagers in the rival tavern.

Inspector Smith, gripping his revolver, cautiously unlocked the door of his room. The girl he had met that morning stood outside.

The new proprietor of Beacon Inn was clearly not running the house to make money but to amuse himself and entertain his friends. Visitors from outside had met with such an uncivil welcome that a very few days had been sufficient to bring about a unanimous boycotting, to the delight and enrichment of the proprietor of the George on the other side of the village.

The door was locked, as before, but Smith battered on it in his noisy way, and in a few moments it was opened.

"Evening, Basher," said Smith affably, walking through into the parlour. "I'm too late for dinner, I suppose, but you can bring me a pint of beer before I go to bed."

Tope shuffled off, and returned in a few moments with a tankard.

"Your health, Basher," said Smith, and raised the tankard.

Then he sniffed at it, and set it carefully down again.

"Butyl chloride," he remarked, "has an unmistakable odour, with which all cautious detectives make a point of familiarising themselves very early in their careers. To vulgar people like yourself, Basher, it is known as the knock-out drop. One of the most important objections that I have to it is that it completely neutralises the beneficial properties of good beer."

"There's nothing wrong with that beer," growled Basher.

"Then you may have it," said Smith generously. "Bring me a bottle of whisky—a new one—and I'll draw the cork myself."

Basher Tope was away five minutes, and at the end of that time he came back and banged an unopened bottle of whisky, and a corkscrew, down on the table.

"Bring me two glasses," said Smith.

Basher Tope was back in time to witness the extraction of the cork; and Smith poured a measure of whisky into each glass, and splashed water into it.

"Drink with me, Basher," invited Smith cordially, taking up one of the glasses.

Tope shook his head.

"I don't drink."

"You're a liar, Basher," said Smith calmly. "I know different to that. You drink like a particularly thirsty fish. Take that glass!"

"I don't want it," Tope retorted stubbornly.

Smith put his glass down again.

"I thought the lead cap looked as if it had been taken off very carefully, and put back again," said Smith. "I just wanted to verify my suspicions. You can go. Oh, and take this stuff with you and pour it down the sink."

He left Basher Tope standing there, and went straight upstairs. The fire ready laid in his bedroom tempted him almost irresistibly, for he was a man who particularly valued the creature comforts, but he felt that it would be wiser to deny himself that luxury. Anything might happen in that place at night, and Smith decided that the light of a dying fire might not be solely to his own advantage.

He undressed, shivering, and jumped into bed. He had locked his door, but he considered that precaution of far less value than the tiny little super-sensitive silver bell which he had fixed into the woodwork of the door by means of a metal prong.

He had blown out the lamp, and he was just dozing when the first alarm came, for he heard the door rattle as someone tried the handle. There followed three soft taps, which he had to strain to hear.

With a groan, Smith flung off the bedclothes, lighted the lamp, and pulled on his dressing-gown. Then he opened the door.

The girl he had met that morning stood outside, and she pushed past him at once, and closed the door behind her. Smith was shocked.

"Don't you know this is most irregular?" he demanded reprovingly.

"I haven't come here to be funny," she flashed back, in a low voice. "Listen to me—were you talking nothing but nonsense this morning?"

"Not altogether," replied Smith cautiously. Although, I don't mind admitting——"

"You're a detective?"

"They call me one," said Smith modestly.

The girl bit her lip.

"Who are you after?" she asked.

Smith's eyebrows went up.

"I'm after one or two people," he said. "Marring, and Crantor, for instance, I hope to include in the bag. But the man I'm really sniping for is Whiskers."

"You mean Professor Raxel?"

"That's what he's calling himself now, I see. I've heard him spoken of by a dozen different names, but we know him best as the professor. He has a certain reputation."

The girl nodded.

"Well," she said, "you gave the gang some pretty straight warnings at breakfast. Now I'm warning you. If the professor's got a reputation, you can take it from me he's earned it. You've bitten off a lot more than you can chew, Mr. Smith, and if you go on playing the fool like this it'll choke you!"

"Rameses is rather a mouthful, I grant you, so my friends usually call me Pip," said Smith wistfully.

The girl stamped her foot.

"You can be funny at breakfast tomorrow, if you live to eat it," she shot back. "For heaven's sake, can't you see what danger you're in?"

"Now I come to think of it," murmured Smith, "I don't even know your name."

"Tregarth's my name," she told him impatiently.

"It must have been your father's," said Smith with conviction. "Tell me—what else do the family call you to distinguish you from him?"

"Betty Tregarth."

Smith held out his hand.

"Thanks, Betty," he said seriously. "You're rather a decent kid. I'm sorry you're mixed up with this bunch of——"

"I'm not!" she began hotly, and then suddenly fell silent, with her face going white, for she realised how impossible it would be to tell him the true circumstances.

And the realisation cut her like a knife, for Rameses Smith was smiling at her in a particularly nice way, and she knew at once that, if there was one man in the whole world whom she might have trusted with such a story as hers, it was the tousled, smiling young man with the twinkling grey eyes who stood before her, arrayed in green pyjamas and a staggering silk dressing-gown that made Joseph's coat look like a suit of deep mourning.

And by the cussedness of Fate it had to so happen that he was also one of the few men in the world in whom she could not possibly confide. She felt hot tears stinging behind her eyelids—tears that she longed to shed, and could not.

"Shake, Betty," said Smith gently; and she took his hand.

He looked down at her, still smiling in that particularly nice way.

"Thanks for coming," he said. "But it's no use, though—I'm staying here as long as the job takes. If you'll adopt me as a sort of honorary uncle, and take my advice, you'll get out of this as quick as you can. Pack your bag to-night, and hike for the station first thing to-morrow morning. That's a straight tip. It's against all the rules of my job, but I can't help that. Take advantage of it. And if you decide to get out, and the others cut up queer, just blow me the wink, and I'll see you through. That's a promise."

He opened the door for her, and he had to let go her hand to do it.

"Good-night," said Rameses Smith.

"Good-night," she said with quivering lips, and an ache in her throat.

He closed the door on her, and she heard the key turn in the lock.

TROUBLE BREWING.

He rolled back into bed again, blew out the lamp, snuggled down, and was asleep in a few minutes. The prospect of being the object of the attentions of other nocturnal visitors not so kindly disposed towards him failed to disturb his slumbers, for he knew exactly how far he could trust his powers of sleeping as lightly as he wished to.

His confidence was justified, for when, three hours later, the door began to swing open under the impulse of a stealthy hand, the almost inaudible *Ting!* of the little bell he had attached to it was sufficient to rouse him, and in an instant he was wide awake.

He pushed back the blankets, and slid soundlessly out of bed, taking with him the electric torch and automatic pistol which were under his pillow.

The room was in pitchy darkness. Smith waited a moment until he judged that the intruder was right inside the room, and then switched on his torch. It picked up the figure of Basher Tope, advancing catfooted towards the bed, and in Basher Tope's right hand was the instrument which had won him his nickname—a wicked-looking blackjack.

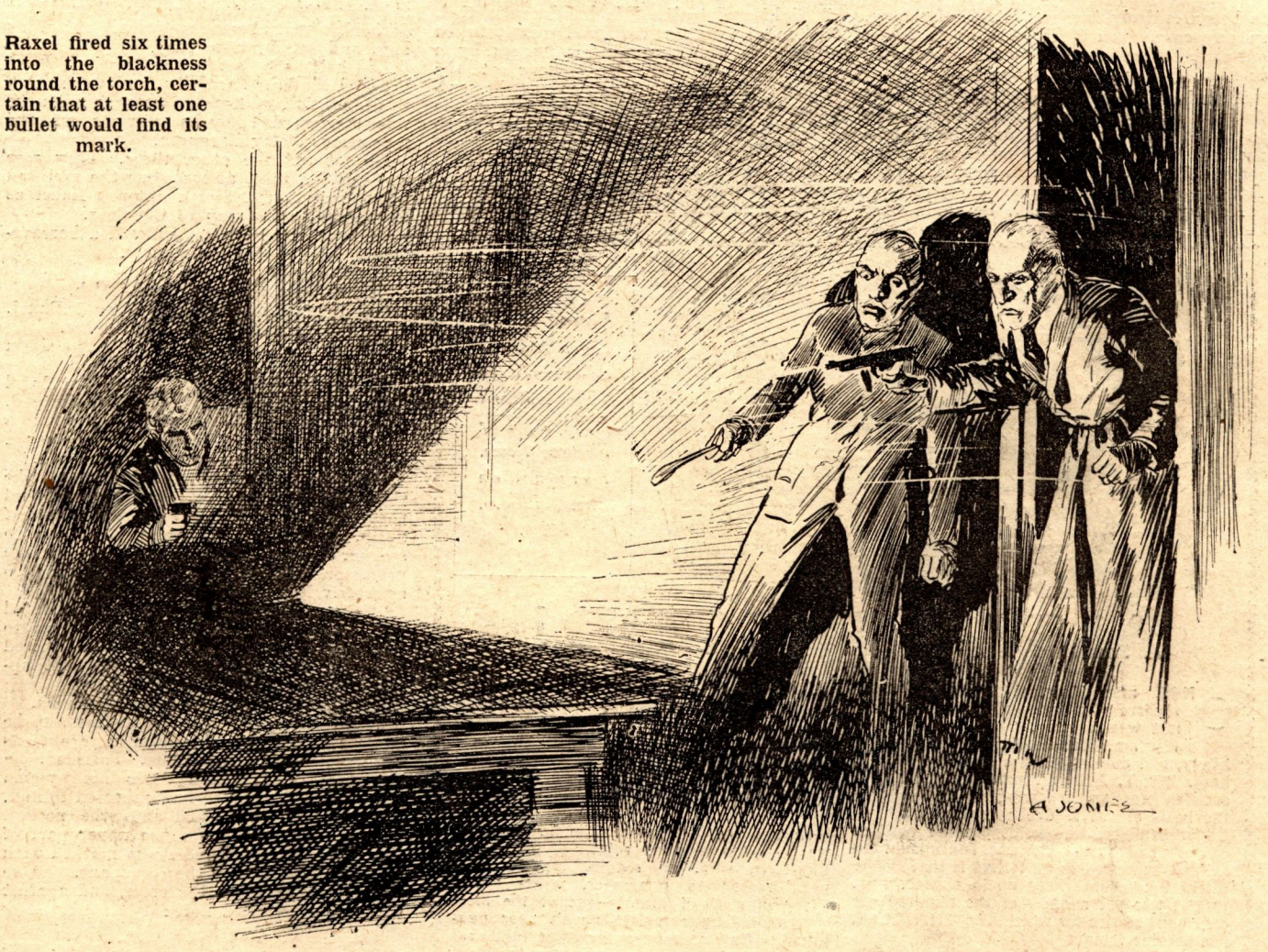
"Hallo, Basher!" said Smith brightly. "Come to hear a bed-time story from Uncle Rameses?"

For answer Tope leapt, swinging his bludgeon, but the blinding beam of light that concentrated in his eyes was extinguished suddenly, and he struck empty air. He felt his way round cautiously, and found the bed empty. Then he heard a mocking laugh behind him, and spun round. The torch was switched on again, and focussed him from the other side of the room.

"Blind man's buff," said Smith's cheery voice, out of the darkness. "Isn't it fun!"

Then Smith heard a sound from the door on his left, and whirled the beam round. The door had opened, and now Professor Bernhard Raxel and the Basher stood in the beam of light. In Raxel's hand was an automatic pistol with a silencer screwed to the muzzle.

Raxel fired six times all round the light, and it was quite certain that, in whatever contorted position Smith had been holding that torch, one of the bullets would have found its mark.



Raxel fired six times into the blackness round the torch, certain that at least one bullet would find its mark.

But Smith was not holding the torch at all, and when Raxel's automatic was empty, Smith struck a match and revealed himself in the opposite corner of the room—revealed, also, the electric torch lying on its side on the table, where he had put it down.

"That's a new one on you, I'll bet!" said Smith.

He lighted the lamp, put on his dressing-gown, and ostentatiously dropped his gun into a pocket. Tope looked inquiringly at the professor, and Raxel shook his head.

"You can go, Basher."

"You can go also, Raxel," said Smith. "It's two o'clock in the morning, and I want to get some sleep. Run away, and save up your little speech for breakfast."

Raxel inclined his head.

"To-night was intended to be a warning to you," he said. "It was purely on the spur of the moment that I resolved to turn the warning into a permanent prohibition. It was clever of you to think of leaving your torch on the table. It is even flattering to remember that you did me the honour of crediting me with having heard before of the time-honoured device of holding the torch at arm's length away from you. But next time I may be a little cleverer than you."

"There won't be a next time," said Smith. "You ought to know that it was a fool thing to do, to come to my room and try to put me out to-night, but it was no more than I expected. Now be sensible about it. I've got nothing on you yet, and so you can carry on until I've got enough evidence to stop you. But you can't kill me, and you needn't think I'm afraid of being killed. You made a bad break when you overlooked the railway ticket to Llancoed in Henley's wallet. That makes you hop!"

"You're talking in riddles," said Raxel coldly.

"You know the answer to 'em," said Smith. "I could run you in now for attempted murder, but I'm not going to, because I want you for something much bigger than that, and I'm going to give you just enough rope to hang yourself. Meanwhile, you will leave me alone. Everyone at Scotland Yard knows that I'm here and you're here, and if I happen to die suddenly, or do a mysterious disappearance, they'd haul you in pretty smart. Now get out—and stay out."

Raxel went to the door.

"And finally," Smith called after him, as a parting shot, "tell Basher not to put any more butyl in my beer. It kind of takes the edge off my thirst!"

. . . . .

Smith breakfasted alone the next morning, but he waited about the hotel for some time afterwards, in the hope of seeing the girl. Crantor and Marring came down, and the cheerful "Good-morning" with which he greeted each of them was replied to in a surly mutter. Raxel followed, and remarked that it was a nice day. Smith politely agreed. But the girl did not come down, and half an hour later he saw Basher bearing a tray upstairs. He gave it up and went out.

His walk did not seem so satisfying to him that morning as it had the previous afternoon, for he was tormented with memories of his first visitor of the night before. He made a point of being late for luncheon, but although the three men were sitting at their usual table (Smith found that a separate table had been prepared for himself) the girl was not with them.

He took his time over the meal, having for the moment no fear that his food might have been tampered with. He sat on for an hour after the other three had left, but Betty Tregarth failed to make an appearance.

When he had at last been compelled to conclude that she was lunching as well as breakfasting in her room, he went upstairs to his own room to think things out. There, as soon as he opened the door, a scene of turmoil met his eye.

The suit-case he had brought was open on the floor, empty, and all its contents were strewn about the place in disorder. The search had been very comprehensive—he noticed that even the lining of the bag had been ripped out.

"Life is certainly very strenuous these days," sighed Smith mildly, and began to clear up the mess.

When he had finished he lighted the fire, and sat down in a chair beside it to smoke a cigarette and review the situation.

He ended up exactly where he started, for everything there was to say had been said at two o'clock that morning. It was a deadlock. A precipitate move might produce results, but on the other hand it might not, and the risk was too great to take. Rameses Smith was not entirely imbecile in his folly. His entry had been staged with a deliberate eye to its effect; it would have been practically impossible to pretend

to be an entirely innocent tourist for long, in any case, even if it had not so fallen out that the first man he met had been able to identify him as a detective.

Therefore, if he had to introduce himself flatly as a detective, the obvious course was to do it with a splash, and Smith was inclined to congratulate himself on having made a fairly useful splash, as splashes go. But there it ended.

Having made his splash, he could only sit tight and wait. His hands were tied, for Raxel was far too good a fish to be allowed to slip through his fingers by a rash move, and his only hope at the moment was that Raxel might be sufficiently rattled by Smith's presence in the house to make a false step which might be the beginning of the gang's undoing.

That being so the only game to play was a waiting one, and Rameses Smith was prepared to back himself against all comers in a patient-waiting competition. That decided, he raked some magazines out of his bag, and sat down to read.

At half-past seven he washed, and brushed his hair carefully, and went down to dinner full of hope. But once again he was unrewarded by a glimpse of the mysterious Betty Tregarth.

He sat out the other three. They rose and left the table at last, but the girl had not joined them. Smith stopped Raxel as he passed on his way to the door.

"I hope you have not suffered a bereavement," said Smith solicitously.

Raxel seemed puzzled.

"Miss Tregarth," explained Smith.

"You mean my secretary?" said Raxel. "No, she has not been with us to-day."

A flicker of hope fired up deep down inside Rameses Smith.

"Unfortunately," volunteered Raxel smoothly, "she has been indisposed. Nothing serious—a severe cold, with a slight temperature—but in this weather I thought it advisable to keep her in bed."

With mixed feelings, Smith watched the three men depart. Selfishly, he was glad that Betty Tregarth had not taken herself away, for that meant that he might hope to see her again. But, at the same time, the professor had been just a little too aggressively plausible.

The professor's manner had indicated quite clearly that whether Smith chose to believe that Betty Tregarth was indisposed or not, his interest in her was not appreciated, and would be discouraged.

Not that that worried Rameses Smith.

When he went up to bed that night he made a careful search of the more obvious hiding-places in his room. Satisfied, he undressed, and, getting into his pyjama jacket, found what he had expected to find, a slip of paper tucked into the pocket. It was a rough plan of the upper part of the house, and each room was marked with initials to indicate the occupant. One room was marked with a cross, and against this was a scrawled note:

Kept locked. R. M. and C. go in occasionally. T. is there nearly all day.

Smith studied the plan until all its details were indelibly photographed on his brain, and then dropped it on the fire and watched it burn. Then he went to bed.

He woke at four o'clock, got up, and dressed. He slipped his automatic into his hip-pocket, took his torch in his hand, opened the door silently, and stole out into the corridor.

DANGEROUS FACTS.

His first objective was the room which had been marked T on the plan. Trying the handle with elaborate precautions against noise, he found, as he had expected, that the door was locked. But the locks on the doors were old-fashioned and clumsy, as he had discovered by some preliminary experiments in his own room, and it only took him a moment to open that lock with a little instrument which he carried.

He passed in, and closed the door softly behind him. The ray of his torch found the bed, and he stole across, and roused the girl by shining the light close to her eyes. She stared, and Smith switched out the light and clapped a hand swiftly over her mouth.

"Don't scream!" he whispered urgently in her ear. "It's only me—Smith."

She lay still, and Smith took his hand from her lips, and switched on the torch again.

"Talk in a whisper," breathed Smith, and she nodded understandingly. "Listen—have you really been ill?"

She shook her head

Letters to the Editor should be addressed to "The Thriller" Office, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

ALWAYS GOOD!

ONCE more I must thank all those readers who have written to me about last week's story, "The Silent Six."

My mail this week was particularly heavy, and nothing pleases me more than to know that T. Arthur Plummer's novel gave such satisfaction, following as it did upon the heels of "The Crook in Crimson," by Edgar Wallace, who holds premier position as author of thriller stories. The unanimous opinion expressed in all letters is that "The Silent Six" came fully up to expectations; that it was yet another of the hundred per cent good stories for which The THRILLER has become famous

There is not room in my short weekly chat to publish readers letters, and I do not intend to rob you of space at present devoted to our long complete story merely to gratify my pride by quoting lengthy peons of praise of my own accomplishments. All the same, I do want to mention two letters which strike me as of special interest.

Tim O'Brien, of New York, says: "I guess that U.S.A. has always been able to hand out the card where slickness is concerned, but, oh, boy, you have gone one better in The THRILLER! Edgar Wallace stories are eagerly sought after here, and his books sell like hot cakes, but we have to pay dollars for them, whereas you deliver the goods to your readers for twopence. By heck, we have to give way to you for slickness after this! You have scored, and your paper is going some out here. Congrats!"

You'll be interested to know, my friend Tim, that several American publishers have cabled me their congratulations and made substantial offers for U.S.A. publication rights of our thriller stories.

Another letter comes from France: "I have resided in the Bordeaux district of South Western France for a number of years, but always like to keep in touch with the Old Country. I follow the English newspapers and read what periodicals I can get hold of, but never has anything compared with the stories in The THRILLER. Unfortunately, I do not live near a city, and find it difficult to make certain of securing a copy regularly. I do not want to miss any issue, so please let me know what it would cost to have it sent out each week.—J. M. Hugon."

No doubt many readers at home have friends living in distant places where regular delivery is out of the question. It would be an act of kindness to let them know that the subscription rates of The THRILLER, inland and abroad, is eleven shillings per annum, or five shillings and sixpence for the half-year. Truly a moderate outlay for a whole twelvemonth of pleasurable reading.

In this week's issue of The THRILLER we have the welcome return of Mr. Leslie Charteris, who, all regular readers have good reason to remember, wrote "The Story of a Dead Man"—one of the most successful long complete novels ever published. Now you have the opportunity of reading his latest work, and I am confident that in "The Secret of Beacon Inn," you will find entertainment and thrills in every chapter.

It is always difficult to select the best story for next week's issue from the stock of manuscripts I have waiting for publication. I have taken the utmost care to select the wheat from the chaff in order to give you only the best, with the result that every story I have in hand is right up to the hundred per cent mark, but my difficulty becomes all the greater on this account. I don't want to delay publication of any of them. Anyway, for next week I have selected Mr. Stacey Blake's story, "The Man From Ashanti." The adventures of a man who returns from the dark and terrible African interior, forbidden to the white man, lead to many intriguing and sensational situations. Mr. Stacey Blake's story opens very dramatically and upon strong human lines; then, with the introduction of the crook element, develops in most sensational manner. You will enjoy every moment you spend with next week's issue. The THRILLER offers you the best and cheapest evening's entertainment in the world. A whole evening's happiness for the price of a telephone call or a short tram ride! Don't miss it.

Yours sincerely,

The Editor

"No. They're keeping me here—I was caught coming back from your room last night. How did you get in?"

Smith gave her a glimpse of the skeleton key which he had spent part of the afternoon twisting out of a length of stout wire.

"Have you thought of getting away?" he asked. "I'll smugle you out now, if you care to try it."

"It's no good," she said.

Smith frowned.

"You're being kept here a prisoner, and you don't want to escape?" he demanded incredulously.

"I'm not a prisoner," she replied. "It's just that they found out I'd got enough humanity in me to risk something to save you. If you went away I'd be free again at once."

"And you'd rather stay here?"

"Where could I go?" she asked dully.

Instantly he was moved to pity. She seemed absurdly young, like a child, lying there.

"Haven't you any—people?"

"None that I can go back to," she said pitifully, desperately. "You don't know how it is——"

"I guess I do," said Smith kindly, even if he was wrong. "But maybe I could find you some friends who'd help you."

She smiled a little.

"It wouldn't help," she said. "It's nice of you, but I can't tell you why it's impossible. Go on with what you've got to do, if you're too reckless to get out while there's time. Don't think anything more about me, Mr. Smith."

"Pip."

"Pip."

"I never knew how horrid Mr. Smith sounded until you said it just now," he remarked lightly, but he was not thinking of trivialities.

Presently he said:

"There's another room I was meaning to visit to-night, but maybe you can save me the trouble. I'm told it's kept locked, but you spend the best part of the day there. What's inside?"

Her eyes opened wide, and she shrank away from him.

"You can't go in there!"

"I hope to be able to," said Smith. "The little gadget that let me in here——"

"You can't! You mustn't! If Raxel knew that you knew what's in there he'd take the risk—he'd kill you!"

"Raxel need not know," said Smith. "I shall try not to advertise the fact that I am going in there, and I shan't talk to him about it afterwards—unless what I find in there is good enough for me to be able to end up my lecture with the well-known song, 'Step this way and meet the hangman.' Anyhow," added Smith, watching her closely, "what can there be in that room that you can spend every day with, and yet it would be fatal for me to see it?"

"I can't tell you—but you mustn't go!"

Smith looked straight at her.

"Betty," he said, "as I've told you before, you're heading for trouble. I've heard of real tough women who looked like angels, but I've never really believed in them. If you're that sort I'll eat the helmet off every policeman in London. I don't know why you're in this, but even if you *are* as free as you say, you don't seem to be enjoying it. I'm giving you a chance. Tell me everything you know, help me all you can, and when the crash comes I'll guarantee to see you through it. You can take that as official."

She moved her head wearily.

"It's useless——"

"You mean Raxel's got some sort of hold over you?"

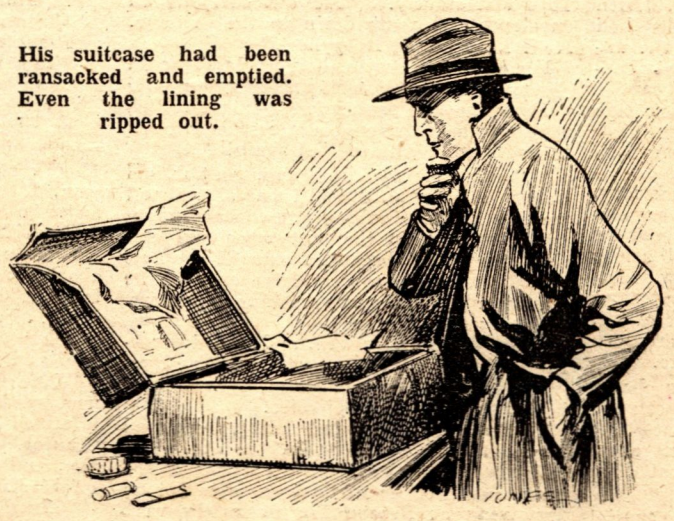
"If you like."

"What is it?"

"I can't tell you," she said hopelessly.

Smith's mouth tightened.

"Very well," he said. "On your own head be it. But remember my offer—it stays open till the very last moment."



His suitcase had been ransacked and emptied. Even the lining was ripped out.

He rose, and found her hand clutching his wrist.

"Where are you going?" she asked frightenedly.

"To unlock that door, and find out what's in this mysterious room," said Smith, a trifle grimly. "I think I told you that before."

"You can't. These locks are easy, but there's a special lock on that door."

"And right next door is an empty room, and there's nobody else but myself on that side of the house. Also, there's plenty of ivy, and it looks pretty strong to me. I don't think the window will keep me waiting outside for long."

He disengaged her hand, and stepped away a little so that she could not grab him again.

"I'll lock your door when I go out," he said.

He went out, and she had not tried to call him back. It was the work of a few moments only to re-lock the door from the outside, and then he stole across the corridor to the door of the room which he had marked down because of its window, which was separated by only a couple of yards from the window of the locked room.

The ivy, as he had guessed, was strong; and, as he had said, there was no one but himself sleeping on that side of the house, so that the noise he made was of no consequence. Better still, the professor, when fitting the special lock to the door of the mystery room, had clearly overlooked the possibilities that ivy-covered walls presented to an active young man, and the catch of the window was not even secured.

Smith slid up the sash cautiously, and slithered over the sill. Then he switched on his torch, and his jaw dropped.

The centre of the room was occupied by a rough wooden bench, and on this was set up a complicated arrangement of retorts, condensers, aspirators, and burners. They seemed to form a connected chain, as if they were intended for the distillation of some subtle chemical substance which was submitted to various processes of blending and refinement during the course of its passage through the length of the apparatus. In a big glass bowl at the end of the chain were a few drops of a pale greenish liquid.

Smith studied the arrangement attentively; but he was no chemist, and he could make nothing of it. Wisely, he decided not to touch any of the components, for he realised that any chemical process which had to be surrounded with so much secrecy was likely to be pregnant with considerable danger for the ignorant meddler, and the association of Bernhard Raxel with the mystery would not have encouraged anyone to imagine that all those elaborate precautions had been taken to protect the secret of the manufacture of some new kind of parlour fireworks to amuse the children.

Smith passed on to the examination of the rest of the room.

On another bench, against one wall, was a row of glass bottles, unlabelled, containing an assortment of crystals, powders, and liquids, none of which had an appearance with which Smith was familiar.

On the other side of the room were two cubical aluminium tanks, and beside these were a couple of rough wooden packing-cases, which had apparently been made to fit the tanks. In the top corner of each tank appeared a circle of metal that seemed to have been recently soldered, and Smith gathered that whatever the gang had been making with the aid of the apparatus on the centre table during the past weeks, was now hermetically sealed up in the two aluminium containers.

A further peculiarity was that in the centre of each tank was a large cubical indentation, some eight inches square and twelve inches deep.

On another bench against that wall were two wooden boxes, which a rough measurement showed at once would fit compactly into the indentations in the tanks. The front of one of these boxes stood open like a door, and inside Smith saw a small clock, from the interior of which an intricate system of levers connected up with a small glass globe, half-filled with a colourless liquid. Beside these were a number of photographs.

Smith, who had studiously left untouched everything which might harbour sudden death in some mysterious form, pent up behind a hair-trigger release, picked up the photographs at once, and scrutinised them. Each was an enlargement of a picture of a sheet of notepaper covered with closely-set lines of fine, neat writing.

The papers seemed to comprise detailed instructions for the performance of some chemical experiment. There were a number of formulæ and hieroglyphics which meant nothing to Smith, and also a diagram of an arrangement similar to that which had been set up on the centre table.

This, then, was the secret of the locked room, and of Betty Tregarth's presence. A comprehensive tour revealed nothing more, and Smith, his object accomplished, prepared to go. As he was about to leave, the photographs that he had already inspected caught his eye, and he was tempted, and fell. He picked them up, put them in his pocket, and left the room again by way of the window.

He returned to his own room as stealthily

as he had left it, but the house remained shrouded in unbroken silence. If Smith had made a more careful and expert examination he would have seen a neat and inconspicuous burglar alarm attached to the door of the locked room. This worked a buzzer under Raxel's own pillow, and therefore Raxel had had no fear that Smith would be able to make an attempt to discover his secret without automatically calling the attention of the whole house to his nocturnal prowling.

In the privacy of his own room, Smith examined again the photographs he had taken. Reading carefully through the unintelligible jumble of a jargon that conveyed nothing to him, his eye was caught by a sentence at the foot of the last page of the photographed papers.

This substance I call, for the moment, HA.

The words stirred a chord in his memory, but he was not able to complete the association at once. He climbed into bed, and for the first time in his life, failed to fall asleep immediately. He wanted to know what sinister secret lay behind the mysterious laboratory in that house, and, most of all, he wanted to know why Betty Tregarth should spend most of her time there.

Betty Tregarth wasn't likely to be a willing associate of a man like the professor—he was ready to swear to that—and, besides, her manner throughout his short acquaintance with her had shown that there was a strange fear that bound her.

Was it possible that she had some special knowledge of chemistry, and had been blackmailed or coerced into assisting the professor? And then Rameses Smith suddenly remembered what HA was, and went cold.

THE MYSTERY SHIP.

He was up early next morning, and the first thing he did was to go down to the village post office. In his hand was a letter to the Chief Commissioner, describing the result of his investigations to date, and enclosing the photographs that he had taken from the laboratory.

As he had expected, he was just in time to see the village postbag being loaded on to a red van, and he watched his precious letter being borne rapidly away, out of the village of Llancoed and the reach of the professor. This gave him some satisfaction, for he had no doubt that as soon as the theft was discovered a search would immediately be organised for the missing documents, and in that search Rameses Smith was likely to be the first covert to be drawn.

This happened sooner than he had expected.

He had just finished breakfast when Raxel, Marring, and Crantor entered the dining-room, and Smith saw at once from their bearing that they had already discovered their loss. Raxel came straight over to his table, and the other two followed.

"Good-morning," said Smith, in his cheerful way.

"Good-morning, Mr. Smith," said the professor. "I am sorry to hear that you walk in your sleep."

"So am I," he said. "Do I?"

"I think so," said the professor, and an automatic pistol showed in his hand. "Please put your hands up, Mr. Smith."

Smith rose, yawning, with his arms raised.

"Anything to oblige," he murmured. "But you're talking through your hat, you know."

"That will be quite easy to prove," said the professor blandly. "Search him, Marring. We have already ransacked your room, Mr. Smith, and the papers which we believe you have taken were not there, so that, if you are guilty, they are likely to be on your person."

Smith submitted to the search without protest, and smiled at the look of savagely restrained consternation that broke momentarily through Raxel's mask of suavity when the search proved fruitless.

"Rather jumping to conclusions, weren't you?" suggested Smith mildly.

Basher Tope stood in the doorway.

"I saw him go out before breakfast," said Tope clamorously. "He was carrying an envelope, and went down to the village. He'll have posted it by now."

For a moment Smith thought Raxel would shoot, and keyed himself up for a desperate grab at the gun the professor carried. But with a tremendous effort the man controlled himself, and Smith smiled again.

"That's where you're stung, isn't it, old chap?" he drawled. "And I may as well tell you it's no use thinking you can arrange a lightning raid on the post office and get that letter back, because it caught the first collection, and I saw it drive out on the mail van before I came back to breakfast. So that's that."

The professor shrugged, and bowed gracefully, but his eyes were flaming with fury.

"It is certainly your point, Mr. Smith," he said in an icily level voice.

Without another word he turned, and went on to his own table, the other two following, and then Smith knew that the hours in which he would be able to bet on remaining at Beacon Inn in safety were numbered.

Immediately the three men were seated, a buzz of low-voiced guttural argument broke out. Both Crantor and Marring seemed to be advancing suggestions. They spoke in a language which was not in Smith's limited repertoire, and he could only guess at the tenor of their discussion. From the glances of baffled hate that were flung in his direction from time to time he reckoned that his guess was not very far wide of the mark.

Raxel listened to the incoherent babbling of the other two men for some time with ill-concealed impatience; and then he silenced them with a wave of his hand.

"*Zuhören,*" he said, with a note of incontestable command in his voice, and spoke a few rapid, decisive sentences.

Out of these sentences Smith caught one word. The word was *töten,* and although Smith was no German scholar, he knew enough of the language to grasp the general idea, and felt rather glad that he had agreed to Bill Kennedy's suggested precaution for his safeguarding. "*Wir müssen ihm töten,*" Raxel had said, or words to that effect.

"So at last they've decided to kill me," thought Smith, eating toast and marmalade. "Presumably my demise will be arranged at the earliest possible opportunity. Well, that means I've got them on the hop at last!"

However, the thought failed to disturb him visibly, and in a few moments he rose and left the room.

Betty Tregarth had not put in an appearance, but he had not expected that, and so he was not disappointed. The venomous eyes of the other three men followed him out.

In the parlour he found a tall, massively-built man wielding a broom.

"Morning, Pug," said Smith.

The man turned a battered face towards him. Regarding that face with a discerning eye, one could understand the reason for his nickname without thinking very hard.

"Morning, sir."

"How are things?"

Pug Hardy grinned.

"Quite all right, sir. I haven't heard or seen anything to speak of—I don't think they're sure of me yet. You told me to lie low, so I haven't been nosing around at all."

"That's right," said Smith. "Keep on being quiet. I've done all the nosing that need be done. But keep your eyes skinned. There's going to be trouble coming to me soon, I gather, and it's coming good and fast. So long!"

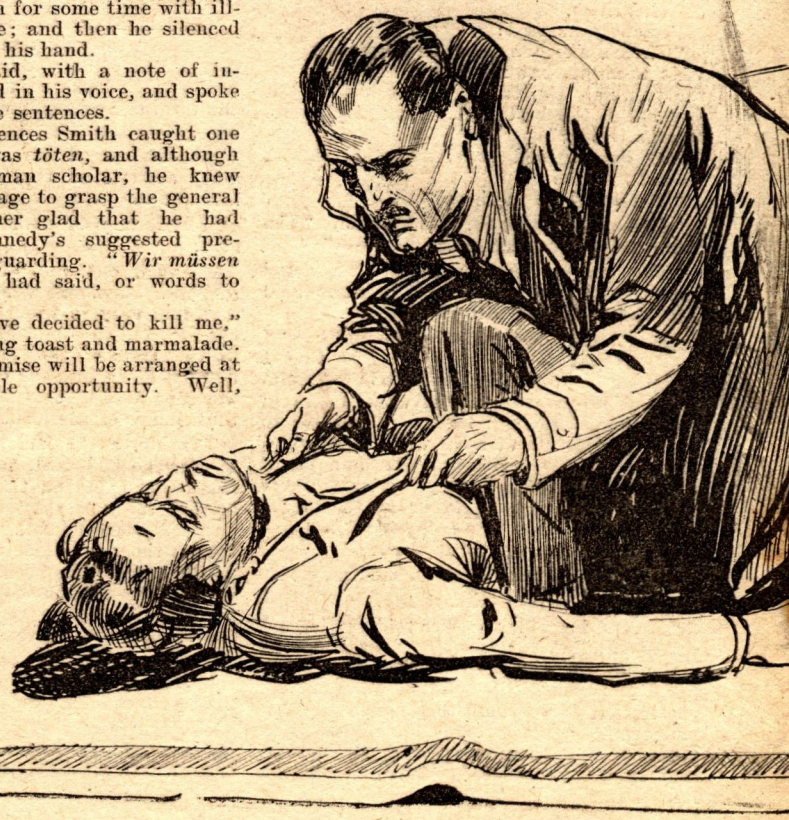
He drifted away.

There seemed to be no point in hanging about the inn that morning, and he decided to walk down to the George and have a drink. In the bar he remembered the ship which was anchored opposite the Beacon Inn, and mentioned it to the proprietor.

"I think it belongs to one of the gentlemen up the road," that mine of local gossip informed him. "Gentleman of the name of Crantor. It came in here about a fortnight ago, and the crew all drove away in a car. I don't think there's anybody on board now."

"There's smoke comes up from her funnel," Smith pointed out. "You can't keep a fire going without somebody to look after it."

"Maybe there's a man or two just looking after the ship. Anyway, half a dozen men drove away with Crantor the day the ship came in, and he came back alone. One of the boys did ask what the ship was for. We don't get ships like that in here so often that people don't talk about it. That was in the days when some of the boys used to go up to the Beacon Inn for



their drinks, before the new boss there got so rude to them that nobody could stand it any longer. I think it was Bill Jones who asked what the ship was doing. Mr. Raxel said they were working on a new invention—a new sort of torpedo, or something—and they were going to use the ship for trying it out at sea. That might easily be true, because about a month ago a lorry came in and delivered a lot of stuff at the Beacon Inn, and the drivers had a drink here on their way out of the village. Chemistry apparatus, it was, they said, and Raxel ordered it."

The loquacious publican passed on to discuss other affairs of village interest, and Smith listened with divided attention.

They found the body of Inspector Henley, sprawled out on the floor of his waiting-room. The murder of one of their own detectives at once set the "Yard" into rapid action.

"Even this place isn't what it was," said the man later, half-way through his second pint. "It used to be so quiet, with just a few quiet people coming here for a quiet holiday in the summer. Now we get quite a noisy crowd in August. And you used never to see a motor-car, hardly."

"The only car I've seen since I've been here is my own," said Smith.

"The gentleman at the Beacon Inn has got one," said the proprietor. "A big one. Must have cost a fortune. That was the one he drove the crew of the ship away in."

"Does it ever go out?" asked Smith, and the man shook his head.

"It hasn't been out since. You might think they'd have used it for taking drives round the country, but they don't."

Smith nodded vaguely, and then suddenly he stiffened, listening. The proprietor also listened. That sort of thing is infectious.

"It'll be more of them lorries I was talking about," said the publican. "You'll be able to see them coming down the street, through that window."

He jerked his thumb indicatively, and Smith went over and looked out. His ears had not misled him—a rickety Ford lorry was crashing down the street. It stopped outside the door of the George, and two men came in and walked up to the counter.

"Couple o' quick beers, mate," ordered one of them.

They were served. The drinks were swallowed quickly. They seemed to be in a hurry.

"Got a rush order," one of them explained. "A couple of boxes to get to Southampton to catch a boat that's sailing to-morrow morning, and all cargo's got to be on board to-night. Can you tell us where the Beacon Inn is?"

"Drive on to the end of the road, and turn to your right," said Smith. "You'll find it on your right, about three hundred yards up. What ship are these boxes going to?"

"Couldn't tell you, mate. All I know is that we've got to get them to Southampton by nine o'clock to-night. Cheerio!"

They went out, and after that the publican felt that he had lost his audience, for Smith was noticeably preoccupied.

Half an hour later the lorry clattered past the window again, and Smith followed its departure with a thoughtful eye, for he recognised the two wooden cases that it carried.

He went back to the Beacon Inn at about half-past twelve, and he was having a drink in the parlour, preparatory to attacking luncheon, when he saw a fast-looking touring car driven round from the garage at the rear by Basher Tope. A moment later Raxel, Marring and Crantor came out.

Crantor was wearing a heavy leather coat, and appeared to be receiving instructions. Raxel spoke, and Crantor nodded and replied. Then he climbed into the car and took the wheel. The others stepped back, and with a wave of his hand Crantor let in the clutch and went roaring out of sight eastwards along the coast road.

Raxel and Marring came in again, followed by Basher Tope, and Smith heard Raxel and Marring go through into the dining-room. He banged hopefully on the bell, and felt that luck was with him when Hardy answered the summons.

"Another half-pint, Pug," said Smith, and tendered a pound note.

Pug Hardy was back in a moment with the replenished tankard and the change. There was some silver and a ten-shilling note. When Hardy had gone, Smith pocketed the silver and unfolded the note. Inside the note was a slip of paper, and on it was written one word:

"*Megantic.*"

The *Megantic*, Smith knew, was on the quick run from Southampton to New York, and Smith guessed that Hardy must have been called in to help carry the packing-cases downstairs, and had noticed the inscription on the labels. But that wasn't particularly helpful, and Smith went in to his lunch a very worried and puzzled man. Theoretically, of course, there was no reason why Raxel should not send a consignment of HA to New York if he had to send it somewhere, but, on the other hand, there was also no earthly reason that Smith could see why he should.

A MAN OF BRAINS.

"And now, my dear Marring," said Raxel, "I have time to demonstrate to you the little device on which the success of our scheme depends."

Marring moved a couple of Bunsen burners to one side, and sat down on the edge of the table.

"I'm glad to hear that, professor," he remarked. "I've been wondering all along how you were going to arrange that detail."

"Unfortunately," said Raxel, "we have been rushed lately, so that I was unable to explain my plan to you more fully. The device was only finally completed to my satisfaction last night. As you may have guessed, it was contained in the two boxes which were fitted into their compartments in the gas-tanks before we despatched them. But I still have the rough model on which I made my experiments, and it will serve admirably to demonstrate the principle to you."

From a cupboard he took a little machine, similar in construction to the one which Smith had seen the night before, but less compact.

"In this little bowl," said Raxel, pointing to the glass globe, "is a quantity of nitric acid, but for the purposes of this demonstration I shall use water. The clock is set for a certain time. We don't want to have to wait two days on this occasion, so I will set it for half a minute from now." He made an adjustment to a small lever at the back of the clock. "Now, if you wait a few seconds, you will see how it works."

They waited, Raxel keeping an eye on his watch.

"It should happen now," he said suddenly, and it did.

There was a whirr, and the system of levers connecting the clock with the glass globe were suddenly set in motion. The glass globe itself was compressed between two metal rods hinged together like a pair of nutcrackers. It burst with a faint popping noise like an exploded electric-light bulb, and the water it contained was spilled on to the table.

"Neat," murmured Marring approvingly.

"I flatter myself that I thought it out very well," said Raxel modestly. "The same process will be repeated at two o'clock in the morning, the day after to-morrow, in the little boxes let into the tanks. And the tanks, by that time, will be in the hold of the *Megantic*. The nitric acid will be released, and in a few moments it will have eaten a hole through the metal of the tank. Then the HA will commence to evaporate, expanding to hundreds of thousands of times its present volume. According to my calculations, the *Megantic* should be wallowing in HA from stem to stern within two hours. It is cold. By four o'clock in the morning nearly everybody will be in bed, asleep, and in this weather there will be very few portholes open. I do not think that the system of ventilation on the ship will create a sufficiently violent draught to disperse the gas before it can do its work.

"The only people who will be safe will be those who are outside on deck—the officer on watch, and perhaps one or two other men. But the watches are not long. The first dog-watch ends at six o'clock. If the gas spreads quickly the officer on the twelve to four watch will not be relieved, and when he goes in search of the man who should be relieving him, he will be overcome immediately. On the other hand, the gas may not spread so quickly, and it will be the second dog-watch which will fail to report at six o'clock; but the result will be the same. By half-past six we can be fairly certain that the *Megantic* will be a ship of the dead."

Raxel's voice trembled with suppressed excitement, and Marring shivered.

"You're a callous beast, professor," he said.

"Why not?" demanded Raxel harshly. "The passengers on the ship are nothing to us. I have simply devised the only means by which, in these days, it is possible for us to capture a modern liner. Since the advent of wireless, the ordinary methods of piracy have become impracticable, for one would be very lucky indeed to be able to shoot away the aerial before an S O S could be sent out. I have circumvented that difficulty. By my method there will be no S O S, and nothing will interfere with us."

Marring nodded.

"You're as clever as Satan," he said, with reluctant respect. "But are you so sure that everything's all right? There's Smith——"

"I will attend to Smith," said Raxel. "Fortunately for us, he arrived on the scene a little too late. The boxes have already been despatched, and once Crantor has returned with his crew, we can embark on his ship and disappear. Smith cannot possibly act until to-morrow—he will be waiting for instructions from his chief, and the letter he posted this morning will not be delivered until to-morrow morning. By that time we shall be on the high seas, and Smith will be—disposed of. Now that this place's period of usefulness is over there is no reason for us to move cautiously in fear of a police raid."

"That's all very well," said Marring. "But what about the girl? Do you think she's as safe as you make out?"

Raxel frowned.

"Once I was certain," he said. "Unfortunately, the arrival of Smith has rather shaken that certainty. I do not profess to be a psychologist, but I consider my intuition is fairly keen. The girl is now debating in her mind whether she can trust Smith with her secret. That is why I caused her to be confined to her room, for it would have been too risky to allow them any opportunity of improving their acquaintance. It may seem ridiculous to you that a girl could confess to a detective that she had committed a murder, and hope that he would help her. But she is in love with him, and that will have altered her outlook."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"That also has been arranged—I think, very neatly. We will deal with it at once."

He led the way out of the laboratory, and

across the corridor. After unlocking Betty Tregarth's door, he knocked, and they went in.

Betty Tregarth was sitting in the chair by the fire reading, but she looked up listlessly at their entrance.

"Oh, it's you," she said dully.

Raxel came over, and stood in front of the fire.

"I have come to tell you that you have now served your purpose, Miss Tregarth," he said, "and there is nothing to stop your departure as soon as you choose to go. I promised you one thousand pounds for your services, and I'll write you a cheque for that amount now."

He did so, sitting down at the table. She took the cheque, and looked at it without interest.

"Now," he said, replacing the cap on his fountain-pen, "I wonder what your plans are?"

"I haven't made any," said the girl, in a tired voice. "I don't know what I'm going to do. I can't go back home—it would have been bad enough in any case with that murder hanging over me and preying on my mind all the time. Now there's what I've been doing here to remember as well. I don't know what it was for—as you said, I've had nothing incriminating to do—but it'd make life impossible. My brother'd know at once that something was wrong, and I couldn't be able to tell him."

"I understand," said the professor sympathetically. "That was a difficulty in your path which occurred to me shortly after you'd started work, and I have given it a good deal of thought. In fact, I have prepared a solution which I should like to offer you. You may accept or reject it, as you please, but I beg you to give it your consideration."

She shrugged.

"You can tell me what it is."

"I suggest that you should leave the country, and start life afresh," said Raxel. "The thousand pounds which I have given you will provide you with enough capital to last you for several months, and that should give you plenty of time to find fresh employment. With your qualifications that should be fairly easy."

"But where am I to go?"

"I suggest that you go to America. In fact, I have taken the liberty of booking a first-class passage for you in the *Megantic* which sails from Southampton early to-morrow morning. You may, of course, decline to go, but I think you would be wise to take it."

The girl spread out her hands in a weary gesture.

"America's as good as any other place," she said, "and it doesn't much matter where I go. But I haven't got my passport down here, and there isn't time to go back to London for it. Besides, I haven't a visa."

"That also I have taken the liberty of arranging," said Raxel.

He produced a newspaper of the day before, and pointed to a paragraph. She read: "Burglars last night forced an entry into the first-floor flat at 202, Cambridge Square, Bayswater, occupied by Mr. Tregarth and his sister. . . . Sister away in the country. . . . Bureau broken open. . . . Mr. Tregarth said—nothing of value taken——"

"The report is quite correct—nothing of value was taken, except this," said Raxel.

He took a little book from his pocket, and handed it over to her. It was her own passport.

"I caused one of my agents in London to obtain it," explained Raxel. "The following morning he took it to the United States Consulate and obtained a visa. There should now be nothing to stop you leaving for Southampton this afternoon. Your luggage, I am afraid, will be rather scanty, but the hardship should not be very great. I noticed that you brought a considerable selection of clothes down here with you.

"If you are agreeable, Mr. Marring will drive you to Southampton to-night. You can board the *Megantic* at once, and go to sleep; by the time you wake up, England and all your fears will have been left behind."

Silently he picked the lock and, opening the door, peered into the bedroom.

Betty Tregarth passed a hand across her eyes.

"I've no choice, have I?" she said. "Yes, I'll go. Will you let me write a couple of letters?"

"Certainly," said Raxel obligingly. "In fact, if you would like to write them now, I will post them myself on my walk through the village this afternoon."

"And read them first, I suppose," said the girl cynically, "to see that there's nothing in them to incriminate you. Well, there won't be—you're quite safe. They'll just be ordinary good-bye letters."

Raxel waited patiently while she wrote two short notes—one to her brother, and one to Rameses Smith. She addressed the envelopes, and pointedly left the flaps open. Raxel smiled to himself, and stuck them down in her presence.

"I don't need to read them," he said. "The fact that you were prepared to allow me to do so proves at once that the precaution is not necessary."

"Will you let me say good-bye to Mr. Smith?" she asked.

Raxel's mouth tightened.

"I am afraid that is impossible, Miss Tregarth," he said "It is the only privilege that I am forced to deny you."

She nodded.

"It doesn't matter, really," she said flatly. "I didn't think you'd let me."

"Circumstances forbid me," said Raxel, and put the letters in his pocket. "The car will be ready for you directly after dinner, if not before. You will remain in your room until then. In any case you would be busy with your packing. Good-afternoon."

He left the room, Marring following him, and locked the door again on the outside. Neither of the two men spoke until they were walking down the stairs. Then Marring said:

"That idea strikes me as particularly neat, professor."

"It is nothing to boast about, my dear Marring," said the professor acidly. "Personally, I deplore it, but it happens to be necessary. That is all."

TO DEATH.

At half-past five that afternoon Crantor returned. Smith heard the car draw up outside the hotel, and opened his window. It was quite dark, but he could hear voices below, and several men seemed to be moving about in the road. Then the car was turned so that the headlights shone seawards, and they began to flicker. Smith read the Morse message: "Send boat." The men did not go into the hotel, but walked about outside, stamping their feet, and conversing in undertones.

Presently a lamp winked up from the shore, and Crantor's voice could be heard gathering the men together. They set out to cross the patch of waste land that lay between the road and the sea. Smith saw the torch which Crantor carried to light the way bobbing and dipping down towards the edge of the sea. He waited patiently, and saw lights spring out on the ship.

After some time the light came flickering over the foreshore like a will-of-the-wisp, but it was Crantor alone who crossed the road and entered the hotel.

Smith was about to close his window when the door of the hotel opened again, and three people came out. They could be seen in the shaft of light that was flung out into the road by the lamp in the hall. One was Raxel, the other Marring, in hat and coat; the third was a muffled figure in furs. Smith realised who it must be, and his heart started to thump.

A moment later, Tope came out, carrying a couple of heavy suit-cases. These he packed into the back of the car. Then the girl walked to the car alone, and got into the front seat. Raxel and Marring stood for a few moments on the doorstep. Their voices drifted clearly up to the listener above their heads. Only four sentences were spoken.

"You have not forgotten to pack your respirator, my dear Marring?"

"Is it likely?"

"Then, au revoir—and a pleasant voyage." Marring chuckled.

"I shall breakfast with you on Thursday," he said. "Au revoir, professor."

He went round to the driver's seat, and clambered in.

Temporarily hypnotised into inaction, Smith watched the car drive away. Raxel, standing on the doorstep, watched it out of

sight also, and then turned and went indoors. The door closed.

"Curse!" said Smith.

He could have kicked himself. He would have done so, only it would have been a waste of time. He'd let the girl go, and never made a move to stop her, or even tried to get a word with her before she went. And then he realised that there was nothing he could have done. She must have known that he was in the hotel—even if she didn't—and she had been taken away against her will, she could have cried for help and hoped that he would hear. But she seemed to have left quite willingly.

She had walked to the car of her own accord, and although she had not joined in the conversation of Raxel and Marring, there did not seem to have been any coercion. And he realised, of course, that he had nothing to go on, anyway—to all intents and purposes she had been one of the gang. He had let himself be run away with by a memory of a rather pathetically helpless hopelessness. If she'd wanted to see him before she left, she'd have tried to. She wouldn't have gone as quietly as that.

Rameses Smith shook himself back into a sternly practical review of the situation. Clearly there was no time to be lost. Marring and the girl had gone, he could not tell where. The reference to a respirator which he had heard only confirmed his previous discovery without elucidating it, but presumably Marring and the girl were handling the practical side of whatever project the professor was preparing to execute.

Whatever they were going to do must have some connection with the two tanks which had been taken away on the lorry that morning. And they had gone for good—that stuck out a mile.

Raxel had said: "You have not forgotten to pack your respirator?" Therefore, Marring was not coming back. Neither, as far as one could see, was the girl. There wasn't anything for them to come back for now.

Then there was the ship. A crew had arrived, and had been taken on board, but Crantor had returned. The ship must dovetail into the plan somewhere, and Smith knew that Crantor held a master's ticket. At all events, the laboratory had apparently served its purpose, and as far as Smith could see there was now nothing to stop the professor and Crantor making their getaway as soon as they chose. They would do that by means of the ship, and since the ship was now fully manned, they might be expected to leave that night.

"Curse it!" said Smith softly through his teeth. "I'm getting weak-minded in my old age. Here's one of the bunch made a clean getaway right under my nose, and I never realised that it *was* a getaway!"

He had now no doubt of that. Marring had flown with the girl. Raxel and Crantor would be flying at any moment, and that had got to be stopped; and the snag was that Smith still felt that he had nothing solid enough on which to act. The time for hesitating and dithering about was over.

Any thinking that had got to be done thenceforward could be done in his spare time, but for the present it was imperative to meet action with action. The professor's gang were on the move; therefore, Smith had got to get moving also, if he were not to be hopelessly left behind.

At that moment he heard the voices of Raxel and Crantor coming down the corridor outside. Inspired, Smith slid noiselessly across the room, and stood motionless at the side of the door, in such a position that if it were opened he would be hidden

His intuition had served him well, for he had hardly taken up his position when the handle rattled under somebody's hand, and there was a knock.

In spite of his improvised respirator, the swirling gas fumes threatened to overcome him. He worked feverishly to remove the heavy slab of stone.

Smith kept silence. The knock was repeated, and then the door opened. Smith held his breath, but Raxel only took one step into the room.

"He's not here," said the professor's voice. "We might have expected that he was out. If I have correctly diagnosed the relationship between our Mr. Smith and our Miss Tregarth, one might safely say that he would not have let her leave without trying to get at least a few minutes' conversation with her."

"Thasso," said Crantor. "He seems to spend most of his time out of doors, walking. I guess he's out on a tramp now."

"We shall be ready for him when he returns," said Raxel, and the door closed.

Smith breathed again. The ancient ruse of hiding behind an opening door had worked for the thousandth time in history. Smith didn't imagine for a moment that he would have got away with it if the gang had been searching for him in earnest, but the chief advantage of his subterfuge was that they could not have been expecting it.

In the past he had shown no signs of a modest desire to efface himself, and the closest observation could not have detected him in any furtive or sleuth-like behaviour; so that, when they did not see him at once, they had fallen into the error of assuming that he was not there.

Well, that was where they got the surprise of their young lives. Smith touched his hip to make sure that his gun reposed in its pocket, and opened the door a cautious two inches. He was in time to hear another door close further up the passage, and crept out.

He padded down the corridor on tiptoe, listening at each door as he passed, and located the two men in the laboratory.

He paused, listening. Their voices came to him quite distinctly. Raxel was speaking.

"The *Megantic* makes a steady twenty-five knots. My inquiries have been very complete. Here is the route—I have marked it out in red ink for you. They sail punctually at six o'clock to-morrow morning. By six o'clock on Thursday morning they should, therefore, be here."

"That's right," said Crantor. "Here, pass me those compasses. I'll just check that, and work out the position now."

There was a silence, and then Crantor spoke again.

"I've jotted down the position against your mark," he said, and mentioned some figures. "So that's that. We've only got to wait till Smith comes back, and then we can be off."

"I've told Tope to watch for him, and report as soon as he arrives," said Raxel.

"What are you doing about Hardy?" asked Crantor.

"For a time," answered Raxel, "I thought of enlisting him. He seemed to me to have distinct possibilities. But I have since revised that opinion. I have been watching him closely, and I now think that he is a man with inherent impulses towards respectability. At any moment he might be liable to succumb to a sentimental desire to reform and lead an honest life, and such men are dangerous. We will leave him behind."

"Right," said Crantor. "My bag's packed. If yours is ready we might send them down to the boat now. Then we can beat it as soon as we've got rid of Smith."

Rameses Smith turned the handle, and kicked the door open. He stepped into the

room. Crantor jumped up with an exclamation, but the professor was unperturbed.

"We've been expecting you, Mr. Smith," he remarked.

"Then you've got what you wanted," said Smith grimly. "Stick your hands up, both of you."

He showed his gun, and Crantor obeyed, but Raxel's hand went to his pocket, and Smith pressed the trigger.

Nothing happened.

"It is now your turn to put up your hands, Mr. Smith," said Raxel, and his silenced automatic gleamed in his hand. "It was careless of you to leave your gun in your bed-room when you went to your bath this morning, but it gave me an invaluable opportunity of unloading it."

Smith's hands went up slowly.

"I congratulate you," he said.

"You flatter me," said the professor. "It was really quite easy. On the other hand, I am able to thank you for saving us the trouble of waiting for you any longer."

On the bench beside Raxel was the glass bowl in which Smith had observed the liquid HA condensing the night before. Raxel picked it up carefully, holding it delicately in his cupped left hand.

"Please precede me to the cellars, Mr. Smith," said Raxel. "Crantor will lead the way."

They went down the corridor, and down the stairs, in procession. For a moment Smith had cherished a fleeting hope that he would be able to grab Crantor from behind, and swing him round as a shield between himself and Raxel's gun. But the same idea had obviously struck Crantor also, and he kept at a safe distance.

The man opened a door under the staircase, and went through, switching on a torch as he did so. Smith saw a flight of stone stairs leading down into darkness.

"What's going to happen when I get down there?" he asked.

"We shall leave you," answered Raxel. "I do not think you will live very long."

It was fantastic—impossible. Outside, it was broad daylight, and only a few hundred yards away there were ordinary unthinking villagers going about their daily tasks, men and women, who would laugh incredulously at the idea of a man being killed in cold blood only a stone's-throw from their front doorsteps.

Yet Smith had no doubt that Raxel intended to kill him. For an instrument there was the twinkling glass bowl of concentrated death in the professor's hand. And the cold, unemotional ruthlessness of Raxel's voice was very real.

But for that, the whole situation might have seemed like the last fragment of a grotesque nightmare; but the professor's quietness was more convincing than any vindictive outburst could have been.

"Nice of you," said Smith thoughtfully.

"I'm sorry," said Raxel, although his deep-set, faded blue eyes showed neither sorrow nor any other trace of humanity. "I bear you no malice. It is simply that my interest in my own safety demands it."

Smith squared his shoulders.

"Since I am to die," he said, "I wonder why I don't chance my luck, and attack you. I could only be shot, anyway."

"Probably," replied Raxel, "because you will not admit the certainty of death until the final moment. Why does a condemned man eat his breakfast, and smoke his last cigarette, on the execution morning? It is no use to him, but he still clings to life."

Stealthily pushing up the window sash, he slithered over the sill into the mysterious laboratory.

"That's an idea," said Smith. "It's the wrong time for breakfast, and I suppose it'd delay you too much to ask you to let he eat a final dinner, but at least you can give me a couple of bottles of beer."

Crantor came up the stairs again, and was visibly relieved when he saw that Smith was still holding up his hands.

"Why don't you send him along down, professor?" he demanded. "We haven't got a lot of time to waste."

"The conventions must be observed," said Raxel. "Mr. Smith has asked the privilege of being allowed to consume two bottles of beer, and I shall let him do so. Tope!"

Basher Tope came shambling out of the bar, and the professor gave the order. The beer was brought. Smith poured it out himself, and drank the two glasses with relish. Then he picked up the bottles.

"I'll take these with me," he said, "as mementoes. Right away, professor!"

Crantor led the way down the stairs, and Smith followed. Raxel brought up the rear.

At the foot of the stairs was a short flagged passage, ending in a door. Crantor opened the door, and motioned to Smith to enter. Raxel came up, and the two men stood in the doorway, Crantor lighting up the cellar with his torch.

It was fairly large, and at one end was a row of barrels. The floor was covered with stone paving, and the roof was supported by wooden buttresses. But the house was an old one, and Smith had banked everything on the walls not being bricked up, and his hopes went up a notch when he saw that there was nothing but bare earth on three sides of the room.

He turned with a smile.

"Good-bye, professor," he said.

"Good-bye," said Raxel.

His left hand swung up with the glass globe, and the green liquid it contained caught the light of the torch, and it shone like a monstrous jewel.

The next instant the bowl had smashed on the floor, and before the light of the torch was taken away Smith saw the green fluid spreading in a pool over the stone, with a thin steamy vapour already rising from it.

Then the door slammed, and the key turned in the lock. The footsteps of Raxel and Crantor could be heard hurrying down the echoing passage and stumbling up the stairs; and Smith, holding his breath, was knocking the bottoms off the bottles he carried, and packing them with earth torn from the walls of the cellar with desperate speed.

ALL'S WELL.

WITH the first bottle packed with earth, Smith put the neck in his mouth, and used it to breathe through, closing his nostrils with his fingers. It had been a forlorn hope, but it had been the only thing he had been able to think of; and he remembered having read in a book that such a device formed one of the most efficient possible respirators. It was something to do with molecular velocity. Smith was no scientist, and he did not profess to understand the principle. The main point was whether it would work effectively against HA.

He waited, breathing cautiously, while the luminous dial on his wrist-watch indicated the passing of ten minutes. At the end of that time he felt no distress other than that caused by the difficulty of squeezing air through the packed earth, and decided that his improvised gas-mask was functioning satisfactorily.

He turned his attention to the door. Hampered as he was by having to take care not to draw a single breath of air which did not pass through his packed bottle, he was not able to fling his whole weight against it, but the efforts he was able to make seemed to produce no impression. He felt all round the door, but the wall in which it was set was the only one which was bricked up.

Then he went down on his hands and knees, and tested the stone flags. Two of them, right beside the door, were loose. Handicapped though he was by having only one free hand, he succeeded in getting his fingers under each slab in turn, and dislodging it, and dragging it away. The earth underneath was moist and soft.

Rameses Smith began to dig.

It took him three hours by his watch to burrow under the door, but at last he achieved an aperture large enough to worm his way through. He leaned against the wall on the other side for a few moments, to rest himself, and then felt his way down the corridor and up the stairs.

Mercifully, the door at the top of the stairs was unlocked, and it opened at once. Manifestly, Raxel had had no doubt that Smith would not live long enough to find any way out of the cellar. Smith burst through, and rushed for the nearest window. He had not even time to open it—he smashed it with his respirator-bottle, and filled his aching lungs with great gasping breaths of frosty fresh air.

After a short time he was able to breathe more easily, and then he made a round of the ground floor, opening every window and door to give free passage to the sea breeze, which was soon blowing strongly enough through the house to sweep away any of the gas which filtered up from the cellar.

It was in the kitchen that he found Detective-Sergeant Pug Hardy, of the Criminal Investigation Department, gagged, and securely trussed up in a chair. Smith cut him loose, and heard the story.

"I don't know how it happened, sir. One minute I was cleaning up a saucepan, and then I got a sickening welt on the back of the head that knocked me right out. Next thing I knew, I was all tied up like this."

"And I suppose if I'd died, as I was meant to, you'd have sat here till you starved to death," said Smith. "He's a lovable bloke, is the professor."

Smith lighted a cigarette, and paced the room feverishly. Raxel, Crantor, and Basher Tope had gone—he did not have to search the inn to know that. And the ship had gone. Looking out of the window, he could see nothing but blackness. Nowhere on the sea was visible anything like a ship's lights. But then they'd had a long start while he was sapping under that cellar door.

And now Smith had a pretty good idea what the professor's scheme was, and the magnitude of it took his breath away.

He wasted only a few minutes in coming to a decision; and then, with Hardy to help him, he went round to the garage and examined the dilapidated *Hildebrand*. It had not been touched; but, of course, Raxel could not have foreseen that Smith would be in a position to use it. Anyway, it didn't look up to much, as cars went, and Smith eyed it disparagingly.

"Now, why did I never realise that a real car might be some use sometimes?" he wanted to know.

But certainly that car was the only vehicle which would take him out of Llancoed that night, for there would be no trains running from a one-horse village like that, at that hour.

"Where are you making for, sir?" asked Hardy, as Smith let in the clutch, and the car moved off with a deafening rattle.

"Gloucester," said Smith. "And *Hildebrand* is going to touch the ground in spots, like he's never skipped before. Now get down on your knees in front of the dashboard, Pug, and pray that nothing busts!"

Nothing bust; but Smith's heart was in his mouth all the way from Llancoed to Gloucester. They took five hours to cover the eighty-five miles, and it was three o'clock on the Wednesday morning when he drew up outside the police station in Gloucester.

There he introduced himself, and while the Assistant Commissioner was being found on the long-distance telephone, a man was sent round to rouse the proprietor of the biggest garage in the town and commandeer his fastest car.

Smith had finished talking to the Assistant Commissioner by the time the car was driven round, and the theory which had formulated itself during the drive from Llancoed was abundantly confirmed. The *Megantic*, the Assistant Commissioner had been able to tell him, was carrying a shipload of two million pounds' worth of bullion to New York.

"You can leave this end of the palaver to me," Kennedy had said. "I'll get on the 'phone to the police at Southampton, and have those cases taken off without any fuss. After that I'll get hold of the Admiralty, and see that everything's ready for you at Plymouth when you arrive."

Smith was already convinced that Marring and the girl had left to catch the *Megantic* at Southampton. The reference that had been made to a respirator substantiated this. Rameses Smith's mouth was set in a hard line as he took the wheel of the waiting Lancia.

. . . . .

Passengers on the *Megantic* who were up early for breakfast that morning were interested to see the low, lean shape of a destroyer speeding towards them. As the destroyer came nearer, a string of flags broke out from the mast, and then the passengers were amazed and flustered, for the *Megantic* suddenly began to slow up.

The destroyer also hove to, and a boat put out from its side and rowed towards the *Megantic*.

Betty Tregarth was one of the early risers who crowded to the side to watch the two men from the destroyer's boat climbing up the rope ladder which had been lowered for them. She saw the first man who clambered over the rail quite clearly, and the colour left her face suddenly, for it was Rameses Smith.

The *Megantic* had got under way again, and the destroyer was rapidly dropping astern when she received the expected summons to the captain's cabin.

Besides the captain, Rameses Smith was there, and another man, with an official

The Solution of this week's 'BAFFLER' PROBLEM

on page 23.

DO NOT READ THIS ANSWER until you have made your effort to solve the crime. To this end the facts are printed upside-down.

1. *Mlle. G., the French spy, communicated the message to her confederate by means of the two books.*

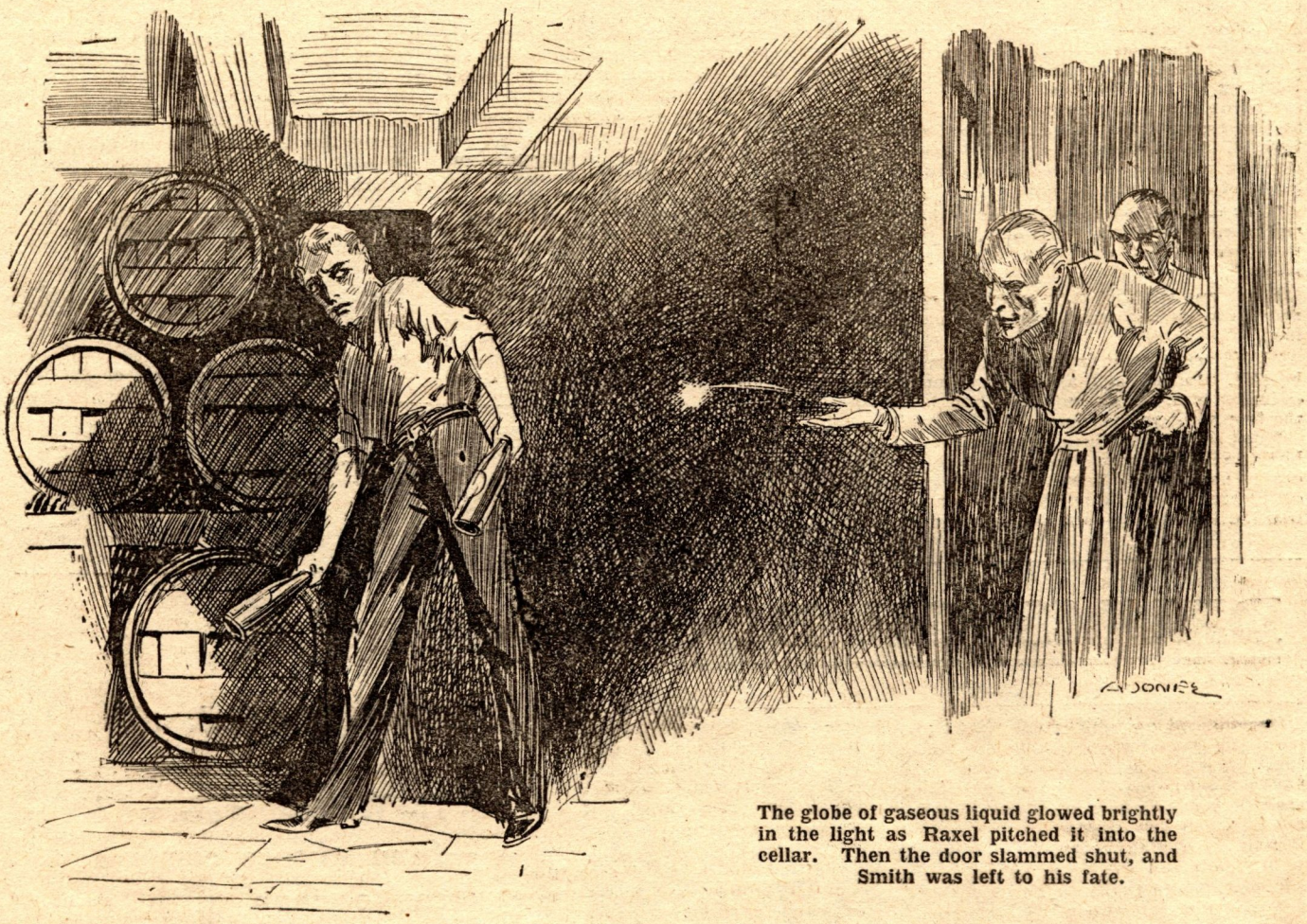
2. *It has been stated that the two books were both volumes of an encyclopædia, containing information under the letters B and H.*

All secret service agents are known by a number, usually preceded by the department letters. B is the second letter in the alphabet, while H is the eighth.

When Mlle. G. entered the lounge, she walked to the bookcase and took out the two volumes in the order, first B and then H. Going to the table, she took out her pencil and a piece of paper apparently to make some notes, and placed the books on the table so that her confederate could set the letters inscribed on them, with the volume containing B uppermost. She then took up this book, made a few notes, and then passed on to the H section.

Her confederate thus got the number of the treacherous spy as B.H.28.

Having, apparently, now satisfied her curiosity, Mlle. G. put the slip of paper and pencil in her bag, replaced the volumes, and left the room.



The globe of gaseous liquid glowed brightly in the light as Raxel pitched it into the cellar. Then the door slammed shut, and Smith was left to his fate.

bearing, whose face seemed vaguely familiar. Marring was also there, an unsavoury and dishevelled sight in his dressing-gown, and she saw that there were handcuffs on his wrists.

"This is the other one," said Smith. "Miss Tregarth, I don't think I need to put you in irons, but I must ask you to consider yourself under arrest."

She nodded dumbly.

Rameses Smith turned to his companion.

"Hardy, you can take Marring below. Don't let him out of your sight. I'll arrange for you to be relieved later." Then he returned to the captain. "Captain Davis, may I ask you to allow me a few words alone with Miss Tregarth?"

"Certainly, Mr. Smith."

The captain followed Hardy and Marring out of the room, and Rameses Smith closed the door behind them, and faced the girl. She had never imagined that he could look so stern.

"Sit down," he said, and she obeyed.

Smith took a chair on the other side of the table.

"Betty," he said, "I'm giving you your last chance. Spill all the beans you know, and you mayn't do so badly. Stay in with the rest of 'em, and you're booked for a certain ten years. Which is it going to be?"

"I'll tell you everything I know," she said. "It doesn't matter much now, anyway."

She told him the story from the beginning, and he listened with rapt attention. She expected incredulity, but he showed none. At the end of the recital he was actually smiling.

"My gosh!" said Rameses Smith, almost with a sigh. "That's the best thing I've heard for a long time!"

"What do you mean?" she asked dazedly.

"Only this," answered Smith. "The shot that killed Henley was certainly fired from a gun of exactly the same make and calibre as the one with your finger-prints on, and the gun with your finger-prints on it certainly fired a shot. But the shot that killed Henley wasn't fired from your gun. The rifling on any gun always leaves distinctive marks on the bullet, and it's already established that your gun didn't fire the shot we're interested in Raxel, or somebody, must have fired from a similar gun just as the drug overcame you."

"Does that mean I'm free?" she said, with a wild hope springing up in her voice.

He smiled.

"Not exactly. I'm afraid you're too deeply involved to be set free without a considerable amount of formalities, but I think I can say that you needn't be afraid of the ultimate result."

Then the relief of realising that she was safe grew too much for her, and she broke down.

Rameses Smith came round the table, and laid a kindly hand on her shoulder.

"Easy up, Betty," he urged uncomfortably

"It's all right," she said, smiling through her tears. "It's just suddenly having all that weight taken off my mind. It's rather a shock——"

"I guess I understand," said Rameses Smith gently; and then, suddenly, surprisingly, he kissed her.

* * * * *

About twenty hours later by the clock, or two and a half minutes by Rameses Smith's reckoning, a trim, racy-looking motor cruiser loomed out of the dawn, and came racing level with the *Megantic*. The transformation that had been effected from the disreputable tramp that had been anchored off Llancoed was amazing. A fresh coat of white paint obliterated the artistically faked rustiness of her plates, and the dummy funnel and deckhouse were gone. On the bridge, a man stood and semaphored.

On the bridge of the *Megantic*, a man whose face was hidden by a gas-mask semaphored back.

As a result of the semaphoring, the motor-ship drew closer alongside, with fenders hung all along her port side, and as soon as the two ships were close enough, grappling-irons were thrown.

The two ships came together with a slight bump, and the man in the gas-mask came down to the promenade deck and dropped a rope-ladder over the rail. From the deck of the motor-cruiser, Raxel and Crantor climbed on to the *Megantic*, and three other

men followed them. They all carried gas-masks, which they adjusted as soon as they came aboard.

Without a word—for conversation was precluded by the masks—the man who had lowered the rope-ladder led them below. He led them to the saloon, and as soon as they saw where they were they turned, and looked at him inquiringly. Then Rameses Smith took off his gas-mask, and at the same moment a dozen armed seamen, led by Sergeant Pug Hardy, filed in.

"You can take off those face obliterators, and talk," said Smith. "The only gas you'll find here will be what you spout yourselves."

Raxel was the first to take off his mask, and his smile had never been more charming.

"I did you a great injustice, Mr. Smith," he said, "for which I apologise. I underestimated you. You should have been killed the first night you arrived at the inn."

"You should have been strangled at birth," said Smith unpleasantly, for he could not forget that Raxel had deliberately sent Betty Tregarth on board with Marring—and she had not been given a respirator, nor had she known that there might be any need for one. "Take them away, Pug."

He watched the removal of the prisoners without interest, and superintended the capture of the rest of the crew of the motor cruiser without enthusiasm, for he was anxious to return to a more attractive pursuit.

Three hours later, the destroyer from which he had boarded the *Megantic* came up over the horizon. The *Megantic* hove to, and the prisoners were taken on board the destroyer; and Crantor's ship was cut loose and manned by a scratch crew from the destroyer, to be worked back to Plymouth.

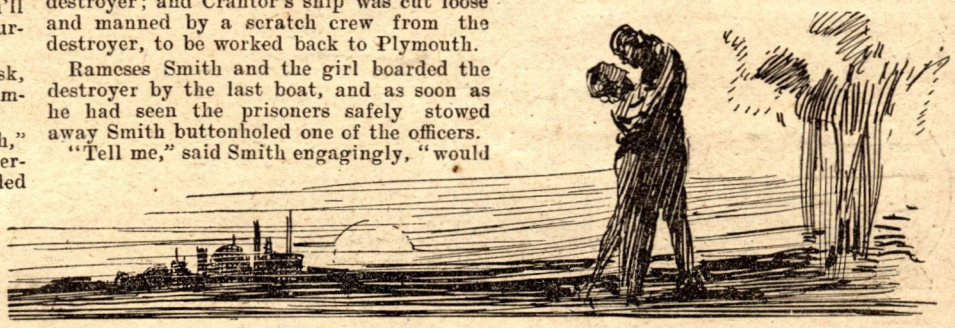
Rameses Smith and the girl boarded the destroyer by the last boat, and as soon as he had seen the prisoners safely stowed away Smith buttonholed one of the officers.

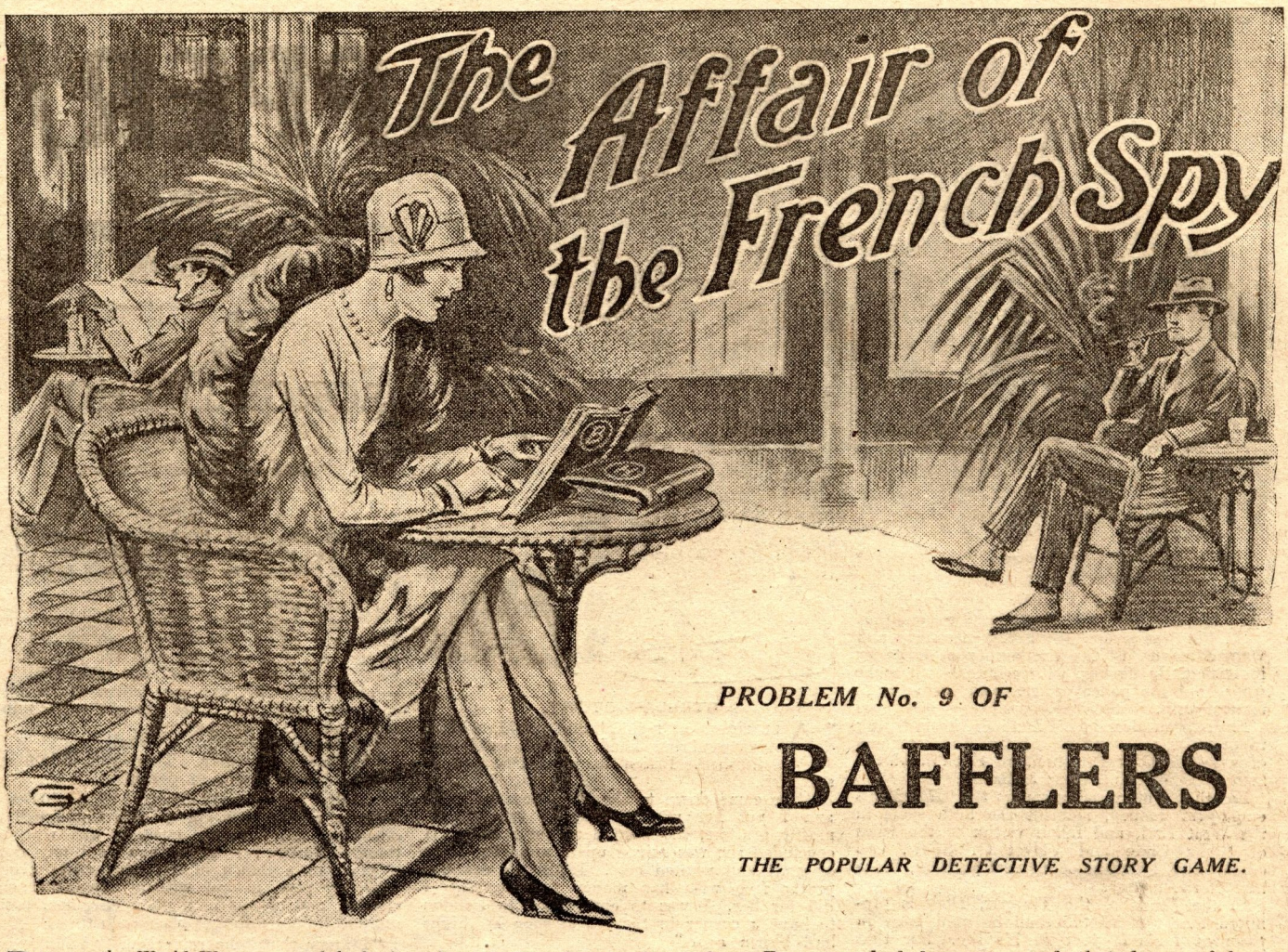
"Tell me," said Smith engagingly, "would you boys like to amuse yourselves on the trip home by getting your skipper to perform a wedding? If I go back to England single it'll be three days before I can get a special licence, but the Old Man can do the job right away."

The lieutenant looked from Rameses Smith to Betty Tregarth, and back to Rameses Smith again. He winked.

Rameses Smith thought him indiscreet, and crude, and utterly repulsive.

THE END.





The Affair of the French Spy

PROBLEM No. 9 OF

BAFFLERS

THE POPULAR DETECTIVE STORY GAME.

DURING the World War many subtle brains were devoted to originating secret forms of communication, and also to detecting the new codes and ciphers used for communication by the enemy. An episode illustrating the keenness of the secret agents in this "underground combat" between espionage and counter-espionage occurred in Switzerland. It presents an interesting problem.

A certain Mlle. G., of the French Secret Service, had been assigned to the French counter-espionage service; that is, to the branch of the Secret Service which spies upon spies. In Berne, in Zurich, and Geneva, Mlle. G. posed so successfully as a Swiss lady that she succeeded in gaining the confidence of German espionage agents. These sought to engage her as a German agent to spy upon the French. For her, this was extraordinary luck; she accepted their offer, and her French superiors were delighted.

One day, however, the French counter-espionage headquarters was shocked to learn through Belgian sources that one of their trusted agents had proved treacherous, and was in reality serving German agents.

The French immediately grew anxious to discover the identity of this treacherous agent, so that he might be arrested at once. They had but a slight suspicion that it might be one of three persons, and accordingly secretly informed Mlle. G. of the situation, and ordered her to lose no time in seeking this essential information, without, however, in any way betraying herself to the German agents in Switzerland with whom she was now daily associating.

By surreptitious examination of documents in the files of her trusting German associates, Mlle. G. managed to learn the identity of the treacherous spy just an hour before she was due to leave Berne on an important commission for her German employers. If she were to get her important information to her French employers quickly enough for them to seize the traitor, it was necessary that she do so before the hour was up, for after that she would be constantly in the company of the Germans. She could not telegraph the message, for she knew that the telegraph offices were honeycombed with espionage agents of all countries, and if any of them decoded the message it might lead to her own discovery.

There was one chance; fortunately, Mlle. G. had arranged an appointment in her hotel lobby with one of her French confederates in Berne, who was also aware of the position, so that she might give him, if necessary, the latest information before she left. But she felt certain that she and her visitor were watched at all times, so it had been arranged that her confederate should take a seat near her in the hotel lobby, but not take the initiative in addressing her.

In short, Mlle. G. was faced with the difficult problem of conveying a vital message upon very short notice to a confederate who could be near her and watch her, but with whom she might not dare to hold conversation. Indeed, in view of the certain presence in the lobby of German agents who might be watching her closely, she knew that she must not be seen nodding significantly, signalling by hand, or doing anything which might arouse their suspicions.

In spite of the difficulties confronting her, Mlle. G. acquainted her confederate with the identity of the treacherous French spy, and without attracting attention. And within ten hours the spy was under arrest.

How did she do it? The illustration above shows Mlle. G. as she sat at the table in the lounge of the hotel in Berne, after she had gone to a bookcase and taken out two volumes of an encyclopædia. She stayed there for only five minutes, first studying the volume containing data under the letter "B," and then the one under "H," apparently making notes. Her confederate sat at another small table beneath a large palm, sipping a light drink. His manner was quite casual, and he did not make the slightest sign or movement to create suspicion. Mlle. G. returned to her room unsuspected.

The questions to be answered are:

1. How did Mlle. G. communicate the message to her confederate? (Marks, 5.)

2. What was the text of the message? (Marks, 5.)

THE RULES.

The rules are simplicity itself. On this page you are given details of Baffler Problem No. 9—there will be another next week. Briefly, you are told the story of a crime and given ALL the clues necessary for its solution. Be your own detective. Read the problem through very carefully, giving consideration to every detail, then try to answer the questions at the end.

Award yourself marks as indicated after comparing your answers with those given on page 20. These answers are printed upside-down so that they may not catch your eye before you have had a chance to test your skill. Remember, it is the sense of your solution, not its exact wording, that counts.

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

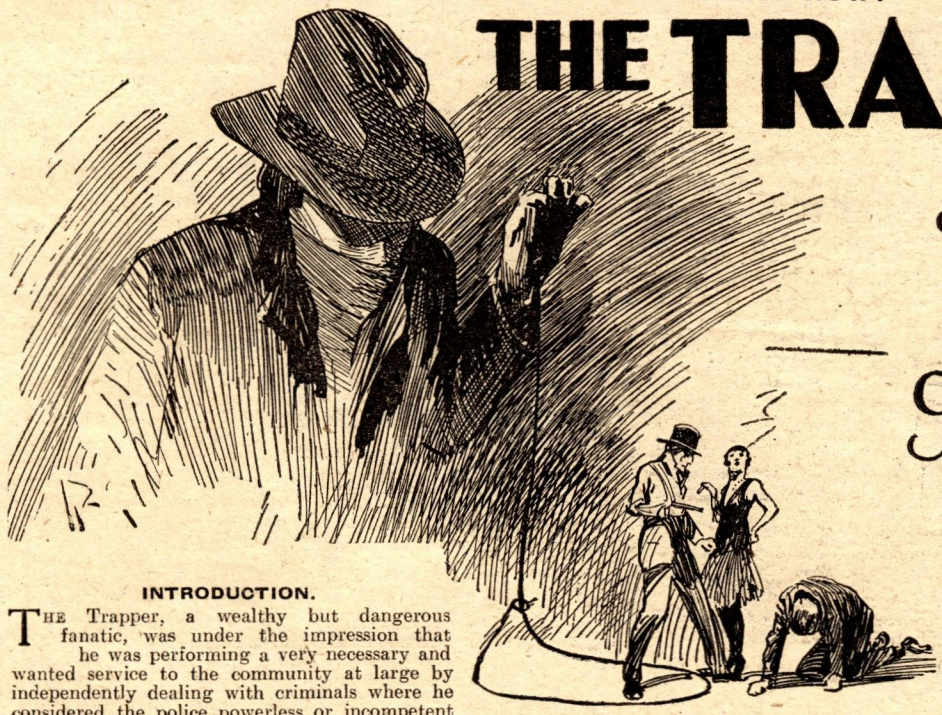
YOU CAN BEGIN READING THIS POWERFUL SERIAL NOW!

THE TRAPPER!

A DRAMA OF THE NIGHT-HAUNTS OF LONDON

By GEORGE DILNOT

Author of "Scotland Yard," etc.



INTRODUCTION.

THE Trapper, a wealthy but dangerous fanatic, was under the impression that he was performing a very necessary and wanted service to the community at large by independently dealing with criminals where he considered the police powerless or incompetent to deal with.

Entirely ruthless in his methods, he is trying to organise a gang, one of the first members of which is Dick Estrehan, an ex-clerk of the firm of Hint, Hint, Sons & Barter.

Estrehan, after embezzling £20,000 of his employers' money, had hit the high spots in the West End, and fallen victim to the wiles of Stella Cliffe and Velvet Grimshaw, two crooks who, ignorant of his real position, fleece him of the money.

In the hands of the Trapper, Dick is promised that the £20,000 shall be paid back in payment for one year of his life. For that period he must give his life and reputation to the Trapper, the alternative being prison and disgrace.

Meanwhile, Velvet Grimshaw is murdered under strange circumstances at a West End night club. On his coat is found a wire noose such as is used for trapping rabbits.

This was not the first appearance of the wire noose. Several previous crimes had borne this trade-mark, and Chief Constable Winter, of the C.I.D., is determined to get the mysterious criminal known as the Trapper. The job is given to Detective Martin Wilde.

Wilde is obliged to accept the assistance, although in only an unofficial capacity, of Quenton Thorold and Patricia Langton. Thorold, an American millionaire, was already known to the Yard on account of valuable services he had previously rendered. On the night that Grimshaw was murdered at the Gnomes Club, it was Thorold who handed to Detective Wilde a flash-lamp belonging to the murderer, and curiously enough Thorold was the only person present that night who possessed a revolver. Following incidents lead Wilde to become suspicious of the American and his partner, but he is unable to prove anything.

Stella Cliffe is closely shadowed by detectives, but they are unsuccessful in their quest when she visits the house of the Trapper. The latter prepares her safe getaway, and upon arrival at the house meets young Dick Estrehan there. She tries to persuade him to break away from the crook. Their attempt to escape fails, and later when Wilde raids the house to which Stella had been traced by the police, he finds them bound and gagged in a cellar. Both are suffering from shock, and Dick is carried off unconscious. Stella, however, not being so bad, is interrogated by Wilde. He tries to find out who the mysterious woman was who helped her to escape from the scene of Velvet's murder. He suspects Patricia Langton.

(Now continue the story.)

STELLA'S STORY.

"ALL right, all right!" Stella said, with a wave of her hand. "Wait until I've finished. Listen to what I've got to say first.

"She came down to the farm once or twice and I put her wise to one or two people, mostly grafters, she wanted to know about. I concluded she was mixed up in some big piece of graft and wanted help. I will say she was pretty free with her money for anything I did for her. I was to come back to London to have a corner in the job as soon as things had blown over."

"Did she give you the names of any of her associates?" asked Wilde.

The girl gave a gesture of denial.

"Not a name, except Dick's. I understood that he'd been dragged into it, although I didn't quite know how. But I knew there were other people, because she said that if anyone showed me a wire noose I would know they were acting on behalf of a man she called the chief. The thing looked good to me, because it was easy money. Then Miss Langton found me, although how she worked out where I was, was a mystery to me."

"You had never met her before?"

"I didn't know her from Adam then. She rushed me off my feet and I agreed to go back to town to see you. You see, I knew that if I refused, you'd be along, anyway."

Wilde doubted if the girl was as candid as she appeared to be at this point in her story. But neither his voice nor his manner betrayed the thought.

"You weren't easy to handle when you came to me that day, Stella. Were you still afraid that I was after Estrehan?"

"Partly. And partly I was picking up the dough so nicely that I didn't want to run the risk of you butting in and spoiling my makings. Naturally, I was cautious."

"Did you see the other woman at all after you came back from London?"

"Not a sign of her. I guess she knew how closely you were keeping tag on me."

She shot a demure glance at him from under her long eyelashes.

"I guessed you'd have me tailed. So I strolled about town and did a little shopping until I'd tired your lads out, and then I rang up the number the lady had given me and reported in a code as we'd arranged."

Wilde did not remove the impression that she had thrown off her shadowers.

"Then you went to your old rooms," he said, "and you've remained there since. How did you manage to keep in touch with your friends?"

She chuckled.

"Funny you smart fellows overlooked one little bit. You watched me every time I went out. You arranged with the postman to look at the postmarks of my letters—and I wouldn't be surprised if you looked inside most of them. But you never thought of tapping my landlady's telephone."

The detective smiled.

"Perhaps we didn't. Then you didn't see any of these people in person."

"Well," she drawled slowly. "I might have done in a way, but not as you would call it officially. They didn't guess I was wise to them. Wouldn't it strike you as funny now if you got a bunch of Treasury notes every week by post, always without any other enclosure, and always in a plain envelope, postmarked from a different place each time?"

"I knew that," he remarked. "Didn't you rather expect them?"

"Yes. But what I didn't expect was to get someone else handing me out dough for no reason that I know of."

Wilde raised his eyebrows.

"Miss Langton?" he said mildly.

"I rather thought you'd guess it. She's a slap-up lady and I wouldn't have a word to say against her if it wasn't for what her pals did to me and Dick in this place. But I'll tell you the truth, Mr. Wilde. She more than once brought a bird named Quenton Thorold to see me—I reckon your fellows reported that to you. But what I want to know is, what they'd be paying money to me for? What have I done for them? And, believe me, they know a lot about this game—more than I do. They were always talking about my plans—trying to dig out of me whether I was likely to squeal, I guess. They never talked straight business, and they always sidestepped me when I asked straight questions, but they went on a lot about my feelings to Dick and whether I wanted to marry him. Perhaps I talked a little freely.

"Y' see, I thought they were straight crooks, and again I had an idea that I hadn't treated Dick quite right. But they fenced whenever I pressed them about him. That began to annoy me a little. I let 'em see that I'd stand for just so much and no more. I kind of hinted I might talk to you. Really, I didn't mean to do anything like that, but I was getting fed up.

"Then, last night, after Miss Langton had gone, somebody rang me up, and said Dick wanted to see me. I fell for it. They sent a car and brought me here. I saw Dick and tried to persuade him to cut loose from the whole thing. He told me he'd had nothing to do with the murder of Velvet, and I got him to agree at last.

"It was a frame-up. The Trapper was listening to everything we said and he broke in.

We started to make a getaway when some of the gang jumped us and brought us back. Dick said a few words to some of 'em—and perhaps I chipped in once or twice. After a while, we were locked up in separate rooms while they had a pow-wow about us.

"Then we were brought down again and asked to promise to carry on with them. But I was awake. The gag was to get us in so deep that we couldn't back out. It wasn't good enough—not with that tough crowd—though Dick might have weakened if I hadn't been there. They wouldn't have dared lose sight of us, whatever we promised, anyway. So we were trussed up and carried to the cellar where you found us. Perhaps they thought we'd peg out. Perhaps they intended to scare us. That's all I know."

"You had a good look at this fellow—the chief?" said Wilde. "Did you happen to recognise him?"

"Well," she said, with quiet deliberation, "if Quenton Thorold was to put a little grease paint on his face and change the colour of his hair it might have been him."

ESTREHAN DISAPPOINTS.

After something less than six hours rest, Wilde arived at Scotland Yard to take stock of the results of the raid. With philosophy, he reflected that, although he had missed the big fish, the effort had not been altogether vain. At least, he had achieved a tactical victory in gaining possession of Stella and Dick Estrehan, both of whom were likely to be important actors in the final stages of the case. For he had perfect confidence that the Trapper would not long elude him, whereas evidence to ensure his conviction would not be so simple a matter. Estrehan, if he had summed up the man correctly, would undoubtedly tell all he knew. That should enable many of the gaps to be filled in, and the question then would resolve itself into one of identity.

Stella he had put for the time being under the charge of one of the two women detective-inspectors from the Yard, a tactful and shrewd lady who could be relied upon to make no mistakes in handling her. A couple or armed detectives were warned to be always within reach of the two women, for Wilde had formed a high opinion of the audacity and enterprise of the Trapper and his associates, and was in no mind to run the risk of again losing the girl. Estrehan had been sent to a private ward in one of the big public hospitals, also under the surveillance of two armed men. One never knew what might happen. Wilde did not anticipate that he would make any move of his own initiative, but there was no telling to what lengths the Trapper would go.

The methodical activities of the police at Canonbury had occupied much time. A detailed search of the house had revealed nothing fresh. That the chief inspector had anticipated. If, as seemed apparent, the intention to raid the house had become known, the members of so astute a gang would have been very careful. Inquiries had shown that the house had been rented furnished from a firm of estate agents by a man who called himself Smith, and who was apparently an American. A considerable sum had been paid in advance, as the tenant said that he was a newcomer to England, and could give no personal references. Even forged references might have left some trace.

In conference with Winter and the area detective, Superintendent Wilde admitted that the point which chiefly puzzled him was why Stella and Dick should have been left behind.

"If they knew we were coming," he asked, "why should they have left these people, who knew quite a lot, for us to find? Why not have carted them away? Or why not have gone the limit and put them completely out of the way? If a man's liable to be hanged for murder, it's not reasonable that he should hesitate at one or two more to make himself safe."

"They were rushed in their getaway," suggested the area superintendent. "It was too much trouble and risk to carry away two unwilling people."

"That doesn't explain why they left them to fall into my hands—alive," said Wilde.

Winter emphasised a point with a heavy forefinger.

"Seems to me you're overlooking something. This booby trap on the cellar stairs. That was just plain futility if it was meant for indiscriminate murder. What good would it have done them if they had killed one of our boys? This Trapper fellow may be mad, but there's always been some motive behind the most crazy of his acts. If I were making a guess, I'd say that they thought it possible a raid might be made, but they weren't sure. That pistol wasn't intended to kill, or perhaps they didn't care whether it did or not. It was meant as a warning to someone."

"You think someone was hanging about to hear if we made any search of the cellar?" said Wilde.

"That's my idea," said the chief constable. "What have you done with the gun?"

"Sent it along to an expert for examination," explained Wilde. "We may be able to trace where it was bought and who bought it."

"Well, guessing won't help us much until we've got more facts," said Winter. "You'll be getting a statement from this boy Estrehan, of course? What move have you got in your mind after that?"

"Perhaps I had better have a word with the Director," said Wilde. Only one person is meant when the Director is referred to in the Criminal Investigation Department—the Director of Public Prosecutions. "If I get what I expect from Dick Estrehan," he went on thoughtfully, "I may be in a position to make an arrest. Estrehan, at least, should be able to swear to identity."

Winter's brow contracted.

"You mean Thorold. I'll own it looks nasty against him, but I'm not at all easy. All the positive evidence you will have will be that of these two young crooks, and they'll be jolted up in cross-examination. Why, you saw this man yourself in Farringdon Street, and, if you are right, he's got a resemblance to Thorold; but they are definitely different people. We can't afford to go off at half-cock. Don't do anything too quick."

"That's why I wanted to talk with the Director," explained Wilde. "As for the man I saw, he was not Thorold, although I at first thought he was. But because there is a man in the gang who is like Thorold, there is no reason why Thorold himself should not be in the game. The thing may be intentional."

The conversation turned to legal technicalities, and after a while Wilde departed to take up the active threads of the investigation.

He found Dick Estrehan in the hospital, propped up with pillows, and playing cards with his guardians. The game was peremptorily broken up, and the chief inspector seated himself by the bedside with a genial word.

"Well, old fellow, you look a little less limp than when I saw you last. How are you feeling now?"

Estrehan eyed him with something of the uneasy trepidation of a caged animal.

"I'm better, thank you," he answered mechanically.

"That's all right, then. I thought I'd like a little talk with you. Stella sent her love."

A faint tinge of colour showed in the pale cheek of the other.

"These men"—he waved a hand to the door through which Wilde's subordinates had disappeared—"they won't answer any questions. Am I under arrest?"

Wilde caressed his chin with one hand.

"I wouldn't exactly put it that way," he said. "We're just detaining you for a while. We have to, in the circumstances, you understand. But I'm not at all sure what will happen. Stella has told me one or two things, and I gather you have been badly let in. We all make fools of ourselves sometimes. I'm inclined to do what I can for you, but it may be that there will have to be some sort of a charge against you. I tell you that frankly. So don't answer any questions unless you like."

The young man breathed heavily.

"I can't make it any worse," he said, after a pause. "I'll be glad to be done with it."

Wilde knew enough to frame his questions adroitly and with an air of candid sympathy that encouraged Estrehan to expand with the feeble self-justification of a weak man on the manner in which the fates had conspired against him. He began with that hour of desperation when he had faced Stella across the dinner-table with a realisation of the full extent of his folly.

"What could I do, Mr. Wilde?" he demanded. "I didn't mean to steal the money, but it was gone, and when they discovered the loss I knew I should be blamed. I was dazed when I left her—ready for anything that would save the disgrace. Then this stranger offered to put things right. I don't know that I believed him, but I was ready to grasp at any straw. That's how I got mixed up with these people."

"Yes, you were in a bad fix," admitted Wilde. "This fellow who you say doped you—he was the one you had most to do with? You didn't recognise him by any chance? Did he remind you of anyone you'd ever seen at the office? I'm trying to work out how it was that he knew you were up against it?"

"No. I don't remember that I ever saw him before. How he knew so much is a mystery to me!"

"Can you remember where you were sitting in the restaurant?"

Estrehan shook his head, and the detective let the point pass. The young man dwelt on his adventures at the Farringdon Street office.

"I was frightened by this man. I had to agree to do what he said. Besides, he was so plausible. He explained that it was not real crime."

Wilde made a little grimace.

"When I was at Farringdon Street," he said, "you must have realised that it was a little more serious than play-acting. If you hadn't interfered, perhaps all this business might have been over by now."

"I'm sorry," faltered the other. "I didn't know who you were."

"If you had, perhaps you would have killed me," smiled the detective. "Never mind about that. I can guess what your state of mind was. Now tell me what you did in the office while you were there."

It quickly became clear, as Wilde had all along suspected, that the young man had been used as a blind tool who knew nothing of the ultimate ends of the conspirators. He had evidently been outside their confidence and had simply carried out mechanical instructions. When Wilde had been knocked out, the Trapper had coolly brushed himself down and then led Estrehan to the street, where they had picked up a cab and driven to Canonbury. They had stopped once on the way, and Dick had waited while his companion telephoned.

Once within the house at Canonbury, Estrehan had been warned that he must in no case leave it, and his own fears were sufficient to ensure that he rigidly carried out the injunction. He had been provided with glasses, and been instructed to let his beard grow. By some method this and his hair had been bleached to give him an appearance of age.

"Did this man live in the house?" asked Wilde.

"No. I was apparently the only permanent occupant. A local charwoman used to come once in a while to clear up, but I don't know who gave her instructions. Mr. Nemo came now and again, and sometimes stopped a night. There were two or three other men who often met him there, and sometimes they stayed. Nothing was certain. I never knew when anyone was coming or going."

"There was no other woman beyond this cleaner?"

"I never saw one."

"How did you manage about food?"

"The tradesmen called every morning, and when the charwoman wasn't there I used to mug up a meal. There was always plenty of canned stuff."

"Who did the tradesmen think you were?"

"I was supposed to be an eccentric old gentleman in delicate health. I didn't speak much to them except to give orders."

Wilde switched to another line.

"These other men you were seeing from day to day. What were their names? What were they like?"

"No names were ever mentioned except Christian names." Estrehan added vague descriptions which the detective mentally determined as of no value. Observation was evidently not one of the young man's strong points. Patiently Wilde pursued the interrogation.

"They talked with you and in front of you, I suppose? Did you ever get any inkling of their ultimate intentions?"

Estrehan fidgeted with the bedclothes.

"They always talked generally. As a rule, I could only form a vague idea that something was being worked out. I don't think these men knew a great deal themselves. The chief, I believe, would give instructions at the last moment."

Wilde wondered whether the other was quite as candid as he seemed. Instinctively he felt that the man was truthful, but a long experience had warned him not to trust to these intuitions. If Estrehan had been involved in the schemes of the Trapper he was scarcely likely to make admissions that would implicate himself. It was much more probable that he would profess ignorance.

But the closest questioning failed to shake his story. He frankly admitted that he suspected some big scheme was being planned before Paddy had been carried off from the Old Bailey, but he had only realised the significance of what he had heard when he read the papers the day after the escape. So far as he knew he had never seen Paddy. He was certain that the gang had some other rendezvous than the Canonbury house, but he had no idea where it was. His account of the events which had led to the break with the Trapper corresponded closely with that of Stella. Wilde had to confess to himself that the result of the interview had not corresponded with his hopes.

He rose to take his leave.

"I'll send a man to show you some photographs," he said. "You may recognise one of the gentlemen who were at Canonbury. And I'm told that to-morrow you'll be fit to get about. I shall want to take you to have a quiet look at a man you may know."

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MARTIN WILDE ACTS.

WILDE hummed execrably out of tune as he turned over the mass of papers on his desk. The various angles of a wide criminal investigation always put upon the man in charge an enormous amount of desk work. Every morning sees an accumulation of reports by minor detectives, of statements, of letters, of opinions of specialists, of the results of inquiries sometimes at the ends of the earth. The great bulk of these are, in the end, utterly inconsequent—proof of the innocence of some suspect, the steps taken to trace a possible witness whose evidence turns out to be of no value, the record of the shadowing of some person, and a hundred-and-one other things that may lead nowhere. Nevertheless, each of these has to be minutely scrutinised and carefully collated. For hidden obscurely among the mass of words may lie the real key to a mystery.

The chief inspector hated the tedium of the job, but he always carried it through with precision and exactitude, dictating comments, replies and instructions to a factotum as he proceeded. He finished the last document, thrust a few papers into his pocket, dismissed the clerk, pushed back his chair, and lay back with legs outstretched, hands deep in his trousers pockets, and stared at the ceiling, with pipe clenched fiercely between his teeth.

His thoughts were concentrated on Quenton Thorold. That very morning Dick Estrehan, well sheltered in the back of a taxicab, had been afforded a view of Thorold as the millionaire strolled along Piccadilly. At first sight he had unhesitatingly identified the American as the man he knew as Mr. Nemo, and although he had faltered and declared he was not so sure on a nearer view, Wilde was satisfied. There had been that among the papers on his desk which resolved any lingering doubt. He felt that he could at any time now justify the arrest of Quenton Thorold for murder. Hence his complacency.

Nevertheless, there remained a problem of tactics which left a fly in the ointment. The Trapper was the figure-head in the series of outrages which had startled London, but Wilde felt that there was at least one other principal behind the scenes. The evidence against Thorold was almost conclusive. But on what pretext could he hope to establish a charge against Patricia Langton? That she was as closely involved almost as Thorold himself the detective felt reasonably confident. But against her he had nothing that could be transformed into concrete testimony—nothing but suspicion.

He considered whether it would be wise to take a chance as was sometimes done in somewhat similar cases, and arrest both the man and the woman simultaneously in the hope that he might get at the evidence against her after she was under lock and key. But if he failed she was certain of acquittal, and she would escape scot-free.

On the other hand, if he arrested Thorold alone, she would be at once put on her guard, and would take steps to destroy any incriminating evidence that might exist. Besides, she might be able to pull wires in a manner that would considerably hamper the closing-up of the case. The small fry of the gang might be run down at leisure, when they no longer had able brains to direct them. But she was different. Her brains had played a considerable part in the conspiracy, if his guess was right.

Still irresolute, Wilde brought his feet down with a thud to the floor. A colleague detained him with some piece of office gossip as he passed out. Wilde listened impatiently.

"There's too much darn law in this country," he announced, utterly regardless of the point that the other was making. "If this was France you could make a man talk."

He went on his way, leaving the other man staring.

At Thorold's house the urbane Watkins answered his ring. Mr. Thorold, he explained, was out, had been out for some time. He couldn't say if he would be back to lunch. He might, or he might not. Mr. Thorold was sometimes a little uncertain in his movements. He had left no instructions.

The butler had one hand on the frame of the door, the other on the door itself, and he pulled the latter forward an inch or two as a polite hint. Wilde's foot, however, was over the threshold.

"Watkins," he said, "you know who I am. I want to ask you a few questions."

The butler was impassive.

"Mr. Thorold told me that you might try to question me again," he said mildly. "I am sorry, but I must decline to answer. I understand that a police-officer has no right to demand information from anyone he pleases."

"Quite right." Wilde nodded approval. "I wouldn't force you for a minute. But, see here, old fellow"—his tone was that of familiar friendship—"there are a few trifles that you could put me right on without doing harm to anyone. It might be worth something to you."

"I shall tell Mr. Thorold that you tried to bribe me," said Watkins stonily.

The detective hid his defeat in a gulp of laughter.

"Heaven preserve me from an honest fool!" he said. "Would it strain your conscience too much to tell me where your master is likely to take lunch if he doesn't come back here? I badly want to see him."

Watkins weighed the question thoughtfully.

"You might find him at the Strangers' Club," he admitted. "Good-day, sir! Thank you, sir!"

Wilde withdrew his foot and the door closed.

Although the millionaire had Scotland Yard men at his heels at practically every step he took, no immediate report of his movements was made to Wilde, save in the event of something exceptional occurring. Consequently the detective had no means of knowing where the other was at any given moment.

He walked slowly to the vicinity of the Strangers' Club, where a few minutes search led him to a smartly-dressed young man idly engrossed in the operation of a gang of road repairers. A word was exchanged, and Wilde went on to the club and sent in his name.

Thorold came down to the hall and welcomed him exuberantly.

"Now this is real good of you! I've been kind of missing your cheerful face. I just love to have you hovering around, ready to check any of my sinister and subtle moves. Say, you're just in time for a bite of lunch. Come along and tell me your latest pathetic little story."

Wilde was watching him warily.

"Afraid I shall have to save you the price of that lunch," he said. "I want you to come along with me to the Yard. I'll try to get a few sandwiches sent in there."

A momentary contortion passed over the face of the other. So quickly had it gone, that with a less observant man than Wilde it might have escaped notice. Then Thorold shook his head with smiling nonchalance.

"That's too bad. I hate sandwiches." He thrust a hand in the crook of Wilde's elbow. "I must really insist that since you are here that you eat in comfort. It will keep your strength up, man. A strenuous worker should never neglect his grub. I never do. Whatever you want me for, an hour can't make such a deuce of a difference."

"My business can't wait!" retorted Wilde, and there was a harsh note in his voice. "I want to see you where we can talk. You are coming with me."

Thorold disengaged his hold.

"Suppose I don't?" he asked.

"I won't suppose you such a fool!" retorted the detective. "You are coming."

The eyes of the two men met. For the second Wilde doubted whether his ever-riding assertiveness would not be met by a peremptory defiance. He was vitally alert, even for a physical attack. Suddenly the dogged light that had been aroused in Thorold's eyes faded. He made a whimsical little gesture of resignation.

"Oh, all right! If you put it that way I suppose I'll come. Wait a second while I get my hat and coat."

It was Wilde's hand that was on Thorold's arm this time.

"I'll come with you if you don't mind," he said.

As they left the club arm-in-arm the well-dressed young man relinquished his interest in the road-making operations and fell into step a few paces behind them. Thorold threw him a glance of mild scrutiny.

"Ah, it's my young friend!" he remarked. "He's wasted as a detective, Wilde. He would make a fortune as a quick-change artist. I assume from your manner," he went on, "that this is an arrest. Do you know, I am disappointed? It's too tame. Do you know I always had an idea that you dropped a hand on a man's shoulder and cried in a loud and audible voice, 'In the King's name I arrest you for——' By the way, what am I arrested

for? It's a mere matter of idle curiosity, but I'd like to know."

"I am not arresting you—yet," answered Wilde. "That will be decided later. Meanwhile, if I were you I shouldn't do any talking till we get to the Yard. There I shall ask you to explain certain things, and if you do so satisfactorily you will come to no harm. If you can't, it will be my duty to prefer a serious charge against you."

He put out his hand to hail a taxi, and the remainder of the short journey was made in silence. At Scotland Yard, Thorold was ushered into a business-like private office, and, with a half-smile lurking about his lips, took a chair at the chief inspector's invitation.

"Now," said Wilde, seating himself at his desk and drawing forward a few sheets of official foolscap, "I am compelled to tell you that, unless you can show me some different interpretation to the facts I have learned, I shall have to take you into custody for murder. Clearly understand that you are not forced to say anything. But I shall write down anything you do say, and it may be used as evidence."

"I get you," said Thorold lightly, crossing his legs and leaning back comfortably. "I'll be careful. What is it you want to know?"

Wilde relaxed his official attitude somewhat.

"Smoke if you like," he said. "Would you care for a whisky-and-soda? No? Oh, very well! First of all, I want you to give me an account of your movements on these days." He picked up a scrap of paper and read several dates. "Tell me what you were doing and whom you saw."

The millionaire threw up his hands in mock horror.

"That's a nice kind of a thing to throw at a man without notice," he protested. "Suffering snakes! How can you except any human man to remember? Why do you want those particular days?"

"Think," said Wilde grimly. "On one of those days Dick Estrehan was doped and inveigled to the office in Farringdon Street. On another Dutchy Ogle was robbed by Paddy the Ghost. Then Velvet was murdered. Markwell and Murraystein were tarred and feathered. I was slogged, and one of my men was laid out. That's enough for you to consider for the moment."

His fingers played with a scrap of paper as, with arms on his desk, he turned his hawk face towards Thorold and waited for an answer.

Thorold gently lifted his shoulders.

"That's a pretty list," he commented. "Sure you haven't forgotten anything? What about the day I strangled the blind beggar's child and stole her money-box? If you've got all that against me, and can prove it, I guess I'll have to take my medicine. If it was to save myself from being drawn and quartered as well as hanged, I couldn't say what I was doing this day week."

"Listen to this," said Wilde, writing rapidly. "'I, Quenton Thorold, a natural born citizen of the United States of America, having been cautioned by Chief Inspector Wilde that anything I say may be used as evidence hereafter, make the following statement. I am unable to give any account of my whereabouts on——' "

The significance of the written word seemed to impress the millionaire.

"Half a moment," he interposed. "Let's have this thing straight before you start making documents. Tell me what you think you've got against me, and I'll tell you where you're wrong."

The detective placed his chin in his hand, and reflected for a few moments. He perceived that Thorold had recognised the peril of answering questions blindly. His action had been strictly legal, although it might save been on the extreme verge of the rules laid down for the guidance of police officers when questioning suspects by his Majesty's judges. But then no detective could do his work efficiently if he rigidly obeyed every regulation and rule. Wilde did not consciously wish to be unfair. If the other made some unguarded admission in reply to questions, that was his own look-out. But Thorold was a shrewd man. Wilde had no illusions on that point. His attitude suggested that he had made up his mind. After all, the millionaire would have to know sooner or later. The detective felt his hand was strong enough to be played openly.

"All right," he said. "I'm willing to let you know where you stand. Of course, you know that we have got hold of Estrehan and Stella Cliffe?"

Thorold gave a little start of surprise which the detective admired as a pretty piece of acting.

"You don't say!" he commented. "You're right on the job sometimes, Wilde."

"We'll take the compliments for granted," returned the other. "One of the things you've got to get over is this. Both of these people have seen the Trapper. Both of them declare that you are uncommonly like him. And Stella has coughed up a story which suggests that you—as Thorold—have been trying to drag her into the schemes of the Trapper. Why, I don't know."

"A charming girl. I am an unmarried man, you know," said Thorold. "I suppose she's told you that I have been helping her with her expenses?"

"Yes. This is no joke," reproved Wilde. "It's an odd thing for a man to pay a crook money without any reason."

Thorold was idly tying knots in his handkerchief.

"I do lots of things without any reason," he said languidly. "While you are on the subject, I'd just like to point this out. If I heard you right, neither of these two will positively identify me. They will only say that I'm uncommonly like your pal. Now, you made an error that way. If you hadn't admitted a mistake yourself, it might get by. You will be an important witness to me."

Wilde lit his pipe and jerked out his words between blasts of smoke.

"I've a card that will trump that. You take it easily, but you won't bluff me. It was clever of you to get in a man who had some general resemblance to yourself in build and voice. By that means it was simple to confuse a number of people, and it left you a possible way out if the worse came to the worst. I'll admit that you had me guessing. One of those simple things I could kick myself for overlooking."

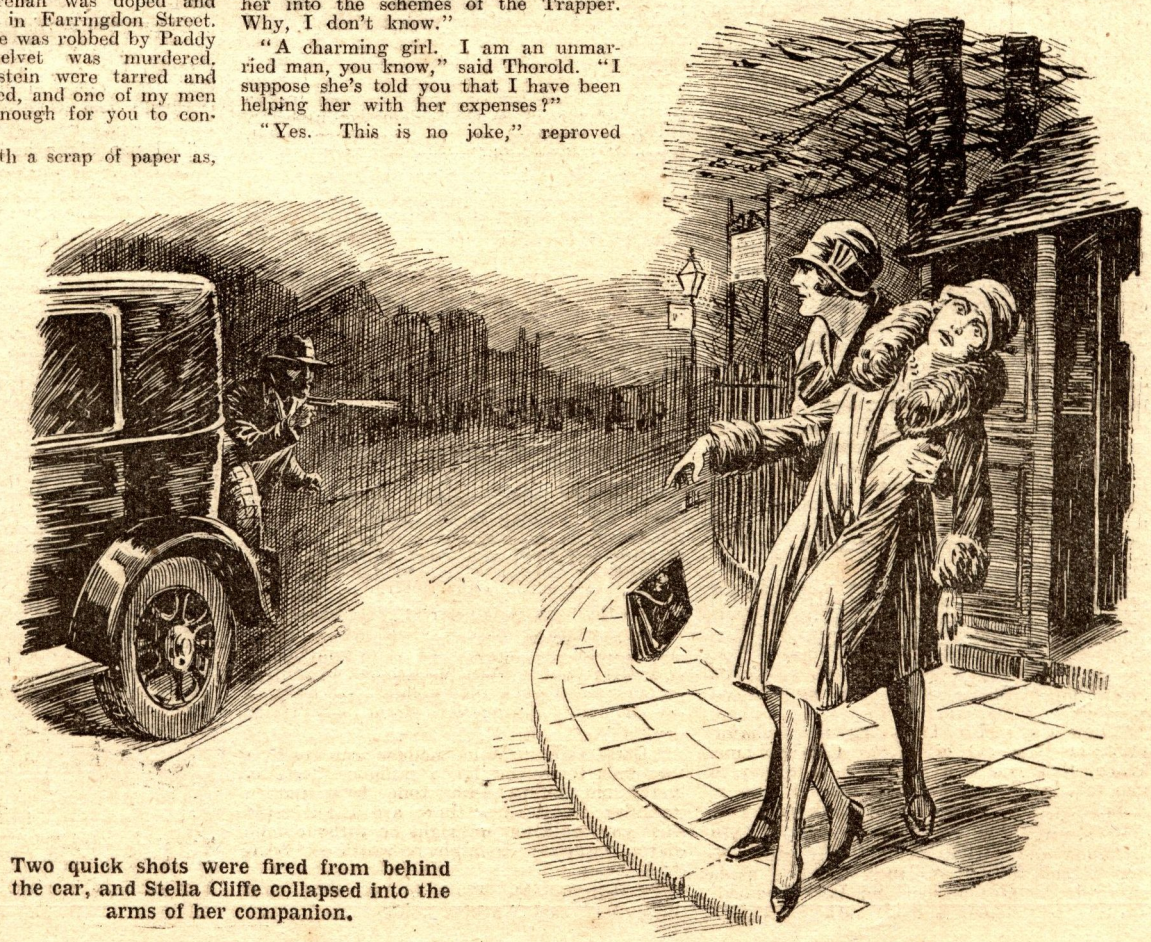
Watching narrowly, he saw little lines of amusement break on the other's face. Thorold shook his head condescendingly.

"That sounds plausible," he laughed. "The only thing against it is that it didn't happen. You're becoming over-subtle, Wilde. Your imagination is betraying you. Where is this double of mine?"

"You deny it," said the detective. "I thought that you would. Well, we shall see!"

At the back of his mind he felt a little shaken. The theory of two men who were so much alike that they could be mistaken for each other was the only one that would account for the facts as he knew them. His attempt to surprise an admission had been defeated by the nonchalant ridicule of the millionaire. He passed to another point.

"You have a bank account in this country. I have been having that looked into. You know that Dick Estrehan embezzled £20,000 from his employers, and that that sum—or,



Two quick shots were fired from behind the car, and Stella Cliffe collapsed into the arms of her companion.

rather, bonds of that value—were sent back to them anonymously. Now, before that went back you withdrew £20,000 from your account. A curious coincidence. What did you want that money for?"

"I'll confess I don't know. I'm pretty careless on money matters. Perhaps I was running short of cigarettes."

"There are some odd features about other amounts withdrawn at various times. But we'll leave that for the moment. I want you to take your mind back to the evening when Velvet was murdered. You had a pistol then which I gave back to you after examining it. Do you know where that gun is now?"

Something of the air of indifferent boredom vanished from Thorold. He pushed back the knotted handkerchief into his breast-pocket and glanced keenly at his interlocutor.

"Knocking about at home somewhere, I guess," he said. "I took your words to heart. Remember you told me that it might get me into trouble. Besides, my tailor told me that it spoiled the set of my clothes. So I heaved it into the discard."

Wilde fumbled in a drawer of his desk, and, producing an automatic, dropped it on the desk in front of him.

"This weapon," he explained, "was found in a resort of associates of the Trapper. In fact, it nearly killed a man. Now when I handled your automatic I looked at the number on the butt—it was 53422. This gun is numbered 53422."

"I'll take your word for it that this is mine," said Thorold coolly. "That looks a rather nasty jolt for me. As I said, I thought it was at home."

"There you are," said the detective, as if in conclusion. "I don't bear any malice, Thorold, although you made me doubt myself once or twice. Add certain other little facts to these—such as the use of your stationery—and it will be clear that I've got you like this." He clenched and unclenched his hand. "But if you can put any other complexion on these things, I'll be glad to listen."

"A pretty piece of work," agreed Thorold, as dispassionately as if he had no personal concern in the affair. "Looks as if you hadn't left many loopholes, doesn't it?" He tugged at his upper lip. "Circumstantial evidence can be the very devil. What would you do if you were in my place?"

Wilde began to tidy his desk as though to signify that the interview was drawing to a close. He had convinced himself that the self-possessed American before him was a clever—if probably mad—criminal. So far as he was concerned, it had been part of the day's work to bring him to justice. That aside, he rather liked Thorold. But his job was still unfinished while the rest of the gang remained at large. He thought that he detected in the other's question a gesture of defeat, a sign of weakening, and he pressed his advantage.

"I shouldn't have volunteered advice," he said, "but I can see that you realise you're in a very nasty hole—a very nasty hole indeed. I can't hold out any promise, but, as man to man, it wouldn't do you any harm, now, to make the whole story plain. You've not been in this alone. Why should you be the only one to suffer?"

He had seen many murderers caught in the toils and accept the knowledge that the worst was likely to happen in all kinds of ways. Never had he acted quite as Thorold acted.

The millionaire broke into a shout of laughter in which there was no sign of hysteria.

"Blow the gaff? Isn't that the technical term, or is it out of date? Own up now, Wilde, that you're as proud as a dog with two tails at having cornered me. I hate to think of the bump that will knock your self-esteem skew-whiff when it comes to you presently. You'll get no admissions from me. I'm just as innocent as you are. But I won't argue. Lead me on to the dungeon cell."

The cloistered calm of Scotland Yard was broken by a mellow voice warbling an extract from "Pinafore":

"But when 'tis noon, the secret I have to tell,
Wide will be thrown the doors of his dungeon cell."

"You might do me a favour, Wilde? You might let Miss Langton know that I've been immured?"

"I don't think!" muttered the detective beneath his breath.

MISS LANGTON EXACTS A TRUCE

THOROLD was held under that rule which permits a suspect to be detained for twenty-four hours before a charge is made against him. He accepted the situation lightly, and Wilde had few hopes that even the solitude of a cell would induce him to change his attitude of amused indifference. But there was just the chance. Theoretically he was not a prisoner, and there is a subtle legal difference in the manner in which police officer may approach a man detained and one actually charged.

Wilde also had another reason for adopting this course. There was no dubiety in his mind as to the strength of the case against the millionaire. He had an idea that the work which remained would be simpler if the fact that he had Thorold in custody was not known for a while.

All the rest of that day he and his subordinates were busy sifting clues that invariably led them nowhere. But, then, nine-tenths of detective work is this kind of futile drudgery, and the chief inspector accepted it with philosophy. If he kept on keeping on, his experience told him that things would straighten themselves out.

Nevertheless, he was a tired man when he had finished, and it was with a sigh of relief that he left the Yard. He enjoyed a leisurely dinner at a restaurant in the neighbourhood of Leicester Square, where the food and wine were good and the charges tempered to the modest purse of a chief detective-inspector. He even ventured on the uncommon indulgence of a cigar and liqueur, and let his faculties lapse into a luxurious mental languor. He roused himself at last, paid his bills, and, uncertain of any plans for spending the remainder of the evening, moved out into the street.

More as a matter of habit than anything else, he tossed a coin to a paper-seller and stood for an instant while he unfolded the sheet and glanced at the headlines. In spite of all his precautions, some hint of the detention of Thorold might have leaked out. He became instantly alert as a paragraph in the stop press column caught his attention.

"STRANGE OUTRAGE AT KENNINGTON.

"As a girl, whose name is given as Stella Cliffe, was walking in the Kennington Road this evening, a passer-by suddenly pulled a revolver and fired two shots at her in quick succession. Before he could be seized the assailant had jumped on a motor-car that had apparently been waiting, and disappeared.

"It will be remembered that Stella Cliffe was in the company of the man Grimshaw at the time that he was murdered in circumstances that bear an extraordinary resemblance at the Gnomes' Club. She unaccountably vanished after that episode, and it is understood that the police, having reason to fear that an attempt would be made on her life, had arranged that she was quietly to remain under their protection. In fact, at the moment she was shot she was in the company of one of the woman detective-inspectors from Scotland Yard. The crime is believed to have been the work of some of the gang who recently effected the audacious escape of a prisoner from the Old Bailey.

"The injured girl was removed to the local infirmary for medical attention. Her condition is serious."

"The inept fools!" groaned Wilde, crushing the paper to a ball, and waving a taxi to a halt.

It was in no pleasant frame of mind that he reached Scotland Yard, where he was welcomed with relief. Search, he was told, had been made high and low for him during the last hour. Meantime, a section of the Flying Squad had been sent to Kennington, and everything done that was possible, but, so far, with no result.

The lady detective-inspector explained that the newspaper account was, roughly, right.

"I live at Kennington, as you know, and I was careful not to let the girl for an instant out of my sight. We were out for a little fresh air and exercise when it happened. The whole thing was a matter of seconds. The fellow had fired twice, and was away in the car before we could do anything."

"But, my dear Miss Poining," protested Wilde, a little hampered in his vocabulary because, although she was a fellow-officer in the C.I.D. she was still a woman, "there were three of you. Why should I go out of my way to put three people to watch that girl, unless something of this sort was liable to happen? What did those pair of slugs think that they had guns for?"

"They are not to be blamed," retorted Miss Poining with spirit. "I don't believe that even you, Mr. Wilde, expected an attempt to kill her. They were thirty yards behind, and before they could reach us it was all over. I have written a report which you can see when you like."

The chief inspector shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah, well, it's no use crying over spilt milk. How is Stella? Is she as bad as the papers say?"

The woman shook her head.

"No. She was lucky. She got one bullet through her arm, and the other grazed her shoulder. She's in the infirmary. She was conscious and comparatively bright when I left."

"I'll pop along and see her," announced Wilde.

Stella, a little pale, but with her indomitable cheerfulness unquenched, received him gaily. "I scarcely like receiving gentlemen visitors like this," she said with a smile, "but it's all right and proper with you, because you're an official, aren't you? You'd scarcely notice seeing a lady in her bed-room."

"You don't need a chaperone," he retorted. "I just dropped in to see that you were comfortable. This is a bit of tough luck for you."

"Yes," she agreed. "He got me, after all, you see, Mr. Wilde, but he didn't get me good. I suppose he reckoned on stopping li'l Stella doing her star turn in the witness-box one of these days. I've been waiting for you to come along. You can get this bird open and shut now. I saw him close when he pointed the gun, and all you got to do is to go and get the bracelets on him. 'I'll learn him to try and put it across a girl like me.'"

"Don't get excited, Stella," warned the detective. "You mustn't overdo it, you know. Who was it?"

"You know as well as I do," she asserted. "Who would it be but that smooth grafter, the Trapper—Mr. Quenton Thorold? No doubt about it. He couldn't buy me, he couldn't frighten me, so he tries to kill me. Well, we'll see." She snuggled a little more comfortably beneath the bedclothes.

(What will Stella's information lead to? And what is the mystery surrounding Quenton Thorold and Patricia Langton? Don't miss next week's instalment of this gripping serial.)

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