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 slick and rain was falling. It lay like glinting oil on the streets, and made the hurrying throngs of pedestrians turn up the collars of their coats against the cold, and shuffle numbly hands deep into their pockets. But in the roof garden all was warmth and light and color. 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 gogogias 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 exotic 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 docketed 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
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 peky, his hair mudflly 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 a 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."

"That's easy to say," he remarked.

"Now consider it practically. Neither Cran tor 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 Cran tor.

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
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she dared not think how bad his injuries might be. She knew the significance of these quietly ominous summumse, 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, eldery 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—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."

Three hours later, at about nine o’clock, Betty Tregarth was reusing 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 traffic accident 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."

Her heart stopped beating for a moment.

"Is he—he is 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...
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 here any longer than necessary."

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

He turned his head aside, and the door opened. Three men came in. One was the butler who had admitted her, the other was a dark, heavy-jawed, rough-looking man in a tweed suit.

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 compelling that for a moment it was able to overcome the panic cry 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 highly-purified preparation of it. 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 the order with a startling intonement, 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 gagged 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 deliciously through an eternity of blankness.

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 familiar. 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 stealthily, 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

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

"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 outbreak; 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 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, except under unusual 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 telephone."

"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 in custody; and, even if he 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, even if 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 you cannot be in danger of incriminating 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 you 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 the lad for whom they have 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 west to Daylesford, 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, when you have done your job, I will return, and you will find me in the same condition I found you in."

"What is it you want?"

"I want no one to know that you are in charge of the case. I want no one to know who you are, or what you are doing. I want no one to know that I am in charge of the case. I want no one to know that I am in charge of the case."

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

"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. In ten 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 is supposed to be done in this laboratory?"

"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 get 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 it. I assure you that you will find 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 had been produced by a chemical firm which had stolen it. And the newspapers had not been sparing of detail.

The gas was the most deadly yet known, one part of it being sufficient to cause death in five minutes. It was volatile, and yet sluggish—it was prepared as a liquid which evaporated rapidly, but on being exposed to air hanged 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 day or so before the scene, for that was what you had to do.

"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 order you to take a rest cure, and then you shall be stopped to do 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 require that you take 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, and I am ashamed to see 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 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 amongst the cigarettes, cigarettes, cigarettes spilled from the overturned table; and the Assistant Commissioner himself came down to the Scotland Yard himself, in an attaché-case, for a more leisureed 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 automatic pistol which they found lying on the floor.

Inspector Henley's pockets were emptied, and a fresh examination made back to Scotland Yard himself, in an attaché-case, for a more leisureed consideration. The police were 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 clearest plan.

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

He carefully cut the wallet open at the rent, and immediately stepped out of 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 Llanloced 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."

Kennedy then spoke on the telephone to the Chief Constable of Monmouthshire. The Chief Constable of Monmouthshire himself went to Llanloced, and made a series of tedious inquiries. The result was a dispatch on the telephone to Scotland Yard; and at the end of the conversation the Assistant Commissioner sent for Detective-Inspector Ramses Smith and told him the whole story.

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

"Of course. He was the one who 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 we could get more out of him on it, that resignation palaver was arranged. The private inquiry business that Henley started on his own as soon as he left Scotland Yard is the same as this. 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 could he have been killed in his own house in London without one other 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 believe that. But the man’s job is to go to Llanloced 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 catch the professor. Now, when do you start?"

"This morning," said Smith. "I feel I’ve been worked much too hard lately, and Llanloced 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. He had said a great personal liking for Ramses Smith, and he had no wish to see the younger man’s promising career cut short unnecessarily. Therefore he insisted on the decision of Kennedy and Smith, after some argument, agreed.

Ramses Smith started for Llanloced 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 Ramses Smith in the circumstances. He could not know that he was not the first..."
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 imperious to vision as it was intended to be imperious 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” defenses, 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 gradually through a clammy sea-mist.

Smith binned 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 leathesome, and Rameses Smith would have had no difficulty in choosing between the two, even if he had not been advised 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 knocked 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 curtly.

“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.

“They’ve all gone out,” said Smith pleasantly, “but you have got a room. There are eight beds in this pub, and it happens 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 get him to send me a message to you, and you will be put in the wrong.”

He thundered at him, and he went and got his car and drove away, and when he came back he had a large envelope in his hand.

Smith had the envelope opened, and he read the paper in the car. He gave it back to the man and said:

“Go on—tell your boss what I said. Smith encouraged him, “I want a room here tonight, 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. There was a clock on the mantelshelf, and it bade back in ten minutes, and it appeared at once that Smith’s want had some effect.

“Let me see,” said Smith, forcing back the door.

“Open the door,” said Smith, forcing back the door.

A few seconds later, a man in a smoking jacket entered, and said:

“The guy’s got a room.”

“The guy’s got a room.”

“Get a room,” said Smith, forcing back the door.

“I want a room, and I’m going to get one.”

He got up early the next morning, and went out to have a look round. The mist had lifted, 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 postcard to Commissioner announcing his safe arrival and penetration into the fortress of the enemy. Then he returned to the inn, and discovered the dining-room.

There was only one table, 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 a 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, Bashier, jump to it!"

Basher Tope muttered another uncomplimentary remark about interfering busses that 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 balled up away into a quiet corner and weep, and that would be very distressing for all concerned."

"Thank you, Tope," 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." After glaring sullenly at the detective for some moments, Tope turned on his heel and shuffled out again.

Smith was skimming 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 bewildernent. She saw a tall, broad-shouldered young man, with twinkling grey eyes, a mop of unruly fair hair, and a most engaging smile; further realizing 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, Bashier?"

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

"I'm sorry," she said at once. "I must have seemed awfully rude. But we—"

"I wasn't expecting to see a stranger here," 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 was very bad here, don't you think?"

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

"The lady wants her breakfast," he said. "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.

"Could 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, with derision.

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

She frowned.

"You were 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 her fork, which she had picked up, and with which she had been prying 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," he said. "I was unconstitutionally 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, support 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 few minutes.

In the silence that followed, Tope shuffled 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 at least 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 enquiry, but he also spared a glance for the girl. Obviously she was one of their party; but she did not strike Smith as being the sort of girl he would have explored 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 much surprised to find that she looked up Mojiterly—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 mumbled themselves before him, and Smith rose with his most charming smile.

"Good-morning," he said. The tallest of the three bowed.
left them, and as he closed the door softly behind him he began to whistle.

"Now I guess I've rubbed the managerie 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 Bashur 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 Bashur 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 supposed Bashur Tope returned exclusively monosyllabic replies to the cheerfully aimless conversation with which Smith rewarded his ministrations. After about the fourth unproductive 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 blame 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 Beacou Inn.

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

As he approached Beacou 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 Beacou Inn had become very unpopular. Smith had gathered the essential reasons for this from his conversation with the villagers in the rival tavern.
The THRILLER

The new proprietor of Begum 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 scant welcome that within a 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, as before, but Smith battered on it in his noisy way, and in a few moments it was opened.

"Evening, Bashier," 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, Bashier," said Smith, and raised the tankard.

Then he snuffled 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, Bashier, it is known as,—one drop of this, and it is the most important objections that it is that it completely neutralises the beneficial properties of good beer."

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

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

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

"Bring on the whisky," said Smith.

Bashier, 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 up, Bashier," invited Smith cordially, taking up one of the glasses. Tope shook his head.

"I don't drink," said Smith calmly. "I know different to that. You drink like a principally thirsty fish. Take that glass!"

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

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, Bashier. I wish you'd let me verify my suspicions. You can go. Oh, and take this stuff with you and pour it down the sink."

He left Bashier 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 he could not 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 a rattling noise 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, with such a story 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.

"That 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 Grantor, for instance, I hope to include in the bag. The man I'm really sniping for is Whiskers."

"You mean Professor Razell?"

"That's what he's calling himself now, I see. I've heard him speak 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 caking 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!"

"Ramesess 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 a man'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 another of the boy 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. She realized that it would be to tell him the true circumstances.

And the realisation cut her like a knife, for Ramesses 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 tousel, smiling young man with the twinkling grey eyes who stood before her, arrayed in green pyjamas and a staggering dress on which a ruddy, cheerful, child'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 girl, I'll take your 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. The train is straight 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 tell me, 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 Ramesess Smith.

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

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

TROUBLE BREWING.

He rolled back into bed again, blew out the lamp, snuggled down, and went to sleep 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 slumber, for he knew exactly how far he would trust strangers, and how lightly as he wished to.

His confidence was justified, for when, three hours later, the door began to swing creakily, and 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 the 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 backed up the figure of Bashier Tope, advancing cat-footed towards the bed, and in Bashier Tope's right hand was the instrument which had won him his nickname—a wicked-looking blackjack.

"Hallo, Bashier!" said Smith brightly.

Come to hear a bed-time story from Uncle Ramesess."

For answer Tope leapt, swinging his bludgeon, but the blinding beam of light that concentrated in his eyes was extinguished by being, without further 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 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 winced round. The door had opened, and now Professor Bernhard Razell and the Bashier stood in the beam of light. In Razell's hand was an automatic pistol with a silencer screwed to the muzzle.

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

MEET THE MAN FROM ASHANTI

in next week's thrilling book-length novel

by STACEY BLAKE.
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, Bashler."

"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 flatter- ing 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 Llan- coed 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 Bashler not to put any more bottle 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. Grantor and Marring came down, and the cheerful "Good-morning" with which he greeted each of them was replied to in a surly manner. 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 Bashler 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 daily 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 suffi-
ciently restless 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. He did not once again he was unrewarded by a glimpse of the mysterious Betty Tregarth.

He saw the other three. They rose and left the table silently, but the girl had not joined them. Smith stopped Raxel as he passed on to the door.

"I hope you have suffered a bereave-
ment," said Smith wistfully.

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 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 had 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:

K ept locked.  R. and C. go in occasion-

ally.  T. is there nearly all day.

Smith studied the plan until all its details were indubitably photographed on his brain, and then dropped it on the fire and watched it curl up and die.

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.

D A N G E R O U S   F A C T S .

H is first objective was the room which

had been marked T on the plan. Ttrying the handle with elaborate precautions against noise, he found, as he had expected, all was locked. But the locks on the doors were old-fashioned and clumsy, as he had discovered by some preliminary experiments in his own rooms, and it took him a second 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 raised the girl by shining the light close to her eyes. She started, and Smith switched out the lights and clapped a hand swiftly over her mouth.

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

She was still holding tightly to 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.
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 smuggle 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.

"Have 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 a chance, I can't think anything more about me, Mr. Smith."

"Pip."

"Pip."

"I never knew how horrid Mr. Smith sounded until you said it just now," she 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, 'Steal 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 retreated a step.

"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 the same, I'll eat my 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

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

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 would have attended to it 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 been surrounded with so much secrecy was likely to be pregnant with considerable danger for the ignorant meddler. The suggestion of Bernhard Raxel with the mystery would not have encouraged anyone to imagine that all eye, and elaborate precautions had been taken to protect the secret of the manufacture of some new kind of parolre 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 there were two cubical aluminium tanks, and beside these were a couple of rough wooden boxes, 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, looking at 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 table 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 it lay 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-net, 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 formulae and hieroglyphics which meant nothing to Smith. The Smith's 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 view of the room, and Smith, his object accomplished, prepared to go. As he was about to leave, the photographs that he had already inspected caught his eye. He was, indeed, and he 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.
The THRILLER

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 get 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, 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, H.A.

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 Treagarth should succeed him in the gaol.

Betty Treagarth 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 showed that there was a strange fear that bound her.

Was it possible that she had some special knowledge of chemistry, and had been blackmailed to come in as assistant to the professor? And then Ramesses Smith suddenly remembered what H.A. 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 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 van. He caught the postman's special 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 an earnest and earnest hope that the theft was discovered a search would immediately be organised for the missing documents, and in that search Ramesses 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, 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'm 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 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 in his look of savagely restrained consternation that broke momentarily through Raxel's mask of suavity when the search proved fruitless.

"What are your conclusions, weren't you?" suggested Smith mildly.

Rash Tepe stood in the doorway.

"I saw him go out before breakfast," said Tepe confidentially. "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 never recover 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 small 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 icy level voice.

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

Luckily 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 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. "To tell you the truth," 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 in the word was jöten, 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 jöten," Raxel had said, or words to that effect.

"So at last they're 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 through the hop at last."

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

"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 kill 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 liquor-loving 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 owner of 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 that they take it for their 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 indiactively, and Smith went over and looked out. His eye had not missed it. McCormick's Ford lorry was crossing the street. It stopped outside the door of the George, and two men came in and walked up to the counter.

"Couple of quick becks, 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."

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 almost the same moment. Raxel, Marring and Crantor came out.

Crantor was wearing a heavy leather coat, and appeared to be receiving instructions. Raxel and Crantor conversed for a moment, then the latter entered the lorry, much to the distaste of the chauffeur, and the car drove off.

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

Pug 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:

"Meganitic."

The Meganitic, Smith knew, was on the quick run from Southamton to New York, and Smith guessed that the little device he had sent to his lunch a very worried and perplexed man. Theoretically, of course, there was no reason why Raxel should not send a consignment of shark's tooth to send it somewhere, but, on the other hand, there was no earthly reason why 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 wandering 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 gathered, you and I worked 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 this of the demonic 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 at 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," said Smith, suddenly.

There was a hiss, 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, which were tightened 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 out 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 tomorrow in the little boxes let into the tanks. And the tanks, by that time, will be in the hold of the Meganitic. 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 Meganitic should be wallowing in HA from stem to stern within two hours. It is cold. By four o'clock it will have been blown out of the water. Everybody will be in bed, asleep, and in this weather there will be very few porthole open. I do not think that the system of very violent will work, for that 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 and the crew, and perhaps 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 six 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 be very lucky indeed to be able to spread away."

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

"Why not?" demanded Raxel harshly. "The passengers on the ship are nothing to us. Simply a means by which I can accomplish what must be done, 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 discreetly get away on it."

"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 be known of 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, you know."

"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 check 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 sent with the checks will not arrive 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'm 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 de-termined, 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 oppor-tunity of conferring. I 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 his word will has 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 will 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 inconsequential to do—but it’s made life impossible. My brother knew 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 tomorrow 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 do very 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, Baywater, occupied by Mr. Tregarth and his sister. Sister away in the country . . . Bureau broken open . . . Mr. Tregarth said—nothing of value taken.”

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 way through the village this afternoon.”

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

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 at last. “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 us directly after dinner. The car will be ready for us 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 coldly. “Personally, I deplore it, but it happens to be necessary. That is all.”

TO DEATH.

At half-past five that afternoon Cranton 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 head-lights shone seawards, and they began to flicker. Smith read the Morse message: “Send boat.”

The men did not go into the hotel, but walked outside, stamping their feet, and conversing in undertones.

Presently a lamp winked up from the shore, and Cranton’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 front sea. Smith saw the torch which Cranton carried to light the way, and they were going 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 Cranton, some 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 light of the 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, Toper 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 car, and started for a few minutes 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 climbed in.

Temporarily hypnotised in inaction, Smith watched the car drive away. Raxel, standing on the doorstep, watched it out of
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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 get-away 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 no doubt of that. Marring had done 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 the previous night had to 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.

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 would be. If I had not assumed a 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 to her at 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 tram 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 stealth-like behaviour: but then they will 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 the edge of the door to make sure that his gun reposed in its place, 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, listened 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, and open the door at a cautious two inches. 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 Teppe 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 calling 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

In spite of his improvised respirator, the swirling gas fumes threatened to overcome him. He worked feverishly to remove the heavy slab of stone.
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 are a very wise and dangerous man," said Smith. "It was quite easy. On the other hand, I am sure you will not have any trouble in finding us."

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

"Please precede me to the cells, 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. 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 stairs running 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 the 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 grudge. It is simply that my interest in my own safety demands it."

Smith shrugged 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."

"That's an idea," said Smith. "It's the wrong time for breakfast, and I suppose it will delay you too much to ask you to let me 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 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 shambly out of the cell, 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.

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ALL’S WELL.

With the first bottle packed with water, R. T. B. 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 the principle of 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. Lampered as he was by having to take care, 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, and 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 turn 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 no doubt that Smith would not live long enough to find any way out of the cellars. 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 cellars.

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 blast 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, Pug."

Smith lighted a cigarette, and paced the room feverishly. Raxel, Cranor, and Basher Tople 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 Hildebrandt. 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 end 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 worked out of Llancoed that night, for there would be no trains running from a horse-drawn village like that, at that hour.

"Where are you making for, sir?" asked Hardy, as Smith let in the cluth, and the car was ready for the battle.

"Gloucester," said Smith. "And Hildebrandt is going to touch the ground in spots, like he’s never skipped before. Now get down on your knees in front of the dash-board, 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 vehicle which had crossed the town and commanded 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 ship-load 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 everybody’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 by the 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 destructor speeding towards them. As the destructor’s name, 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 destructor 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 destructor’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 gone under water again, and the destructor 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 answer to the question asked of the Megantic, was addressed to the passengers awaiting entry into its saloon.
The globe of gaseous liquid glowed brightly in the light as Raxel pitched it into the cellar. Then the door slammed shut, and Smits was left to his fate.

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 dusk, and came racing level with the _Megantic_. The transformation that had been effected from the disreputable tramp that had been anchored off Liancoed 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
The THRILLER

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 indiscernent, and crude, and utterly repulsive.

THE END.

DRUMS OF DOOM—

THE THRILLER

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OUT NEXT SATURDAY
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 telephone 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 encyclopedia. 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 TRAPPER!

A DRAMA OF THE NIGHT-HAUNTS OF LONDON

BY

GEORGE DILNOT

Author of "Scotland Yard," etc.

"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.

"Well, smart fellows overlooked one little bit. You watched me every time I went out. You arranged with the postman to look at the letters—and in every letter's address 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."

"It might have been so. Would it be more funny if you got a bunch of Territorials every week by post, always without any other enclosure, and always in a plain envelope, posted a different place each time?"

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

"Yes. But what I didn't expect was to get someone else's handwriting on the envelope for no reason that I know of."

"Ned raised his eyebrows.

"Mr. Langton?" he asked mildly.

"I rather thought you'd guess it. She's a scrap-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 was more than five fingers from a sixth. And that's what I see—recon your fellows reported that to you. But what I want to know is, 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."

"Yes, 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 the matter to answer my questions."

"She nodded.

"They told me that one of them had fully intended to hold me up but that he 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.

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 independent action in the pursuit of criminals, and he considered the police powerless or incompetent to deal with.

Entirely ruthless in his methods, he was 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, owing $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 Grimsbaw, two crooks who, ignorant of his real position, fleeced 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 Grimsbaw 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. Some time previous, it had borne this trade-mark, and Chief Constable Winter, of the C.I.D., is determined to get the mysterious criminal who employs it. The job is given to Detective Martin Wilde.

Wilde is obliged to accept the assistance, although in only an unofficial capacity, of Quen-ton 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 Grimsbaw 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, until 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 cell. 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.
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. After that, we were locked up in separate rooms while they had a pow-wow about us.”

“Then we were brought down again and asked to talk to them with them. But I was awake. The gag was to get us so deep that we couldn't back out. It wasn't good enough even to be caught. Dick might have weakened if I hadn't been there. They wouldn't have dared lose sight of me or lose track of me. So we were trundled up and carried to the cellar where you found us. Perhaps they thought we'd go out. Perhaps they intended to scare us to death.”

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

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

**ESTREHAN DISAPPOINTS.**

After something less than six hours rest, Wilde arrived at Scotland Yard to take the next stage 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 possessing implications perhaps even more important than those of the trial. 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 secure his conviction would not be so simply obtained. Estrehan, if he had summed up the man correctly, undoubtedly told all he knew. That should enable many of the gaps to be filled in, and the questions then would resolve itself into one of identity.

Stella had put for the time being under the charge of one of the two women detectives—Inspector, who had been a trial balloon for a tactfully trained 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 in no mood 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 surmised to be a trained young armed man. One never knew what might happen. Wilde did not anticipate that he would ever be so unwise as to lose his nerve, but there was no telling what lengths the Trapper would go.

The methodical activities of the police at Canbury had occupied much time. A detailed search of the house had revealed nothing fresh. That the chief inspector had anticipated anyone interested in taking the initiative to raid the house had become known, the members of so august a gang would have been very careful not to attract the police. Wilde had shown that the house had been rented furnished front 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. When the signed references might have left some trace.

In conference with Winter and the area detective, Superintendent Wilde admitted that the point of view put forward by Miss Spaeth and 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 that we were coming? Why didn't they not have carted them away? Or why not have gone the limit and put them completely out of the way, so that Dick'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 greatly emphasised a point with a heavy forefinger.

“Seems to me you’re overlooking something. This booby trap on the cellar stairs. That was the plainest case of indiscriminate murder. What good would it have done them if they had killed one of our boys? This Trapper fellow may be mad, but the man is well planned, most of his acts. If I were making a guess, I’d say that they thought it possible to a reasonable certainty that they weren’t afraid of it. That pistol wasn’t intended to kill, or perhaps they didn’t care whether it did or not. It was meant to be a frightener.

“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 got?”

“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’re getting into a statement from this boy Estrehan, of course? What 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 want from Estrehan, he went on thoughtfully, I may be in a position to make an arrest. Estrehan, at least, should be able to give me details:

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, as they are not connected to Thorold; but they are definitely suspicious people. We can’t afford to go at half-cock. Don’t do anything too quick.

“That’s why I want to talk with the Director,” explained Wilde. “As for the man I saw, he was not Thorold, although I at first thought it was. There’s 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.

“This is a standard type of gang socialism, 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 liap than when I saw you last. How are you feeling now?”

“Dick enjoyed 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 you love.”

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

“These men—they haved a hand to the door through the tell-tale subordinates had disappeared—they won’t answer any questions. Am I under arrest?”

Wilde crossed his chin with one hand.

“Ask it of yourself,” he said. “We’re just detaining you for a while. We have to, in the circumstances, you understand. 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 afraid, however, that I 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 pause. “Let’s get it over with it.”

Wilde knew enough to frame his questions adroitly and with an air of candid sympathy that encouraged Estrehan to expand with the possible self-justification of a week 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 table, wondering if he had a realization of the full extent of his folly.

“What could I do, Mr. Wilde?” he de
erested. “I didn’t mean to steal the money, but it was so and, this is the loss I knew I should be blamed. I was dazed when I left her—ready for anything that would come to me; the direction seemed a stranger offered to put things right. I don’t know that I believed him, but I was ready to grasp it. That’s how I got mixed up with these people.”

“Yes, you were in a bad fix,” admitted Wilde. “This fellow who you 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 I knew you in that 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 hall at the time?”

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

I was frightened by this man. I had to agree, and where he was so plausible. He explained that it was not real crime.

Wilde made a little grimace.

“When I was at Farrington 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 long ago.

“I’m sorry,” faltered the other. “I didn’t know who you were.”

“If you had, perhaps you would have killed me. You must be concerned about your 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.”

“Before we went to Canbury, 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 been an outsider, disinterested 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 Canbury. They had stopped once on the way, and Dick had dismissed the woman who 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 what the girl’s name was now and again, and sometimes stopped a night. There were two or three other men who came when 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?”

“I paid the bill.”
THE THRILLER

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

"Who did the tradesmen think you were?"

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

Wilde switched to another line.

"There were other men who were seeing from day to day. What were their names? What were they like?"

"Names were ever mentioned except Christian names. Estrehan added vague descriptions which the detective mentally determined. Old Wilde 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 of the other thing 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 taught him to trust these intuitions. If Estrehan had been involved in the schemes of the Trapper he was scarcely likely to make admissions that would implicate him further. It was not probable that he would profess ignorance.

But the closest questioning failed to shake his story. He frankly admitted that he suspected something was afoot 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 besides the Canbury house, but he had no idea where it was. His account of the events which had led to the break with the Trapper corresponded exactly. 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 Canbury. And I’m told that tonight you’ll be fit to get about. I want you to take you to have a quiet look at a man you may know."

MARTIN WILDE ACTS.

Wilde hummed excruciatingly out of tune as he turned over the mass of papers engrossed in the formless criminal investigation always put upon the man in charge an enormous amount of desk work; writing summons, compilation 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 stores taken to trace a purchaser; the turnouts to be of no value, the record of the shadowing of some person, and a hundred-and-one other directions. Nevertheless, each of these has to be minutely scrutinised and carefully collated. For hidden obscurely among the mass of words may lie the real meaning behind it all.

The chief inspector hated the tedious of the job, but he always carried it through with precision and exactitude, dictating comments, replies and instructions to a factum 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 pockets, when he felt the pipe clenched fiercely between his teeth.

His thoughts were concentrated on Quentin Thordor. That very morning Dick Estrehan, well sheltered in the pile of papers, had been afforded a glimpse of Thordor as the millionaire strode along Picadilly. At first sight he had unhesitatingly identified the American as the man he knew as Mr. N.--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 Quentin Thordor for murder. Wilde, on the other hand, was convinced.

Nevertheless, there remained a problem of tactics which loomed in the ointment. The Trapper was the figure-head in the series of events. The detective had felt that there was at least one other principal behind the scenes. The evidence against Thordor 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 Thordor, was, he believed, indubitable. 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 sometimes, done in somewhat similar cases, and arrest both the man and the woman simultaneously in the hope that the girl would be able to point her finger at him after she was under lock and key. But if he failed he was certain of acquittal, and she would escape scot-free.

On the other hand, if he arrested Thordor and Patricia Langton, she would at once put on her guard, and would take steps to destroy any incriminating evidence that might exist. Besides, hitherto he had managed the man in such a manner that would considerably hamper the closing-up of the case. The small fry of the gang seemed to have done all that they could, without question, longer had 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; Wilde listened impatiently.

"There’s talk of a new 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 standing.

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 been standing on the frame of the door, the other on the door itself, and he pulled the latter forward as inch or two as a padlock on Wilde’s foot, however, was over the threshold.

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

The butler was impassive.

"Mr. Thorold told you that you might try to trace this character," 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, it is the case of one of my old friends—there is a friendly atmosphere—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.

"I haven’t preserved you 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 have been expecting 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 forwarded. The Englishman was not the man to permit 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 engaged in the contemplation of a gang of road repairers. A word was exchanged, and Wilde went on to the club and sat in his name.

Thordor came down to the hall and welcomed him heartily.

"Now you are real good of you! I’ve been kind of missing your cheerful face. I just love to have you hovering around, ready to keep track 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 over."

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 been lost in the shuffle of his movements. He 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 you are here that you got in comfort. I’m trying to keep you fit and strong 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 difference of a deuce."

"My business can’t wait!" retorted Wilde, and there was a harsh note in his voice. "I can’t meet you where you can call. You are coming with me."

Thordor disengaged his hold.

"Suppose I don’t?"

"I won’t suppose you such a fool!" retorted the detective.

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, ever on guard for a physical attack. Suddenly the dogged light that had been aroused in Thordor’s eyes had died down, and he made a wistful, whimsical 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."

It was Wilde’s hand that was on Thordor’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 surprise.

"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 assumed you’d see him. There is this is an arrest. Do you know, I am disappointed? It’s too tame. Do you know—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—I bring the man that was at any given moment."

By the way, what am I arrested for?—"
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 it. 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 worst 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-subsie, Wilde. Your imagination is betraying you. Where is this double of mine?"

"You deny it," said the detective. "I thought 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 Estrehem embezzled $20,000 from his employers, and that that sum— or, if it was—"
The cloistered calm of Scotland Yard was broken by a mellow voice warbling an extract from "Pinocchio."

"But when his noon, the secret I have to tell," went on Wilde, "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 immunised?"

"I don't think!" muttered the detective beneath his breath.

**MISS LANGTON EXACTS A TRUE**

**T**HORDOL 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, the Baron naturally was not a prisoner, and the secret was to be found above the bar of the twentieth millionnaire. He had an idea that the work which remained would be simpler, if the fact that he had Thordol in custody was not known to the public.

Every day, he studied his subordinates were busy putting clues which irrevocably led them nowhere. But then, a messengers of detective work is the dead-end of futile drudgery, and the chief inspector accepted it with philosophy. He kept on going on his experiences with the confidence 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 Wilde, who had never slept in his life, went to bed that night.

The next morning, at break of day, Wilde was up and about, and had ordered a breakfast of a gentlemanly dinner at a restaurant in the neighbourhood of Leicester Square. Where the food and wine were good and the charges lessened to the point of insignificance.

He even ventured on the uncommon indulgence of a cigar and liqueur, and let his faculties be财力ced.

He received the newspaper, set down the glass he had raised to his lips, and read it with the same care that one arranges his thoughts before proceeding to write.

More as a matter of habit than anything else, he tossed a coin to a roarer-eller, and stood for an instant while he unfolded the sheet of newspapers. In the course of all his evolutions, some hint of the detection of Thordol might have leaked out. He became instantly alert, however, when 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 close succession. The girl was wounded, the assailant had jumped on a motor car that had apparently been waiting, and disappered."

"It would be remembered that Stella Cliffe was not far from her home. It is possible that he was the man who threatened her the other day in the yard. The crime, it is believed, has 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."

"It happened at a railroad, 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 three times, and we were in the car before we could do anything."

"But, my dear Miss Poining," protested Wilde, a little hampereed in his vocabulary, "I believe you should have written the newspaper account this way, too."

"They are not to be blamed," returned Miss Poining, "they were acting as they would 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 split milk. How is Stella? Is she as bad as the paper says?"

"The woman shook her head.

"No. She was lucky. She got one bullet through her arm, and she was in no worse condition. She's the more insolent. She is, now.

"I'll pop along and see her," announced Wilde.

Stella, a little pale, but with her indomitable cheerfulness unimpaired, received him with a smile. "You're a gentleman, Mr. Wilde, but you've got it all wrong. I suppose he reckoned on stopping me! Stola doing her stuff in the wire-box was all right for you to see, but I'm the one who had to come along. You can get this bird open and shut now. I saw him close when he pulled the gun, and all you've got to do is to go and get the bracelets on him. I'll learn him to try and put it across me like a girl.

"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 be busy that smooth grafter, the Trigger from the Queen's Boulevard? No doubt about it. He wouldn't buy the gun to frighten me, so he tried to kill me. Well, we'll see."

"She smuggled a little more comfortably behind the clothes she had on.

**What will Stella's information lead to? And what is the mystery surrounding Quentin Thordol and Patricia Langton? Don't miss next week's instalment of this gripping serial.**