Chapter 1.
BLIND, DEAF—AND DUMB.

On the girl's face grew progressive incredulity, conviction, horror. And the last remained, squeezing her fresh face of all colour till it was bloodless and haggard. Her mouth sagged. Her eyes were full to the brim with something like terror.

She stood at the gangway on the quay, watching the old man descend from the ship towards her. Old—perhaps he was not so old, but he was broken—broken as much as any man can be, and yet live. He was clinging to the rail on each side and walking with fearful, hesitating steps, although assisted from behind by a seaman who followed him step by step. He presented a dreadful, scarred face to the pale twilight.

Sightless eyes looked blankly ahead of him. Sprouting white whiskers clung about his chin in an uncared-for manner.

Tragic fragments of tropical clothing, supplemented by warmer garments culled from the tramp-steamer's slop chest, covered his body. This was the homecoming of a man whose name had been once renowned, subsequently notorious, and afterwards a thing hated and execrated. And he came back secretly, no one knowing but the girl who waited there for him with dread on her face.

"Father!" she said under her breath.

The old man did not answer or make any sign that he heard. The sailor behind him spoke for him, answering her with rough sympathy.

"He can't hear, miss—he's deaf and he's dumb as well. And he's blind. You can see that."

"Deaf and dumb and blind?" she echoed, with a little wail in her voice. "He will not know me, then. How shall I make him know?"

"He'll know you somehow, miss. He has his ways of knowing. He guessed someone would meet him. He said as much—no, not said. He scribbles on bits of paper, and you have to give him signs by tapping on his shoulder—one for 'yes' and two for 'no,' and like that. It's a bad go for you if you didn't expect him to be like this. Mr. Neville has been a bit of a 'andful this voyage, I can tell you."

She looked at the seaman a moment with a puzzled air. "Neville?" She did not know the name. Was that what her father called...
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himself now? Then speculation was drowned in the emotion of the next moment, for she was holding him. He was clenching her, feeling her hands with his own and putting his finger-tips on her face. He made queer little noises that were nothing like speech. He gripped her, while his poor, scarred face worked with excitement. Of a sudden he pulled out a scrap of a notebook from his pocket, and with a pencil scrawled a question across a leaf of it.

"Are you Margaret?"

"Tap once for 'yes' and twice for 'no,'" said the sailor over her shoulder.

She tapped his shoulder once. He instantly responded. He was all excitement, clutching her to him. Then he broke away, making the significant sign of a forefinger across his lips, which meant silence. He was silent enough because he could be no other. But she must be silent. He demanded her secrecy. She tapped on his shoulder again in token that she understood and agreed.

But she was not likely to do anything else. In the years that had gone since her father’s disappearance she had learned enough of his going to understand what shame was. His coming back now might mean a revival of it. It might mean much worse. Someone might find out he was in England. In spite of the hideous change in him, it might be known!

All at once a great surge of pity for him overwhelmed her. And with it came a great resolution to protect him and to shelter him.

"Come with me, father," she said in a whisper, taking his arm, and forgetting that he could not hear. But he understood the pull on his arm. He accompanied her a little way and then stopped. Again the ragged notebook came out. He wrote:

"Is it safe where we are going?"

She answered with a tap on his shoulder. He nodded and came with her, letting her guide him. Her mind was all turbulent questioning. How could she ever communicate with him? To merely answer him "yes" or "no" was one-sided talk. She could not get at his mind. She could not get to know anything. She was up against something that was beyond her. Just for a moment her reason tottered as though the problem of it all was beyond her mind to grapple with, and then with the need came an effort of resolution. She had to protect him. She must learn to communicate with him. Whatever had to be done she must do.

"Come along," she said, for she could not yet rid herself of the habit of speech to him. She wanted to get him to herself. She wanted to learn of the horror that had befallen him. She clung close to his arm and took him along.

The night was falling. Already over Louden river the gloom of the twilight mingled with the smoke of the sea-traffic that had come to rest here. The wharves were darkening. Lights flashed here and there, but on this Limehouse wharf, and in the streets beyond, there was as yet no light.

It was under an archway, where the gloom seemed to have gathered like flinth in a sewer, that there manifested sudden life of the kind that is spawned in dirt and darkness. An under-sized figure, a human rat of the streets, pushed up.

Before the girl had time to realize what was taking place, she was sent staggering against the wall, while her father was neatly back-heeled and sprawled upon his back.

An arm and a foul paw were thrust under the blind man’s coat. There was an instant’s movement, a quick grab of a practised hand, and a swift withdrawal.

Three seconds later there was only the sound of patterning footsteps, and the sight of a dark figure disappearing round the corner. Margaret sprang forward, leaving her father standing there, but she saw nothing. The archway made a twist, and there was more than one way out. She ran fifty yards, but saw no sign of the disappearing thief. She went back to her father. He was making a queer, gurgling noise in his throat while he was feeling frantically into the inner pocket of his coat. Both hands were groping wildly, frenziedly, in his pockets, and then into the inner part of his clothing. He did not find what he sought, and he went over his pockets again in a half-mad and wholly panic-stricken manner that was the more terrible because he could not speak. In place of speech his scarred features worked in demonic fashion. He thrust up his arms in despair, then clutched his blind eyes with his hands.

"What is it? What have you lost?" the girl gasped.

There was no reply from the man, from whom all sound was shut out. And he could not see her, though he must have sensed she was come back to him, for he seized her by the shoulders and his hands ran over her as though to find out if she had recovered what had been stolen from him.

Suddenly he seemed to collapse in her arms. How she got him out of that dark hole she did not know. Somehow she reached the street with him. She bribed an archicab to get a taxi. Half an hour later she had got him in her room in Lambeth. He was sitting in a chair with his head down on the table, drumming on the table-top with his hands.

Thus came home Samuel Radcliffe, the
man who four years ago stole a hundred thousand pounds and got away with it.

THE SECRET.

What had happened between Margaret and now Margaret's own life had been weary and burdensome to her. For the life of a girl who had been brought up in a sheltered, luxurious home, and who is suddenly faced with the need to earn her own living, is never easy. But what had befallen her husband had been manifestly more terrible. She watched his dumb agonicities with dread. He would have none of her sympathies. He was insensible. He was not going to languish, as though what he had lost was of value beyond compituation. As to the nature of his loss he gave her a clue at last. She put a pencil into his hand and paper by his side. He wrote down: "I have lost everything. It is what I suffered for. I must go out to find the thief—to strangle him."

She tapped on his shoulder a sharp negative. He collapsed on the table, his hands beating a devil's tattoo on the wood. But he started up once and clawed his hands along the walls of the little room, scaring the door. But she locked the door and took possession of the key. And when he found he could not get out he sank down on the floor in an attitude of despairing grief.

She gave him food and drink. Afterwards he sat in a chair with his head in his hands, shaking with a monotonous expression of despair. She thought he meant to commit suicide with him. She placed her right hand, and, grasping it in her own hand, made on the table-top the shape of a letter. He nodded in understanding. She formed another imaginary letter. She made words of them. Slowly, and with great tedium, she spelled out a question.

He answered it more quickly with pencil and paper. For conciseness he used a sort of telegraphese.

'Have been in Black River country. Africa—up river of Hell. All I went away with buried there in safe place. Put it there for safety till trouble was blown over. Well, six days, Hell natives. Priest devil made me blind. Escaped. Lot to tell. Brought home plan where money is buried. Wanted help from someone who could get it and share with me. Packet stolen by river-rats—Black river—river of Hell—all lost—must go out and look for thief—'

In these fragmentary sentences she read the bones of the tragedy, and her imagination, aided by the terrible sight her father presented, could fill in the rest of the dreadful and horrible details.

"You can do nothing yourself," she commenced to him slowly. "Shall I go to the police?"

The grimace he made as this idea reached his understanding was horribly significant.

"I can't appeal to the police," he answered on the point. "I'm going myself to find the thief."

He got up again and tried, in a half-demented fashion, to get the door open. But she led him back again.

"Give me time to think," she conveyed to him. "I will see what can be done."

To get his mind off the madness she tried to tell him how his letter, sent from Moopata, announcing that he was coming by the Creole on that vessel's return voyage, came to her via the old address, through someone who knew her. The letter had not been signed, and it simply said that she was to meet the Creole at the London Docks when the shipping news announced her arrival. Nor was the writing the same, although there were some tricks in the formation of letters that suggested the identity of the writer and in some ways prepared her.

She told him all this, but he seemed to lose interest. Exhaustion could not be kept back. He was sleeping before she had got to an end of what she had to tell him. That was all to the good. She wanted time, time to decide what she should do, time to design some rearrangement of her life to fit in with the new responsibility that had come to her. For she had to shelter him, care for him. She did not think there was any possibility of his arrest, for no one would know him. No one who knew Samuel Rodcliffe in his past life would recognise the same man in this broken creature who had come home.

She looked at the clock. She suddenly realised that something little shopping had to be done—something food obtained for breakfast. There was just time. She dragged on a hat, opened the door noiselessly, and went out. What was necessary to do she got done expeditiously. She was back in something under twenty minutes. She entered the sitting-room noiselessly—and, to her disappointment, saw, where her father had been sitting, an empty chair. He was not in the room.

She flung her purchases on the table and passed through into the bed-room beyond. It, too, was empty. Her father had disappeared.

She gave a little cry of anguish and ran outside, down the stairs and into the street. There was no sign of him. She ran along the street in the opposite direction from that which she had just traversed, but she got no sight of him. He had gone. She knew what had sent him out. He was insanely seeking the man who had robbed him.

CROOKED BUSINESS.

The man who had snatched at the blind man's pocket, seeking to get whatever plunder it might contain, was at this moment examining his loot under the light of a gas burner in a back room of a hostelry that, even in an evil street, suffered under the reputation of being a tough spot.

In the strip of sail-cloth, which was tied up with a cord, he found a couple of ten-shilling notes, almost unrecognisable with sweat, but undoubtedly good currency. These were satisfactory, and he put them away with his own small stock of money, but the rest of his acquisition he could not understand.

He had a rat-like face. He peered into the thing spread in front of him—a roughly-prepared, crinkly and jagged piece of skin with ink marks on it, suggesting some sort of map, and some writing which he could not make out—with no more than animal intelligence. He shook his head after a while and let the skin return to its original flatness. When he had drunk up his beer he abandoned this part of his plunder as being of no use to him, by the easy way of dropping it under the table, to be found by anyone who was interested in meaningless puzzles.

Thus, a few hours later, it came into the possession of the man who owned this house, one, Alf Finkhill, whose astuteness had so far kept him out of the hands of the police, although his reputation might have hanged some people less fortunate. This individual, after closing hours, spent some thoughtful hours and missed a considerable amount of sleep in considering his find.

"There's something big in this," he concluded at the finish, "but it's a job outside my weight. I can't do it. It's a young man's job. And I've got to hand it to someone else and be content with a percentage. Africa, eh? That's it. And something ugly at the end, maybe. But it's Africa's business there's the Africa of the tourist, with cool drinks handed to you in a hammock, and there's the Africa that's blustering Hades. I don't like the idea of the Gold Coast. This might interest a retired soldier. I've passed my years of adventure."

He put the inscribed skin carefully away, and in the morning had another look at it. Into this house of no reputation sometimes strayed broken travellers, and those who had wandered into the less blessed parts of the earth, and he had heard yarns that had made him tolerably familiar with some of that which lies off the coast line and away up some of the lesser known rivers of Africa, and he had no wish to sample adventures there.

Another examination of the skin confirmed his opinion about it. He started off with it in his pocket, and sought a certain office in an old-fashioned building in the City, where, if the brass sign at the entrance were any indication, operations of a financial character were negotiated. But since the term is loose and the description—"finance"—may be made to cover a multitude of activities, some not always within the limits of the law, the inattenr of the keeper knew he was coming to the right spot.

The names on the brass plate were "Stokes & Partner." Probably this announcement was the only reliable hint that ever came from that office, for the partners in this concern undoubtedly owned those names, although they had been known to transform them to use elsewhere.

Mr. William Stokes, a florid, rather flashy and over-dressed man of forty or so, occupied the inner office when Finkhill was ushered in, and being in good humour, for at that hour it was easy, toyed over a box of cigars to the innkeeper.

"What have you got on your mind this time, Fink?" he asked familiarly. "If it's jewellery, I'm not buying. Your clients will have to find another channel for disposal. Too jolly risky, my lad."

"I've got something very different, Mr.
Stokes,” Finkhill said, selecting a cigar with care and chewing the end off with sharp teeth. “I’d keep it all to myself, but I think it is a bit above my weight. I’ve got an idea it’s something big and wants a big way of handling. If you are feeling speculative, and if you don’t mind risk for big money, I fancy I can show you something.”

He put a hand into his inner pocket, and then paused.

“But, understand, it’s my possession. Any funny business—

Stokes waved a fat hand as though to indicate his perfect honesty.

“Between friends, my dear fellow, there should always be trust,” he said. “Still, if you’d rather smoke your cigar outside—”

Finkhill clapped on the desk in front of him the folded skin bearing the inked plan and the obscure notes in a language he could only partly read.

“Look at that and tell me what you think of it,” he said.

Stokes unfolded it and spread it out on his desk, and looked at it for a long time without speaking.

“A plan,” he said; “a chart, shall we call it?—a river leading from another river that leads from still another. It is West Africa. I will show you.” And he went to a book-case, a section of which was devoted to maps and from this division he took a map, which he spread on the writing-table at his side. He placed a yellow-stained forefinger at a point on the map.

“Here is the spot, but the drawn map on the skin gives a lot more detail of the further river, and it is clear that the man who drew it is a native of the district than the map-engraver did. The printed map is sketchy, and some of it obviously guess-work, but the drawn map looks like the work of someone who knows.”

“That’s my idea,” said Finkhill. “And it marks and shows how to get to a spot that strikes me as being infernally interesting. And for why? There’s probably gold there, or diamonds, or something big that’s worth running risk for.”

“Do you know what these notes—this writing means?” asked Stokes.

“I haven’t made all of it out,” said Finkhill cautiously.

“You haven’t? I’ll bet. Well, it’s in Spanish. I don’t know the language too well myself. I’ll let Biskerton have a look at it. He’s got that lingo all right. It means that a Spaniard has written this, or it may have been written by an Englishman with an idea of extra caution. You’ve brought this to the right place, Fink. We’ll have the guts out of this document in no time.”

“That struck me as being queer,” Finkhill said, placing his finger on a strange little drawing at one corner of the skin. It was a sort of representation of a human figure—rather a caricature of that shape with a monstrous head and round, bulging eyes, a long body, and crooked legs. Underneath it, at the feet of it, was a square shape representing a cube, and underneath it was written the Spanish word “Dinero.”

“That word means jewellery, or money, or wealth,” said Stokes. “This is a jolly interesting document.”

“By gum, I thought so myself,” said Finkhill excitedly. “It’s worth money, eh?”

“I don’t know,” said Stokes cautiously. “Central West Africa is a long way off, and some things aren’t worth the risk.”

“The man who made that map thought it was.”

“I don’t know. I should like to meet that man. Do you know him?”

“No. Me. It was jettisoned in my hotel, either accidentally or on purpose. I’ll bet it was pinched. But it’s mine now. Well, what are you going to do with it?”

“Nothing yet. You open your mouth too soon, Fink. I want to know more about it.”

“But it sounds good, eh? And that funny figure! It’s a statue, or god, or something. Perhaps it’s made of gold, being marked “Dinero.” Or perhaps those big eyes are diamonds, or rubies, or pearls, or something.”

“Perhaps nothing of the sort. Fink you’ve been reading tales. This isn’t fiction—it’s life!”

“What means it may be a jolly sight queerer than fiction, Mr. Stokes. What’s the next move?”

“I’ll get in touch with my partner,” Biskerton will know what this means without any mistakes.”

He spoke into the telephone. Biskerton came down from an upstairs room. He was a loose-limbed, untidy-looking man with prominent teeth, which he had an unpleasant way of showing by pulling back his lips. And he had a way of whistling through them.

“What’s that you’ve got?” he asked.

“I’ve translated most of that,” Stokes said. “If you’re the same result.”

Biskerton whistled through his teeth. He glanced at the writing with interest. Then he took a magnifying-glass from his pocket and examined the skin through it.

“Queer,” he said. “Do you know what this skin is? It’s human. Human skin. Very queer. And this inscription. Well, it’s a pretty clear instruction how to find a ju-ju idol up a water-way called the Black River. At the foot of the ju-ju idol is buried a hundred thousand pounds.”

“Pounds of what?” demanded Finkhill eagerly.

“Pounds sterling—money—dinero it is called here. It is written in words, not figures, eien mil libra esterlina.”

“Gold, perhaps.”

“There’s no indication of that.”

“Then it looks as though some Spanish Johnny has written this thing.”

“Maybe. You can’t tell. It is probable. But this cache of plunder is British currency according to statement. Queer. And up an African river, too. How would the stuff get there? Perhaps some niggers robbing a down-coast bank have taken it into the interior as an extra powerful ju-ju. I dunno. He whistled through his teeth while he examined the map and writing again through his powerful magnifying-glass.

“Oh, yes, human skin, right enough. Looks like a slab from a human back between the shoulder-blades, judging from its wrinkles.”

“A white man?” asked Finkhill, in an awed voice.

“Yes,” said Biskerton, whistling quietly. “Gosh! I wonder what it all means. I’d like to have the yarn.”

“Don’t you know anything? Where did you pick this up?”

“Biko dropped it in my hotel.”

“In that low joint of yours, Fink.”

“Not too low for you to use sometimes, Mr. Biskerton.”

The other chuckled in his throat and nodded. “Well, what’s the proposition? Are you handling this to the ethnological department of the British Museum?”

“I’m out to sell it to the best bidder. I reckon you’ll give me more than they will for it,” Finkhill said cunningly.

Biskerton whistled several bars before replying, while Stokes sat back smoothing his hair with one hand.

“I’m not seeking hazardous speculations myself,” he said, putting down his magnifying-glass.

“Nor am I,” added Stokes. “Quiet business is my hobby just now.”

Finkhill stood up, reached over and grabbed the piece of skin.

“Righto,” he said, folding it up. “I’ll find someone with some sand in their backbones. If you don’t know a good thing when you see it, or if an easy life has
The THRILLER

The man with a face of intense, hard, rat-like features answered Finkhill's interrogation with full frankness when he was assured that no one was about to get his slip from the watchman. "It was just a crony lay," he said, rubbing his nearly chinless face. "Just a snitch at the pocket and run. It was a old bloke. I see him come tottering off a ship, and blokes wet come off ships often 'ave a bit of something worth picking. He was more like a man with decent taste. The lads might at least roll a night of free drinks.

"I was just a crony lay," he said, rubbing his nearly chinless face. Just a snitch at the pocket and run. It was an old bloke. I see him come tottering off a ship, and blokes wet come off ships often 'ave a bit of something worth picking. He was more like a man with decent taste. The lads might at least roll a night of free drinks.

"Better to be blind and deaf and dumb as well." Finkhill. "That's pretty steep. Funnny a chap like that being blind and deaf, and dumb, was known as 'adn't do 'im no good."

"And you robbed this poor bloke," said Finkhill.

"Oh, yes, I've got myself to look after, ain't I? He won't so poor as me, any way up, but I reckon 'e must 'ave got his money somewhere else. Only got a couple of ten bob notes. That's all I know.

Deaf and dumb and blind, was he?" Aye, and wit a face like a piece of pickled pork. Now I'll 'ave a drink. I'll start wit whisky, Mr. Finkhill."

"You're mad, then. You're risin' Finkhill. Blind and deaf and dumb! Gosh! Here, what was the ship he come on?"

"Four ale don't let me remember that. Gosh! I never had a chance to take a look at him."

"It was the Creole. She's lying in the London Docks now. Now gimme a man's whisky."

This information was in the hands of Messrs. Stokes and Biskerton within a few minutes of the opening of their office in the morning.

"Man, the thing is tumbling into our hands," Stokes said, while Biskerton, whisking joyfully through his teeth, nodded in satisfied agreement. "I'm beginning to see the start of a way through.

"But deaf and dumb and blind!" said the publican with a shiver. "And he'd got into the hands of natives who'd done him a bit of no good. That sounds rotten and rather.

"Most unpleasant. But we can't help his troubles. And now we've got a start we have to find out what they've perhaps found on that ship. In the guise of a kindly and interested relative I could see the skipper myself; you, Finkhill, could do something discreet to summon the coppers, and Biskerton might concentrate on trying to get track of this affected man.

"And if you find him, what then? Being blind, deaf, and dumb, he'd not hear any questions or be able to answer them. And besides, if he once got the suspicion that we'd got the skin, he'd perhaps set the police on us again."

"I don't know. He might have reasons for secrecy himself."

"How do you make that out?"

"I don't know. I'm only thinking."

"Biskerton, who had been idly turning the morning paper in front of him on the desk, broke into a startled whistle.

"Listen to this as he rilled with a blue pencil an item of news in the paper before him.

"An old man who was knocked down by a taxi at the Bridge on Tuesday evening, was found, on being taken to Charing Cross Hospital, to be blind and deaf and dumb."

"By gosh!" said Finkhill. "I wonder if it is the same man."

"The chances are that it is. Even London isn't full of old men who are blind and deaf and dumb."

"Then that opens up a fresh field for inquiry," said Stokes thoughtfully.

"But it isn't one to barge into without due consideration," commented Biskerton. "Delicate negotiations are indicated—what?"

"So jolly delicate that I don't know how you can work it," said Finkhill. "Deaf and dumb and blind! Gosh! They said he'd been a house negro in some Hades of a place up a river."

"Biskerton whistled a few notes, and then bared his teeth in a grin.

"You've got a face, Fink. What's that to worry about, except that it's going to give us our chance? Now, there's that girl who met the old man at the ship. Your radiogram suggests that she was his daughter. Perhaps he knows something. She might be worth while finding. That may be done through the hospital, provid- ing that the radiogram does not indicate that she was with him. Well, we will just consider our plan of campaign."

Of that long room in which there were many beds, some with screens round them, Margaret Radcliff and a few others had little. Most of the beds were occupied. Nurses moved from one to another, and here and there people, whom she was conscious of without taking a particular notice of, beds, talking to those who occupied them.

Instinctively her eyes picked out her father. He was in a corner, and a stranger—a tall, loose-legged man, in the rusty black uniform of a sailor, with philanthropy, stood by his bed. She ignored this stranger and darted to the bed, bending over and seizing her father's hands and pressing them to her face.

"Father! Father!" she murmured, forgetful of the fact that he could not hear. But he knew her. It was evidenced by the expression of his face, as he held her hands and made queer little noises in his throat. He tried to sit up in bed, but she held a comforting hand on his forehead. And she stroked it, as if to make him know she was there to comfort him.

So manifest was his excitement at her presence that a man who sat at the next bed, writing down in a note-book a statement that was being made in a low voice to him by the man who lay there, ceased to write, and raised his head. Margaret caught his eyes for a moment. He was a young man with very yellow, smooth hair and an angular, good-looking face. Then she had only attention for the old man, who was dumbly clutching at his hands. He was sitting, with nothing to his bedside. He made the sign of writing with one hand. She understood. He wanted his note-book. She guessed it was in his evening, that hung beside his bed. She took it and as she accompanied it, found a clean page, and put both into his hands. He wrote deliberately.

"Do you know the man who is here at my bedside?"

She looked up at the black-garbed visitor. She saw a rather untidy-looking man with hair that was not well-brushed, and pronounced with a not very prepossessing smile. She turned to her father and tapped twice on his shoulder.

"He's asking about me," said the stranger agitatedly. "I am from a philanthropic association. We seek to help the friendless who are in hospital."
"I understood you had claimed to be
some relation," Margaret said.

"No, no; that is doubtless the attendant's
mistake. Though all those who are in mis-
fortune are out of theirs. Now, do not let me
interrupt. But if you need help—"

"Thank you. You are very kind," Mar-
garet said, turning to her father again.
He was writing furiously.

"Am afraid this man wants to know
something."

She tapped disagreement. The stranger's
motives were evidently only kindly. Her
father had nothing to fear.

"Didn't find the thief," he wrote. "Ruins
Stole from me all chance of getting what I
suffered for. Must always be blind.
Native devils. Up Black River devil priest
of Karmo got cure. No one can guide me
there without chart."

She took his right hand and grasped his
forefinger like a pen, and shaped letters
with it on the coverlet.

"Wait," she wrote. And then she added:
"Is there hope for your blindness?"

He answered, writing with such a quick,
desperate haste that she had difficulty in
deciphering it:

"The priest of Karmo blinded me. It
was unjust devil's work. But he has the
cure. If someone could take me I could
get it. And the money is up the Black
River—Ashanti—Gold Coast. The power of
that could help."

He broke off his writing in a kind of
frenzy, as though he had so much to say
that the cumbrous way of expressing it
drove him mad. He flung his arms up in
unrestrained anguish, while his scarred
face worked pitiably.

The note-book in which he had been
writing fell upon the floor, lying open at
the foot of the bed. While Margaret tried

to restrain him, the stranger picked up the
book. He turned it face towards him, and for a
moment in the meaning of the writing that
was scrawled on it. But his face gave no sign, and he
turned on Mar-
garet, as he handed back the book, a look of
beneficent friendliness.

"He needs taking care of, I am
sure. I think you would be well ad-
vised to leave him here for a while.
This mental disturbance may get
worse. Who can

wonder at it?

This accident on the top of his
physical disability.
Now, if I can do
anything at any
time?"

"You are very

kind. I am sure," Mar-
garet answered him. But
she was busy soothing her
father, letting her
fingers wander over his
forehead, and putting her
face down to his.

"I shall give

you my address, in case you need help,"
murmured the stranger.

"Yes, yes, thank you."

"And will you tell me where you live,
in case I can."

"It is No. 15a, Green Street, Lambeth," she said, comforted that at least one friendly
soul was in the world.

"Yes, yes, I will make a note of it. The
now I had better be going. I have others
to visit. But I shall see you again. I
hope—oh, I have your address, but I did
not catch your name."

"Radcliffe—Margaret Radcliffe."

"Ah, yes, I shall remember, Miss Rad-
cliffe. And he turned away to hide the
exultant look that no effort could help
coming into his face. He went along the
corridor between the beds. Margaret did
not look after him, but the yellow-haired
man who was taking notes from the patient
in the next bed watched him until he was
gone. And then he watched Margaret.
But she was unaware of his interest. She
bent low over her father, trying to calm
him.

PREPARATION.

EARLY in the evening, Biserton, having
changed the rusty black of philan-
thropy to a slack tweed suit, turned
into the office in the old-fashioned city
building and found both his partner and
Finkhill there in conversation.

"I don't know what you two have found
out," he said, whistling through his teeth
with joyful detachment, "and it doesn't
matter, either. I have got all that matters.
The luck makes me a bit frightened. It's
too good to last. Seems as though there
may be a catch in it. It's all as smooth
as sugar-stick."

Captain Christmas

wasn't standing for

anything crooked. In his
rage he smashed up

the office and heaved

the desk on top of the

senior partner.
"A home away from home," said he, "but I would never choose to pick up a bit of a steamboat, if the fare were plenty and the weather much like that. And I think he wrote something about getting the crew of the steamboat. And they can be found up the Black River. It could buy—" It broke off like that. I don't suppose I'm word perfect, but he left them very much like that. I think he wrote something about the being up there is what you want. You see, it bears out what we've got from the skin."

"It sounds good," said Stokes. But have you got the story? the speech was written in Spanish," asked Stokes.

"Or on human skin?" queried Finkhill un-casually.

"No notion. But does it matter?"

Stokes nodded in agreement, but Finkhill was not satisfied.

"A country where they make maps and write things on human skin doesn't seem a very strong point to get up, he said."

"You are weakening, eh?" jeered Biskerton. "A share in a hundred thousand pounds doesn't add to your airs," he said."

"By gum, it does. But if I got the whole lot, and came home like that bloke, blind and deaf and dumb, it wouldn't be much cop."

"Very well, we'll do the job and give you two and a half per cent. When we come home," suggested Stokes."

"I'll see you incinerated first," answered Finkhill haughtily. I go through with it."

"Well, it sounds like absolute pie to me," said Stokes. "The thing is as straightforward as a journey to Epson. We're merely to go out and collar the stuff. There may be it was just up and down. If the local niggers begin doing the ugly on us we shall have to be in a position to hand out the hard stuff. It means arranging a little expedition that would be much safer if we had a few useful men with us—men who haven't any fancy notions about shooting a nigger or two."

Finkhill nodded."

"The only condition don't point to there being any parlor manners to speak of among the niggers up the Black River, so we've got to see ourselves well heeled. I've a fancy for a couple of good—some handy a thousand cartridges for my own ugly stuff."

"Now you are beginning to talk, Fink," said Biskerton. "Stokes is right. We shall want a little expedition. That's where your help will be valuable. You'll know a few tough men of the seafaring type. You'll be able to pick out, just the sort we want—no crooks, but men who might calculate on digging into our plunder, but hard-fisted fellows who'll do as they are told for a union wage and keep a still tongue before and afterwards."

"It might be, Mr. Biskerton. That's going to cost me money."

"I'm afraid we've got to spend a bit to get a lot. We can't very well go out on a Union Castle mail boat and ask to be dumped on a deserted coast and then take our chance of going up country on foot. It would be safer to stop at home than that. And if we chance it by some rash step, we'll be much better off. No, we want our own ship—some handy little craft that can go up the first river a few hundred miles."

Stokes nodded in agreement.

"Police action."

Chieff-Inspector Birchdale swung round in his chair as Desmond Galloway came into the office. This was a snuggy tucked away a nest of such apartments in the very ordinary brick building known as New Scotland Yard, and there was nothing in the office to suggest it was any part of the Criminal Inves-

tion Department. Over the chief's desk was a photograph of a homely woman—his wife. A geranium grew in the window."

"Did you have any luck, Galloway?"

"Lucky!" said the young man, smoothing his yellow hair, which was already very smooth. "What would you call it if you picked up a tenant out of the street when you were only looking for a cigarette?"

"Depends what the cigarette-end meant," said Birchdale, doggedly. "It might lead to the刑事 or the thousands pounds."

"What I have found will lead to a jolly sight more," said Galloway. "Oh, about the Jansen case—well, I interviewed the man and got a statement of what we require. It's here. That's that. Now there's something else."

"You look excited, Galloway," said the senior inspector increduously.

"Excited? Man, I'm bursting with excitement. You sit hard on your chair, chief, or you'll find yourself airy with the same emotion. I have found Samuel Radcliffe, the bank manager, who absconded with a hundred thousand out of the strong room of the City branch of the Southern Joint Bank some four years ago."

"Oh, what are you giving me," said the chief inspector incredulously."

"Just what I say. I've seen him—stood as near as him to—""

"As sure as I am standing here. I was on the case, you know. I was not unacquainted with Radcliffe before he made a hole in things. I've carried the look of his face in my memory ever since. Not that he looks the same. It seems impossible that a face should change so much. It is a diabolical transformation, and there must be some terrible story behind it."

"You are sure it is the same face?"

"Yes, I am in no doubt. Besides, his daughter was there with him. I remember her—a rather beautiful girl. I had to interview her four years ago, and I was sorry I could not have met her in those pleasant circumstances."

"What?" said Finkhill, checking the senior partner's writing-table on top of him. But he's been staring ever since."

"Sounds our mark," said Stokes. "We'll get him cheap, I'll bet. What's his name?"

"Christmas—John Christmas."

"Sounds a jolly name—Captain Christmas."

"There's nothing jolly about him, but he knows his work," said Finkhill.

"Righto. You get in touch with him."

"He'll want a bit of an advance note. I should say he's desperately hard up."

"Very well. He shall have it. You find him and send him along here. You'll tell him we are geologists, and that we are prospecting for precious metals. We have got scent of a deposit somewhere and we don't want it talked about. That will keep him quiet."
Chief-Inspector Birkdale nodded in understanding.

"But do you calculate he is in with Radcliffe?"

"No; I calculate he's doing the vulture act. Where the body is there will the vultures be. I suspect he knows something. He's out to get pickings. Suppose Radcliffe has got some of his plunder hidden away somewhere?" "Yes, that skunk might be easily after it."

"It's clear that he wouldn't be at the hospital for any other reason than his own good. The girl did not know him, for I heard their conversation, but he got her address out of her and her name. I heard both. So it wasn't even necessary to remember her face. She's Margaret Radcliffe, of 15a, Green Street, Lambeth. He made a note of it, saying he would like to help her if she needed it. Of course, he's out to help himself."

"But he wouldn't be able to get much information from the old fox who was deaf and dumb, and blind."

"No; I don't think he did. I fancy he was there to prove the old man's identity. But he got to know something. The girl communicated with her father by holding his hand and forming letters. He answered by writing in a pocket-book. He was writing and dropped the book. Biskerton, standing by the side of the bed, picked it up and handed it to the girl. But he read what was on the open page while he held it, and his face, as he read it, was an interesting study."

"You've no idea what it was that was written?"

"No; that's just what I lack. I want to know. I must find out."

"That's where you have missed your chance, Galloway. That seems to me the kernel of the whole thing."

"I'll get it. I'll get a good deal more. But this is most important—that the activities of Messrs. Stokes and Biskerton shall be watched. We want to know what moves they are making. The old man can be arrested any time, but—"

"The sooner, the better, I should say."

"But then we shall miss the other crows. At present Samuel Radcliffe is a decoy for them. He might be left a bit till we know what the others are doing. See the point? We don't want merely to arrest the bank manager, who is but a broken husk of a man, anyhow, but we want to get on the track of the plunder, which, I imagine, Biskerton and his partner are after."

"Yes, I suppose that's so. I'll get a few men watching those fellows. You can go on with the inquiries at the hospital."

Galloway went back to the hospital. He was a privileged visitor, but he made apologies to the surgeon in charge.

"Our cases are like yours, doctor. We start after one trouble and unexpectedly come upon another. My point of interest is the man who is deaf and dumb, and blind. Has he any visitors just now?"

"No, he's alone. His daughter's just gone. But I daresay she may come back soon. He's apt to be violent when she's not there. His struggles to make himself understood are rather dreadful. I fancy he's asleep just now."

Galloway nodded and went in. He went and stood beside the wreck of a man that was Samuel Radcliffe. The poor, scared face, with its wrinkled skin and pain-lined features, was at rest. There was a world of tragedy in that distorted mask. It was as the face of one dead, one who assuredly had paid heavily for his sins.

The Scotland Yard man looked down quietly at him, compassionately, desiring to avoid waking him. He resolved to wait. But presently he saw protruding from under the pillow a tattered notebook. It needed but a touch to release it. So it came into his hands, and he opened it and saw the scrawling calligraphy, by which the blind man had communicated his dreadful story to his daughter. It was fragmentary. Much of it illegible and over-written, but there was enough to tell the tale of it just as Margaret Radcliffe knew it. He copied it into his own notebook, and finally put the dog-eared book back under the pillow whence he had got it.

In doing this he somehow wakened the man on the bed. He did not touch him or move him. It was probably on the part of the broken man, to compensate for the loss of sight and hearing, a super-sensitive to the presence of anyone. He suddenly waved his arms, and his face twisted into an agonised expression as though he were afraid of some horror that he would keep away. He sat up and tore at the sleeping jacket that covered his upper body. The garment, which was big and loose, fell over his shoulders and slipped down his waist, exposing his naked body.

There were to be seen scars and lacerations on the skin of his chest as well as the deep tan that comes of exposure to a tropic sun. He twisted round and showed his back, which was all pink and streaked with white, as though it were one great scar, and altogether different in colour from the rest of his body. Then a nurse came and pulled on the garment again, while Galloway helped her. And he left her soothing him.

"He generally wakes from sleep like that," the surgeon said, as Galloway came out of the ward. "I'm afraid it is a bad case. He's got something on his mind that agitates him in his sleep."

"Those scars on him. What do you make of them?" Galloway asked.

"I should say he has gone through a terrible experience of some kind that has affected him mentally as well as bodily."

"His back—what do you make of that?"

"I should say he has been flayed."

"Good heaven!" Galloway went out shuddering. He had a look of horror on his face even when he came back to Chief-Inspector Birkdale.

"I'm afraid my imagination fills in what I don't know, and if you ask me I should

They found the man struggling in delirium. His sleeping-jacket had slipped from his shoulders, exposing a great and terrible scar.
say he has gone through several kinds of Hell." And he read over his notes and filled them out with reasoned explanation.

"It's all very clear. The money he stole and buried was his from the old gentleman he had killed. The old gentleman was a man of wealth, and the money was his inheritance.

"Of course, we don't commit ourselves in any way, neither does the captain, but, in case we fix it up, it's something already done then, and we'll see how the crew approves of the craft we've got our eye on.

"Yes, sir, that's right," said Captain Christmas. "She's a steam trawler used on the Irish coast and doing business. It must be taken over mostly ever since, I guess, but she's sound for all that, and with a bit of overhaul-"ing would be fit to go anywhere. She'd be a fine prize to suit you, and that's your palaver, not mine—I don't know that you'll do better if you want an economical voyage."

"Righto, captain. You've said it," returned Rakeheart. "Have a cigar?"

"Thanks, sir; I'll fill my pipe, if I may," said Christmas. "Where did you propose setting a course to? I understood from Mr. Finkhill here that you'd get a business proposition on foot—something that you didn't want shouted about."

"That's it. We've got scent of a bit of mineral deposit that we want to make sure of before we shout about it. If it gets known, the jowls will be drawn, and the passage money stashed up to get his hand into the pie, and we shall be frozen out before we've had a chance. You can say it's a secret, if anybody asks you. It isn't there."

"I'm generally used to having my employers trust me, sir," said Christmas, with a little show of stiffness.

"You'll be trusted, all right, captain, in due course," said Biskerton, whisking through his teeth. "And to come down to business, you'll get the usual wage, plus a bit on the top if our little expedition pans out O.K."

"Christmas nodded, and blew out a poisonous stream of smoke from which Stokes recoiled.

"Gosh! What are you smoking, captain?"

"Well, it is a stout brandy tobacco, sir. I'll put it out if you...

"Oh, carry on, we'll open the window. It smells like insecticide. When should you be ready to start, captain?"

"Now, or as you like."

"Well, we haven't got our crew fixed up yet, and there's some overhauling to be done."

"Well, if you wouldn't mind, I'd rather go on board straight away and get used to my quarters. My present lodgings are not to my taste."

"Finkhill looked at Stokes. It was to say that John Christmas, having come to an end of his resources, would probably be lodging in the street this night."

"Righto, captain," Stokes agreed. "And perhaps it would be convenient to draw on your wages up to a figure?"

A gleam came in Christmas' eyes, although he tried to appear not too eager.

"Very well, sir; I'll have a few things to get out of the voyage and match, and the like. And if I'm on board I can make the refitters—the mechanics and joiners and other lubbers—pall their weight of work. By ginger! I'll make the beggars jump!"

"Fine, captain," said Rakeheart, reaching for his pipe-tweeze. "Now, when you've drawn this money you get along with Finkhill and have another look at the Meteor, and you tell us what you think is necessary to be done. Her condition is well known, and her hull is sound, but there may be a few things."

"So far so good," said Biskerton, when the others had gone. "Chartering and running a ship isn't cheap, but the spec is good. A hundred thousand of the best isn't to be sneezed at. It seems all very easy. I wonder whether it isn't too easy, and whether there's a catch in it somewhere. For instance, come here and look out of the window. Do you see that man over there lighting a cigarette by the lamp-post on the other side of the road? It's my suspicion he's watching this office."

"Good lor! What makes you think that?"

"Nothing in particular, mostly all day pre-tending to be helping those lorry drivers to unload, and pretending to be picking up odd jobs where he can."

"If that's what you call 'policing'?

"Not my idea, how could they have got any sort of a hint? Or, if it is, they're on a mug's game, for we've given nothing away. After all, we've been watched by the police since the lady's death, and they've got their eye on all of them. But my notion is that the blind and deaf and dumb man has palls—perhaps some who were going to share the plunder with him—and they have somehow got on the scent."

"But how?"

"Through Finkhill. It may have been suspected that the skin with the writing on it was dropped in his place. Perhaps he's been warning him."

"That's a longish shot, but it's possible," agreed Biskerton. "The man who pinched the packet from old Rackcliffe may have dropped it for that reason. He's gone half out of his mind of late."

"Stokes agreed Biskerton went out. The man who was lounging against a lamp-post casually followed him. He found him on the same bus as himself. He spotted him on the door of the bus and followed him. He got rid of him by walking out to the end of London Bridge, going down the steps to-wards the Old Swan Pier, slipping into a yard, and waiting five minutes and then going under the archway towards Billingsgate and up the steps on the other side. He leaped on to a passing bus and was free."

"But we are being watched, that is certain," he said to himself. "It doesn't matter who has the carriage in our hands. At the same time, if the old man has palls working for him, and with him, they might make it not too easy for us. The old man could have been one of the old man's friends. We ought to have been in touch with him and working for him—five per cent. profit for him and ninety-five for us. He whistled thoughtfully through his teeth and watched the passing traffic. "Yes, there might be some little item of information we lack that would make all the difference. The dickens is getting into communication with him. This deaf and dumb business is a bore. It can only be done through the girl. I've got to get her confidence."

He had to change into his suit of dark grey, approaching black, which, to his mind, was a very becoming one. He dressed himself in it, and this he did at a hotel in Bedford Street, Strand, where he had a temporary bed-room. Then he made for the hospital. He made the usual appearance at the office. The clerk catered a list.

"Neville—Neville?" he said. "That's the case that was blind and deaf and dumb, sir. Haven't you heard about that? He got up last night, and has dropped himself—at least, put on some clothes and came down here and got as far as the street. There he was arrested by the police, who seemed to have some reason for what they were doing."

"Arrested?" echoed Biskerton, and dropping into silence with the little fear that something was happening that he did not understand.

THE CAPTAIN.

Shaven so clean that his angular jaws shone, blue eyes that at first looked mild till a second glance at them showed that what seemed to be mildness was merely a mask for a lean, well-set-up figure. That was John Christmas. He was smoking a pipe of undue proportion loaded with a tobacco of strength when he arrived outside the office of Messrs. Stokes & Biskerton. He put the pipe in his pocket as he went in on Finkhill's heels, and he took his hat off and bowed stilly as he was introduced to his new owners.

"We were so near that I thought I would show our ship to the captain," Finkhill said.
"Happened not an hour ago, sir. I've just had a 'phone message through from police headquarters giving us official notice.'

"That is very sad, sir. I don't know the man, of course. My interest in him is purely compassionate. His daughter?"

"Was here not half an hour ago. Seemed a bit cut up, sir. She'd hardly believe it, sir, but there it is."

"Dear me. And you don't know anything of the poor man who was arrested, for example?"

"No, sir. We haven't any information."

"I am very sorry to hear it. I must look up the poor girl, and see if I can be of any assistance. Good-afternoon."

He went to a call office and rang up Stokes and informed him. Stokes' voice came back, somewhat perturbed.

"I'll see you in the Strand Palace coffee-room in half an hour," he said.

Under cover of a strident rendering by the band of a "Lothengrin" selection, Stokes expressed his principal fear.

"It's clear the police have guessed his identity, and so much the worse for him, though I can't see them attempting to bring him to trial, considering his condition. But what concerns us is whether they have got hold of that note-book in which he wrote down his conversation with the girl—one you had a peep at. It seems to me that if they've got that, they'll have a pretty good clue to where the plunder is hidden. In that case they may butt in, and—where shall we be?"

"But the hands didn't get the skin," pointed out Biskerton. "They may be pretty sure the stuff is hidden somewhere, and they may know it is in Africa, but they aren't going to find it on such slender information. Nobody knows where it is but us and the old man, and he couldn't direct anybody without the map, otherwise he wouldn't have been so keen in sticking to it."

"Yes, I believe that sounds sense," said Stokes. "I've been frightening myself unnecessarily. But you'd better go and see the girl, and find if she knows anything about that note-book."

Biskerton called his companion over to the window. "See that chap out there by the lamp-post?" he said. "It's my suspicion he's a 'tee watching this office."

The hospital, she was informed that he had been arrested, was incredulous.

"I don't know whether you'd call it arrest," said the man at the hospital, seeking to soften the blow. "Perhaps it's only detention. They are taking care of him, and I am sure he needed it."

Margaret went away, staggering under the blow. Afterwards, summoning up courage, she went to a district police-station and asked questions. The inspector in charge got on the telephone to headquarters.

"He's just being taken care of," the inspector said, with an economy of information. "If you'll leave me your address I'll get to know if you can see him, if that's what you want. If you can, I'll send along to you, or they will communicate with you from headquarters. What's your name?"

"Margaret Radcliffe."

"Ah, what's that? You said his name was Neville. If you are his daughter—oh, perhaps you are married?"

"No, it is my business name," Margaret said hastily. "And the address is 15a, Green Street, Lambeth."

"Um, yes, all right." She went back to her lodgings later on, to learn that she had had a caller.

"A gent with a come-to-meeting manner and teeth that stuck out, miss," said her landlady. "He seems to have visited your father in the 'ospital. He'll come to see you again sometime."

Margaret recognized the description. She had no doubt this visitor meant well, but she was glad she had missed him. She wanted to be alone in this time of anxiety. Early in the evening a plain-clothes man came from the local police-station, saying that if she wished she could visit her father, who was at that moment detained in Pentonville prison.

"He's in the hospital there, miss. If you say the word, Chief-inspector Birklund, from the Yard, will come along in a taxi and take you straight there."

She was agreeable. She wanted nothing better. To be conveyed and escorted there seemed likely to save her a lot of trouble. But she had not prepared herself for the inquisition that Inspector Birklund proposed to put her under during the journey.

He was a homely man, and treated her in a severely fatherly manner, but his questions were persistent.

"It's no good trying to hide things," he said. "We know all about it."

"Then you know more than I do," she said, "so why question me?"

"We know his name is not Neville. He is Samuel Radcliffe, who stole one hundred thousand pounds and got away with it. He hid the money in Ashanti, on the Gold Coast, and I guess it's there now—up the Black River. He got blinded there. There is a map missing—"

He jerked out in little disconnected sentences the story such as he knew it, leaving suggestive blanks for her to fill in, which she did not.

"Where did you get all this story from?"

"Oh, you are beginning to question me, my dear. No, that won't do. I am questioning. But you'll see it is no good telling me anything but the truth, as I already know so much."

"It is no good telling you anything at all, as you think you know so much," she answered.

"What about that money? He can't go and get it now. Perhaps you are thinking..."
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of trying. Perhaps someone is helping you.

"No, to both questions," she answered.

He put the same questions to her many times in various ingenious ways. He zigzagged among the facts already known, trying to find some other crumb of evidence, and trying to catch her in the conspiracy to get hold of the money, but he got nothing.

"You have been sheltering him for a long time,—eh?"

"He was with me perhaps an hour," she said.

"Ha, how was that? He had only been ashore some time," said Birkland, making a sly shot.

"Yes."

"He came by what ship?"

The constable named Margaret, seeing no need to hide that. "She is in the river now."

"Ha." Inspector Birkland’s face showed indifference. He went on to other subjects, but came round to the ship again, showing that he neglected none of its significance.

"And that map or plan, that was lost?"

"I have seen no map or plan," said Margaret firmly.

He pried her with questions, but got nothing further from her. He subsided, content to hide his time.

Margaret entered the prison buildings with a queer feeling of heart-sink. Every corridor, every room. Where she supposed, every cell appeared to be designed to break the souls of those who came into them. Even the men nurses in the hospital seemed, to her sensitive consciousness, to be pitiless gaolers rather than merciful healers. But one spoke to her gently enough and took her over to where her father lay, in a bed beside a fireplace, in which burned a cheerful fire.

"We'd be jolly glad to know how you communicate with him, miss," he said.

"We've been at our wits' end."

She bent over her father. What instinct told him she was there she did not know. He stiffened up his hands and touched her. His excitement was manifest. His poor face strained and convulsed. He clasped her frantically as a man clasps his one leaft of salvation. She signed to him that she knew quite well. He wished to write. She put into his hands a penny note-book she had brought, and a sharpened pencil, used both with avidity and wrote a rapid question:

"Am I in prison?"

There was little use in conveying the tense feeling of relief that coursed his body once. He shuddered. She watched the agony on his face. She seized the forefinger of his right hand and traced letters on the brown sheet that was turned over the brown blanket.

"You are in hospital, well cared for. No harm can come to you."

He seized the pencil again.

"End of everything. No hope. That money lost. Must always be blind. Priest of Kamin, I will be sorry if you miss and cure, but can't get. Would give all money for it. If could find someone to trust."

She turned the leaf of the paper for him, for her writing was overlapping, and as she did so she met Inspector Birkland's eyes, watching her intently. She knew what that official wanted and expected.

"Shall go mad to dwell in darkness and silence always— that's cure—the priest of Kamin who blinded me."

He reiterated this plaint all over many sheets of paper. Her thoughts were working quickly.

"Could I get the cure?" she asked him by the infinitely slow method of forming letters with his forefinger.

"It is a man's work," he wrote.

"But suppose I could find someone who could do it?"

He answered frantically over many sheets of paper. She tore them out in a sheet in a moment when Inspector Birkland's eyes were off her. She was sitting close to the bed, on a low stool. With one hand she folded the slips of paper and put them inside her shoe under her foot, and then strapped the shoe securely again.

To her father her words were:

"If I do not come again for a long time, you will know that I am doing something to help you."

He started to write again, but she stopped him with a signal as the inspector came across the room.

"Time I looked at what he is writing," that officer said, taking the note-book.

"Hallo, you have torn out some pages."

"I usually do so," she answered calmly.

"It saves confusion, and he has a clean place to write."

"You will please give me those sheets."

"I shall do nothing of the sort. I am not under arrest, inspector."

"Then you may soon be," he retorted, with a flash of anger.

"Very well; make your demands when I am."

"Look here, you are making it worse for him."

"Who could make it worse for him than this?"

"Look here, you must give up those slips of paper."

"Thee are already disposed of."

She showed the fire. He stepped forward hastily. There were ashes of paper among the coals. He stabbed the poker into them.

"Where's that tattered note-book he wrote in when he was in Charing Cross Hospital?" he pursued.

ALL ENTHUSIASM!

THE EDITOR GREETS YOU

Good! I am glad that last week’s story, "The Secret of Beacon Inn," was so much appreciated. Keen approval is unctintingly expressed in the many letters I have received. In selecting Mr. Leslie Charteris' novel for that issue I knew it would maintain the ambition standard which The THRILLER has created, and that it would be received in the same enthusiastic manner as the stories preceding it. I note with interest that some readers commented particularly upon the intriguing née with which Mr. Charteris opened his story, others seemed to be more interested in the breezy personality of Detective-Inspector Smith, and many in the sensational crock element. Apparently every taste was catered for, and it is evident that "The Secret of Beacon Inn" was a complete success, as it rightly deserved to be.

In this week’s issue, the book-length novel, "The Screaming Skull," will be yet another exceptional offer to readers of The THRILLER—a long, complete story by a popular author. To introduce a little novelty into the feature, the author is using a nom-de-plume—viz., Fenton Arnold. Apart from the story being something in the way of a "gift," it will give added interest for readers to endeavour to designate the authorship. I shall be keenly interested to see how many subscribers of The THRILLER give the right name. I can assure you that this writer's name is well known to all readers of thriller stories, though he has not previously contributed to The THRILLER.

Now a little word about our artist, Mr. Arthur Jones, who has illustrated all the stories that have appeared in The THRILLER (with the exception of one) with such dramatic imagination. His work has been deservedly commented upon by readers, who anxiously desire Mr. Jones to be employed every week. It will please you to know that Arthur Jones has been specially retained to work for this paper. Naturally, it is a strain upon him to complete so many illustrations each week, and only in the event of his incapacity will other artists be introduced.

Our serial, "The Trapper," by George Dilnot, is obviously very popular, and many readers express the hope that this story will not conclude for many weeks to come. Unfortunately, the dramatic story of the night-haunts of London cannot last for ever, and as I anticipate it concluding fairly soon, I am arranging for something else to take its place. When I am more certain about the date of the conclusion of "The Trapper," I shall be able to make a definite announcement. Of this you can be certain, the next serial will be written by an author whose name is well known as a best seller.

Therefore, keep a sharp eye upon the announcements in The THRILLER—you will be sure of the excellent stories awaiting publication.

Yours sincerely,

The Editor

Letters to the Editor should be addressed to "The Thriller Office, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4."
"I took it the last day he was there. I carried it home with me and burnt it."

Inspector Biskerton thought a volume of catharsis, but it was a credit to his self-control that he said nothing. In the taxi he asked her why she had burnt it.

"It was my father's suggestion. He had an idea someone might have been looking at it."

The inspector's face was blank.

PHILOSOPHY.

He was that gent with the kind smile that visited your father in the "spitball, miss," said Margaret's lagniappe in the middle of the morning. She had breakfasted, been out and bought a newspaper, and was engaged in searching the columns for any reference to her father's arrest. There was none there. It was evident that the woman was keeping the fact quiet for a bit. She went to the door to meet Mr. Biskerton, who was dressed for philanthropy. He grinned with his teeth pushed out, and then composed his face to a gravity consistent with his errand.

"I have been to the hospital. I know what has happened," he said.

"I am very grieved for you. I ventured to come to offer you my sympathy. I wonder what can be done? It is a great tragedy that he should be snatched out of your care. He will be among those who cannot communicate with him."

Margaret nodded. It was only too true. She thanked her visitor for his solicitude.

"Yes, it was interesting to see how you conversed with him, how he said something to you. I understand his gesture. Can you always write his reading? Since he writes in the dark, is it not often illegible?"

"No, I can always read it," Margaret answered him.

"It is incredible. I am very interested. Have you a scrap of his writing that I could look at?"

"I am afraid not. You see, I destroy it the moment it is finished with."

"Ha! That book he wrote in that was under his pillow—perhaps the police got that?"

"No, I got it. I burnt it," Margaret said.

"Very wise, my dear—very wise," he said, with what she thought was a sigh of relief.

"Poor man! He has suffered. He has paid heavily. Of course you know a good deal about his adventures."

"I know something," she admitted.

"Ha! If you could only turn that knowledge to advantage," he said insinuatingly.

"I don't understand," she answered, looking at him.

But his eyes were turned away, thoughtfully regarding the wallpaper.

"You would like to help your poor father."

"It is my dearest desire."

"Then you will keep from the police what you know."

"I shall. But I am afraid that will not help my father much. He is arrested. They seek to know everything."

"Do they know where the money is hidden?" he asked in a significant whisper.

Their eyes met. He was looking at her with none of the meekness and greasy amiability of the professional philanthropist. There was cunning in his eyes. In her gaze he surprised astonishment.

"Between friends," he said, "nothing need be hidden. I know what is up the Black River. Friends of mine are going with me to get possession of it. You tell us what you know, and there may be some of it for you, that you can apply to the comfort of your poor father when he is released from prison."

"Are you—going—up the Black River?" she articulated, amazement unsteadying her speech.

"It is possible, though the risk is great, and we may not think it worth while," he said cautiously.

"I want to go up the Black River," she broked out.

"You? Not after that plunder?" he exclaimed.

"No. I don't want to touch that," she cried earnestly. "I would not put my hand to get round her enough for that?" asked Stokes irritably.

"I'm coming to it," answered Biskerton, whistling cheerfully. "She's going to join us in the expedition. She's coming to the Black River with us."

"But we don't want anyone else to share," said Finkhill.

"That's just it. She wants no share. She's going for something else. And he went to Captain Frank, said Stokes. "She's bound to know a lot. She perhaps doesn't know enough to go on the expedition or to guide it by herself, but she may know bits of essential matters that we lack. As for her particular...."

"I see," said Captain Frank. "She may have a cure for the old man's blindness, well, I should think that's part of his madness. But that'll be her palaver. We can't afford it. We shall have plenty of our own."

"Yes, I dunno as it's going to be all pie," said Finkhill anxiously.

"We'll look for it all if we all come home deaf and dumb and blind."

"Chuck it, man. You tire me," said Biskerton. "Look here, you'd better go east and hurry up those infernal ship-fitters. We are about ready to go to sea."

Immediatley the inspector's eyes were turned, she slipped the incriminating message inside her shoe.

on it if I found it. It is for something else—something that will cure my father's blindness. There is a witch-doctor up that river who can give me something to cure him.

He suddenly stood up as though he had made a quick resolution.

"You can go with us," he said, "but keep it dark. If the police get an inkling of it, you will be stopped. They'll clap you under arrest on suspicion. Nor must you be seen with me or my partners. The police are the very dickens. I'll communicate with you when we are ready. But are you sure? Is your mind made up?"

"I would start now if I could," she said uneaveringly.

"Righto. We'll do a deal," Biskerton said. And he went out whistling. By circuitous ways he reached the office and found Stokes and Finkhill engaged on some accounts.

"It's all O.K.," he said. "The police didn't get that notebook because the girl burned it. She's all alive. It's my opinion she knows a lot. She can fill in all the blanks we cannot."

"Yes, but will she? How are you going to get round her enough for that?" asked Stokes irritably.

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THE WOMAN PASSENGER.

Known the driving methods of Captain Christmas the a.s.

Malador was quickly made to look ship-shape. It must be confessed that he transgressed a bunch of trade union laws, and that he frightened several worthy workmen into labouring at greater speed than they were accustomed. One or two slipped away at midday and did not come back, but one hung on because he appeared to like working at that speed. At least, he said so.

"I like to keep warm at my job," captain, he said, as he put paint on at a terrific speed. "Hanged if I wouldn't like a job on a ship like this. I'd like to go to sea again."

"There's no job for painters at sea, my lad," Captain Christmas said.

"This craft won't get a lick of paint this war hang back again, if that."

"No, sir. I'm not meaning that. I've been a steward and a cook, and I once did a spell in the stockhold."

Christmas looked at the man favourably, his appearance was that of a man with very yellow, smooth hair, and an angular face that would not be described as ill-looking.

"There's not room here for a cook and a steward as well," Christmas said. "One man's got to do the lot. Are you capable of handling both jobs?"

"Not half," said the man, laying on paint furiously.

"Well, I'm not satisfied with the man I've got," Christmas said. "My owners sent him along. I'll see if I can fire that other one. But how do I know if you can cook?"

"Well, guv'nor—I mean, captain—the best way is to try me. You are living aboard. I'm not particularly pleased with my own lodgings, so if you like I'll stop aboard and cook your breakfast for you in the morning. I can bring my own rations aboard."

"It's a fair offer, my lad, but I can't promise you. It depends what my owners say. But you can come aboard to-night."

"Righto."

Long since this craft had any paint. Hallo, I'm sorry, sir, if I splashed you."
The man, Smith, came aboard that evening and temporarily took possession of the galley of the modest provender Christmas had imposed upon himself. From these materials, plus several penny hurrings and some packets of dried eggs, the painter produced a supper that made Christmas open his eyes wide and give an exclamation. There were fried herring fillets, and there was a cheese savoury. It was quite clear the fellow could cook, and Christmas was impressed. When Finkhill came aboard he mentioned the meal.

"The crew you've sent me seem all right, Mr. Finkhill," he said behind a barrier of heavy tobacco-smoke, "all but that grab-spoiler. The man is mad. Now, I've got the very man. If you insist on that man you've sent me there'll be no comfort on this voyage, and you'll all feel sorry for yourselves. Your partner, Mr. Stokes, doesn't look like a gent who'll care for his Licon burnt and his potatoes under-cooked."

"Same here," said Finkhill. "You sign on this man of yours, if you have confidence in him. Now when can we be ready for sea?"

"The day after to-morrow," said Christmas confidently.

"Well, there's one thing I've got to mention. There's a lady coming with us. We've got to get her accommodation somehow."

"I understand. Well, if it comes to it, I can make shift in the chart-room, and she can have my cabin."

And in intimating to Smith later that it was likely he would be signed on, he mentioned the additional and unexpected passenger.

Smith made no comment. His face was expressionless. But up on deck by himself he was thoughtful.

THE OPEN SEA.

The Matador dropped down river on a misty evening. Margaret saw the lime-green of the lime-house—the mysterious region of Dockland with its strange shapes against the sky—masses of factories and chimney—and on the river forlorn clusters of barges and the looming silhouettes of great ships.

"I've got your berth ready, Miss Radcliffe," said a voice behind her.

She turned to see Smith. He had waited at table during the dinner only an hour or two, and that was her only acquaintance with him. "I am sorry to have been so late in getting it ready, but there's been rather a rush of things to do."

"I should think so, if you are doing the cooking as well as the work of a steward," she said. "I am afraid you must be busy. I really don't expect you to wait on me, you know."

"Oh, it's a pleasure," he said, in a manner that struck her as not being at all the style of a cook-steward. But he appeared immediately to correct himself, for he added ungrammatically: "I like plenty of work, miss. Keeps me 'appy if I haven't time to brood."

He stood looking at her intently. He appeared to have the impulse to say more to her, but he moved away when the skipper hove in sight and disappeared into the galley.

"If everything isn't quite as you'd like it, just let me know, miss," Captain Christmas said with some ceremony, as he passed.

There came up through the saloon sky-light a gust of laughter and the sound of glasses clinking together. The three partners were drinking success to the great venture. Amid the laughter came foul words. She shrieked back a little.

These men, with whom she had been forced by fate into a sort of partnership, were not her sort. They were crooks and potters. She realised now that, from the first, the visits of the man, Biskerton, to the hospital in the guise of a charitable visitor had been merely a ruse to get information from her father, and then that led her to the consideration of how they had got on the scent to begin with. She could only conclude that they would not start on such an expedition as this without ample information, and that led her to the belief that in some way they had come into possession of the plan that was stolen from her father's pocket a few minutes after he landed.

All this convinced her that she was sharing quarters with a crook combination who, in the accomplishment of their design, would not study her interests against their own. For it was quite clear to her that she was given passage with them because they thought she had knowledge of facts that would assist them. Such knowledge as she had must be used sparingly. She had to trade it, giving it out in discreet portions to secure her continued usefulness to them so that her claims to a passage might be maintained.

Her thoughts went back to her father. Would he miss her much? Would he conclude, because she did not visit him, that she did not want to go on the journey to find the stuff to bring him from darkness? Would that belief comfort him in his loneliness? Of his immediate future—she did not think anything would happen to him. Some formal proceedings would be instituted by the police as a matter of course, but he would doubtless be remanded, and, as an accused person unfit to plead, would be placed under surveillance somewhere. Thus she had no need to worry about him in that sense.

The lights were getting fewer now, and there were greater stretches of darkness and a sense of wider water. There was a little lift in the ship as though she smelt the sea.

Down Channel the Matador ran into a blow, and, though she was a handy enough sea-boat, her small tonnage made her pretty lively. In spite of wind and sea Margaret was out on deck early, revelling in the fresh breeze and in the green, running hills of water. Smith came out of the galley and intimated that coffee would be ready in five minutes.

"Will you have it with a biscuit, miss?"

"If you please, We—"

"And served in the saloon?"
look at that skin? We want to get the route in our minds. We don’t want to waste time mucking about when we get there.”

Stokes nodded. He adjusted the saloon lamp and then went to his berth, and presently came back with the piece of crumpled yellow skin, on which was marked the chart and the Spanish script.

“It’s that ju-ju god we’ve got to find,” said Biskerton, putting a forefinger on the queer little caricature of a human shape drawn on the skin. It’s called the god, Kargo.”

“How did you find that out?”

“The girl told me. I’ve got a few bits of information from her while Stokes here has been smelling and you have been swilling whisky. The old man told her, in bits, a good lot of things that aren’t on here. For instance, when we get to the second river—come close and have a look, I don’t want to shout. There may be longer ears on this craft than you’d guess.”

He talked in a low voice of the many details he had obtained and dove-tailed together. The three of them slanted their faces over the skin. Suddenly Stokes lifted his head at a sound above.

“Hades! If that isn’t someone listening at the skylight I’m struck dead myself!” And he jumped to his feet and made for the companion. He came up on deck, but found no one there, although the skylight was open.

At that moment Margaret and Smith were behind the wheel-house. He was standing rigidly against the iron. She was breathing hard, as though she had just undergone great physical effort and was under the stress of fear. They were both listening intently. When the sound of Stokes, cursing under his breath, had subsided into the wash

of the sea, she spoke, in little jerks, as though she laboured under great emotion.

“Why were you listening? What is it you wish to find out? Who are you?” She had found him lying half over the cabin skylight. It was her touching him that had caused him to make the noise that alarmed Stokes.

“I was listening, to add to my stock of information,” he answered. “I’ve found out one thing that relieves me intensely. You are not in with them.”

“But I told you that,” she answered swiftly.

“Did you? Forgive me if—if I was glad to have corroboration.”

“You did not believe me, then?”

“I would believe anything you told me.”

“That might not be wise. I might lie to you if I were desperate and I could gain something by it.”

“My dear, I would prefer to trust you,” he said.

“Then trust me in another sense. Tell me who you are.”

He paused a moment, then whispered in her ear. She took a swift breath, and was silent.

“And while I am telling secrets I’ll add another,” he said slowly. “It may not interest you. If it doesn’t, forget it and think me a fool. I love you. Now I am going before you have time to be angry with me.”

She found herself alone. She went to the rail and looked astern at the foaming water, which seemed to be running out like life—a disappearing pathway that told of journeys done, a road that could not be retraced. Thought, dark as the night, fell about her and submerged her. Suddenly, with a new resolution, she moved away and went to the galley, where she could hear him raking at the fire.

“I want to say this,” she said, in a voice that sounded as though there were a sigh

A gun in each hand, Smith rushed forward, firing rapidly at the gibbering blacks who leapt round the grim sacrificial stone on which Margaret lay.
on every word. "You will not love me when you know who I am."

He chuckled in his throat, as though the idea were a great joke.

"My dear, I know who you were from the very beginning," he said. Her head was inside the doorway. He held her face in his hands. He discovered tears on her cheek as she kissed him.

"But there may be no happiness in it," she said, as she left him.

BLACK RIVER.

Thirty-six hours later the Matador nosed her way over a muddy bar and bore up a wide waterway that was the colour of pea-soup and bore the smell of the A GIFT!

Another 7/6 Novel for

2D.

THE SCREAMING SKULL.

A story of adventure and mystery in the Secret Service

NEXT WEEK

land in its great current. From the mud-bank on each side sprouted palms with the solid green of mangoes filling the background. Over the vast expanse of the equatorial forest floated scarcities of white vapour as the dawn light flooded it, and the river was misty as though ghosts were left over from the night.

"This mist tastes of mud," Captain Christina said. "Pretty filthy stuff. It spells fever of sorts for those who are ripe for that kind of thing. But the sun will shift it.

He went into the bow's himself with head and line and coned the deep-water channel. Now and again he shouted out a change of course to the man at the wheel. There were mud-banks about, stretches of slimy-looking stuff where the great grey and grey logs were stranded. Margaret saw one of these grey logs move, slide off the mud, and take to the water as the steambarrow. It gave her a little thrill when she realised it was a crocodile.

Of sight of habitation there was none, nor of living creatures, save the gruesome reptiles and many birds. Once, close into the bank, they saw the ruins of a dwelling of corrugated iron and thatch, with a broken-down compound and a rotted jetty of tree-trunks sprawling in the mud. It was the melancholy remains of some trader's house.

"Somebody who's given up the job," said Smith to Margaret. "He'll be buried somewhere at the back of there, or perhaps there wasn't anybody burying him. This is a bad country for white men.

"You've been here before?" queried Margaret.

"Not up this river, but I've been on the coast. I've some score in scores."

She thought of her father, who had come up this river. She felt a shuddering dread of what might lie before her now. Smith saw and understood the shadow that crossed her face.

"But we shall not be here long, anyhow," he said. "And I will look after you."

Then twelve hours late Smith was smitten down by sickness, and he went to his berth with a green face and a temperature of 108 degrees.

"He's a local swamp fever," he said to Margaret and to the man who was put on to attend to him. "It's bad while it lasts, but I shall pull through. Give me time. I've been over it before. The cooking will be all sixes and sevens.

"I'll manage that," Margaret said. And she did. She took over the galley, and got a man from the crew to give her assistance under her instructions. And the pressure of work was more or less of what might lie ahead. Not so the three men who had staked so much on this plunder-seeking expedition. The sickness that had come on board terrified at least two of them, and Stokes and Finkhill sweated fear.

"He ought to be landed somewhere," Finkhill said under his breath. "We shall get the infection.

"Landed—where? In the forest, and left for beasts to eat!" said Biskerton scornfully.

"Don't talk like a fool!"

"We're running a risk, anyhow," declared Stokes.

"You'll run a bigger risk if you talk that stuff to the skipper. Oh, yes, we employ him, but he's top-dog while we are aboard. That's the law. And I reckon him up pretty well. His whisky and this climate doesn't agree. You'd better buck up. When the final dash comes you'll want all your guts to keep you going.

"Are you talking to me as well?" asked Stokes.

"I'm talking to anyone it can apply to," answered Biskerton irritably. The climate did not help. The heat, the plague of insects, the inaction, and the threat of an indefinite danger, had an irritating effect on them.

"I look upon that blooming Stewart as a sort of Jonah aboard," Stokes persisted. "A Jonah that isn't going to bring us any luck.

"By about to-morrow or the next day you'll have something more important to think about," Biskerton promised, "We'll be up the second river and well up towards the mouth of the Black River. The ship won't go much higher after to-morrow. The skipper is complaining now that the water is low.

"The river was narrowing. The twisting roots of the mangoes withered and their branches were wriggled from the trees to the water. The forest seemed to be closing in. Why life was flung nothing, save a furtive crocodile here and there, but at night, when they anchored, for it was no longer safe to force ahead in the darkness, they heard many weird sounds coming from the forest. There were yells and shrieks, probably from monkeys, but by no means sure, and more than once the sounds of paddles from the side of the boat reached their ears. They could see nothing, but there was always the shuddering sense of the darkness being populated by dread things.

At last the second river. More and more the waterway began to take on the nature of a tunnel through which the banks came close. The trees hung out further. Here and there creepers, with grey, frilly stuff pendulous from them, leaped the space from the one bank to the other. Still she climbed up, churning the mud from the bottom, ripping away the trails of creeper with her foremast.

During the first night up the second river there came a new sound—a drumming noise that at times might have been low thunder, and then was distinctly a sound of per-

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cessation. It reached Smith's ears as he lay in his bunk.

"It's native devilry, sir," said he to Smith, when that officer was visiting him. "It puzzles me with smoke of the strongest tobacco grown. I've heard that sound before. It's ju-ju, which is another name for magic attached to devilry.

"I've heard of this," said Smith, "but I'm not an adept in Africa before myself. I've fancied for days we have been watched from the jungle. But I've got weapons on board—in case. Shall you be able to take a hand if there is trouble?"

"I'm past the worst, sir. I can shoot, if necessary," said Smith.

In the morning the Matador grounded on a muddy bar, at the mouth of the opening of a tributary stream that wound up like a black sewer, into the dark forest.

"We stop here, anyhow," said Captain to Biskerton. "I'll pull her back and tie her up in the water. But there's the opening to the Black River. That's where you are going prospecting for minerals, eh? Now you'll want a boat, with arms and provisions aboard. How many men will you want?

Four men should be enough. It's a day's pull, I calculate. But the actual work, where we propose to prospect, will be done by ourselves. We don't want the thing shotted about. We want to get our specimens and come away. Catch that idea, skipper?"

"Then you'll be away, say, three days. I'll let out the fires to save coal.

The ship's long boat was thrust outboard and lowered, and she was fitted with all that was necessary.

"I also am going, captain," Margaret said. "The dence you are. I'll tell off a man to look after you, if you like.

"I think what I have to do I can only do by myself," she answered. She had thought to go and tell Smith she was going. Then she changed her mind and looked after what she would need for the journey.

"You are going with us, eh?" said Stokes, as she prepared to descend into the boat.

"You must know I am. What did I come here for?"

"Righto. It's your palaver!"

"Do you think it's worth the risk, any-

how—for you?" Biskerton asked.

"It's worth anything," she answered as she swung down the ladder.

Captain Christina in the boat disappeared up the evil-looking waterway.

"Like a river going direct into hell," he commented, and set about his own job, get-

ting in hand and turning round, ready to descend the river. This promised to be a bigger job than he anticipated. He reversed engine for half an hour and turned the river to soup, but she would not move. And in the end he had to fasten warps to tree-trunks on the bank and put straining on them via the after winch, under the end of the upper deck's sweating work, she was afloat and turned with her nose down the river.

"But may the angels that have pity on poor sailor-men keep enough water in the river so I'll never have to go back to the sea again," he said. He had been so intensely occupied during the day that he had forgotten about the sick steward. He went up to the ship, purposing to go below, when he met that individual, fully dressed, clinging to the door-frame of the companion in a rather shaky manner.

"I thought I'd try if my pins would support me, sir," Smith said. "I've had a gem of a sleep all day. I'm very much on the mend." He was white-faced and hag-

on both deck and below, reached the rail and leaned against it.
you, captain, guessing you would want a hand in the plunder if—"

"By ginger, you’re a sick man, or I’d handle you for insulting me! I’m no dirty thief!"

"Then you’re a servant of thieves."

"By gosh, mister, tell me the whole caboodle!" gasped Christmas. "You’ve got me guessing. And how do I know you aren’t putting over a tale on me? And how do I know you are who you say you are?"

"It’s a right and proper question, captain. I’ll show you my authority—my papers. Then I’ll tell you my story from end to end."

"Stop a bit, I’ll give you a drink. You look pretty rotten."

"No, wait a bit. I’ll have food directly. I believe that’s what I’m ready for."

HADES!

From the vague darkness of the forest came the queer drumming noise that was sometimes like distant thunder, and sometimes like the weird mechanisms of a menacing barbarism, not wholly human, but compact of devilish influences from the nether world.

"Listen to that!" groaned Galloway. "It sounds satanic. There’s diabolic work going on somewhere! She’s out there! Do you wonder I’m half-crazy with apprehension?"

"She’s got men with her. I don’t know that you’ve got much to worry about. Those fellows being crooks won’t make any difference to them making a scrap of it if they are attacked."

"Yes, I dare say you are right. But I feel like starting after them. I am afraid, skipper. I’d mad with fear."

"You can’t do anything, my lad. You couldn’t pull an ear. And if you could—if I came with you and took every man we’ve got, what could we do in the darkness? Besides, we’d look a lot of fools."

Christmas argued reasonably. Galloway admitted it.

"I know I’m all nerves, captain. Something is dragging at me. I feel she needs me. It’s as though she were gone into hell and were calling to me for aid."

"Don’t forget there are drunken men with guns there," said Christmas, with matter-of-fact sense. "If any of those nigger drummers try to weigh in with any funny business, there’ll be some sudden lead-poisoning handed to them."

"I think you are right, captain. I am sure you must be right. But—"

"You must sleep," Captain Christmas said. "I’ll give you a pill out of the

As Smith drew level with the ship’s long boat, he saw three men in the stern. Each one appeared to be in terrible agony, his hands clasped to his eyes.
Cackling like monkeys, the blind natives were upon her. Gasing with terror, she shrank back as one hideous creature laid hands on her.

"I'm good enough to go, captain. At any rate, I'm going," Galloway said twenty-four hours later. "I'll take that light dinghy. I can pull it up the river at speed."

"I'd go with you myself," Christmas said, "but I've got my duty to the ship. I can see we are being watched day and night. If the ship were overwhelmed in a surprise attack we'd all be in queer street."

"I guess I can handle myself what I have to do," said Galloway. And he set about preparing his own little expedition. His strength had come back to him amazingly, yet his features looked strained, as though he were working on pluck more than stamina. It was pretty near sunset when he started, but he said he would welcome the coolness, and that he would work better in the night. But he had not reckoned on the density of the darkness up that grim, seaver-like river.

"It's own brother to the infernal Styx," he said when he had been pulling a while. Half the time the trees met overhead, so that he was roofed in and the sky was hidden, and no light of stars could reach him. Dark curtains of creepers hung down so that often he was entangled in them, finding his head and neck and sometimes his arms netted about with matted growth that he had to blindly cut at with a knife before he could be free. And then sometimes he drove his boat into the side or into beds of water-weed, and more than once he found he had left the main stream and was navigating through drowned forest.

He thought this night journeying would be cool. Instead, it was hot with an

s u f f e r i b l y c l a m m y h e a t t h a t m a d e t h e p e r s p i r a t i o n p o u r f r o m h i m. A l l a b o u t h i m b r o o d e d t h e c e e l t h r e a t o f t h e m y s t e r i o u s f o r e s t. T h e f o o t d e t a i l s m e l l s h a l l o w n t o h i s n o s t r i l s. T h e r e w e r e o c c a s i o n a l s h i r k s f r o m t h e f o r m e l s s h a d d e s k e t c h, a n d a l w a y s t h e t h r e a t e n i n g m u r m u r — t h e b o o m i n g o f t h e d r u m s o f d o o m.

In the end he found himself hemmed in on all sides by trees—trunks evidencing that he had missed the main waterway and was in a tangle of the forest, so he waited till daylight. When at last the grey light of dawn filtered through the roof of leaves he was able to find his way back through the ghostly curtains of creepers to the main waterway, and here he put his back into the work and forged ahead.

Hour after hour he sweated at the work. Once when he paused to disentangle the forepart of his boat from a clumping river-plant he was attracted by a sound he had listened. It was the noise of dipping oars. He could see nothing, for the river twisted ahead of him, and a shaggy creeper festooned down from bank to bank at the bend, trailing its lowest twigs in the water. The sound came nearer. He waited, on the edge of expectation. And then he saw the prow of a boat break through the creeper—the ship's long-bark and four seamen stripped to their waists, pulling at the oars.

There were other figures in the boat. He pulled over to greet them, his eyes seeking only one figure. He saw three men, all doubled up curiously, but there was no sign of Margaret. He shouted as he pulled alongside.

"Where is Miss Radcliffe?"

"She's not here, steward," answered one of the seamen.

"What do you mean?" he cried. "Why is she not with you? Why have you left her behind?"

The same seaman answered: "She went off on her own, and she didn't turn up again. We couldn't find her! We've got enough man power. We've got three blind men on board.

"What's that?"

His eyes turned to Stokes and Finkhill, who were squinting through their eyes, and to Biskerton, who was scooping up water from the river with both hands and dashing it in his face. It was the latter's voice that answered him.

"We're blind—the three of us," he cried in an agonised voice. And, as though he were too desperate to try to conceal anything: "We were at the ju-ju idol in the forest by the river and something happened. Something—came out—out of the trees—powdery stuff flung at us. It hurt. Night seemed to come suddenly. We were blind."

"I heard 'em yell," broke in the seaman. "I found 'em staggering about as though they were blind drunk."

"Only blind," cried Finkhill, raising slobbering morn and showing for a moment eyes that were set amid puckering, inflamed skin.

"Says I. But where is Miss Radcliffe?" cried Galloway in a hoarse, broken voice.

"'Haven't we got enough?" bellowed Stokes. "Could we wait for her?"

"You've deserted her, you crooks!"

"We'll come back," said the seaman. "We'd better take these guys to the ship. Maybe the skipper will know what to do with 'em."

"Yes, go!" And Galloway, with a face of a man who has looked into Hades, started up the river.

There are agonies that may be felt and so understood, but not conveyed in words, because words are feeble things. Galloway suffered sheer torture as he pulled on the oars. At first a sort of panic got him so that he spent his strength so prodigally of his body that his body was unequal to the tasks his furious spirit would have driven out of it, and he came to an agonised stop, gasping for breath, every muscle and sinew quivering in his body.

He conquered his panic. He tried to think clearly what he had to do, how best to conserve his strength. He tried to rid himself of the fear that she was in dreadful danger, perhaps facing the torture that had broken the man at home who was deaf and dumb, and blind. He knew that if he let himself believe this was possible, his own mind would break down and all the strain. Indeed, at times he doubted his own sanity. Through the screen of diabolical forest he saw foul visions that set him biting his lips till he found blood on his face—that started him madly pulling at the oars till he collapsed in exhaustion.

The time went on unrecorded. It was to him just an unmeasured period of hours. He lost his way one time and got up side channels away from the main stream, and only discovering his mistake when his prow drove into swamp.

Up the sinister, swirling river, he toiled hour after hour, that terror of it claiming like the ocean fastening on a drowned man. Towards evening he was working mechanically like an automaton, a man lacking the power to think or to hope, only dimly conscious that he was searching something.

Some sort of reasoning nudged at his senses. There was food in the boat, and for a long time he had not eaten. In an ex-hausted state he was in fact in face of a possible emergency. He crammed food into his mouth and washed it down with tepid water from a flask. Strength came with the food and more hunger. He was ravenous. He ate and kept the boat moving at the same time. His whole body seemed to respond to the food. He was lifting the boat powerfully through the water.

When daylight winked out, there rose from the gloom the sinister drumming noise, with its maddening monotony and its diabolical significance. It boomed out of the forest, time-honoured song of doom. Of a sudden it was answered from a spot near at hand—quick, vibrant notes merging one into another.

He swung round as though something had hooked into his nerves. He suddenly saw—what he had not been able to see before—a glowing light hovering over the trees, no great
distance away. In the same instant he saw a break in the angle of the forest—a piece of bank flattened down into a landing-place, and a dug-out canoe drawn up on the mud. The opening widened into a lane which led away somewhere.

This was the place he had to look for! He pulled his boat round and drove it at the mud. In the instant that the keel passed softly over the slime there arose, from among the trees where the light gleamed, an animal-like cackling, broken by peals of insane laughter. And then there stabbed through this sound a scream that was like the despairing utterance of a soul in torment. It was the voice of a woman.

He leaped ashore and ran down the lane towards the light.

INTO THE INFERNO.

MARGARET, from the first, was under no misapprehension about the risk that beset her enterprise. When she came ashore with Stokes, Biskerton, and Finkhill, her presence was forgotten, and she was instantly left to her own devices. She lost sight of the three men within a minute. They went up a scarcely discernible track in the jungle, Stokes, with the skin chart in his hand, feverishly leading.

So she was left alone, although through the screen of her own body and the river she could hear the voices of the seamen in the boat. She was free to pursue her own work, and she wanted nothing better. She went along this broken jungle lane, whose origin was clearly a wild-beast track to a drinking-place, her courage keyed up to the utmost limit, every nerve and fibre of her strained to the last notch of resolution.

Her heart went back to a place in her mind—she herself knew what it was, the details of things she must look for—the precautions she must observe—her methods of approach. She had learned it all slowly, word by word, from her father.

Pooke, the high priest of Karmo, the hideous god of the blind, lived in a dwelling of mud and thatch a mile or so away from the idol. Between his dwelling and the dread god was a straight path cut through the forest and marked by posts. Each post top was crowned by a skull. The whitened relics had been owned by men sacrificed to the idol.

"Everyone blinded first," her father had written. "They are blind men who tend the idol. They are blind men who are about him. Karmo is called the blind god, and all who do the hideous ceremonial are also blind, all save Pooke, who has the secret of sight and of blindness. With a touch of the stuff he keeps in his little bottles made of gourds he can make men blind.

"With other stuff he can restore the sight he has taken away. Magic? I don't know. Perhaps he has more knowledge than I. And blindness comes from the trees. Something falls. Men look up, and the poison is in their eye before they know. No man is safe there, because only blind men may come into this territory of Karmo. But a woman may go. A woman, who is only held to be on the level of a beast, is safe.

"Pooke, who is a great, fat elephant of a man, has a host of women waiting on him, tending him and supplying him with food, but the men about him are blind. He is a cunning beast, full of knowledge. He can speak some English, for he has lived on the coast and come in contact with traders. Offer him jewellery, anything you have. But keep a bullet for him in the last event—"

All this ran through her brain like a sound-film going through a projector. It was all so familiar to her, for her mind had held it so long that she could have recited it mechanically and without conscious effort. But here, so near to the fearful place, here on the very ground where her father had been tortured, it all presented a dreadful significance.

Of jewellery she had not much save a wrist-watch, an old-fashioned bracelet or two, and a necklace of imitation pearls. But she had the other thing—a tiny revolver, ready at hand in the leather bag that was hung from her waist and contained the other objects.

She went resolutely ahead, crushing down the fears that gripped at her heart. She came to a pathway cutting across the one she traversed, a dark lane almost in twilight because of the thickness of the growth. She saw pieces of tree-trunk, left and right, driven into the ground as posts. Something white was at the top of each. They were set up at every twenty yards or so, each with its gory decoration, and between one post and another was stretched a rope of twisted creepers.

The reason of it—the posts and the rope—she understood a moment later. She saw four men coming along behind her. They were naked save for loin-cloths. They shambled curiously as they walked along, one following another. They clutched at the guide-rope that stretched from post to post. These men were blind! That was the reason of the rope—to guide them from where they dwelt to the foul idol they served.

Cackling like monkeys, they approached her. She shrank back and remained still, holding her breath, her heart almost still with the clutch of a cold, unnameable fear. One creature stopped suddenly in front of her, and he perceived the strange perfume of her. And he stepped forward with as much sureness as though he could see, and gripped her with his skinny arms.

Her fortune broke down. She gasped in sheer terror. She could not shriek, although every nerve of her body wanted that expression. She could only make a hoarse noise. She looked at the creature's dreadful face. Sightless eyes looked at her. And the puckered skin about them was like the scars around her father's eyes.

The blind men babbled with excitement. They fastened upon her. Their foul hands crawled over her. They pulled at her clothing. Their fingers ran through her hair.

She made a desperate effort to escape, struggling, striking at them with her hands. She bad as much chance as a gazelle in the claws of a lion. She thought of the little weapon in her bag, but she could not get hold of it.

She was hurried along the dark lane, her hands lifted high as though she seemed to grind at her terror. She was hardly sure she was alive. The horror fastened upon her so that this seemed not real, but a nightmare straight out of Hades itself. A few yards further, more blind men were met. A gable of words passed between them and her captors, and more leathern hands were passed over her.

Again she was hurried forward, with the whole gang of blind creatures about her. The semi-darkness of the lane was broken by light ahead. There was an opening, a

As the big black lumbered threateningly towards her, Margaret fired. Roaring like a maniac, he staggered back.
clearing in the jungle, and in the middle of it a shapeless, warren-like construction of mud and thatch. A distance away were small huts. Pig drums chattered, sprawled and crept among them like great insects crawling among festering filthiness. The great hut of mud suggested a gigantic wattle and daub building with many entrances.

She was rushed to one cave-like opening, where a crowd of women lay on the ground. They rolled away as the mob of blind men staggered, shouted, struggled desperately, and then she was carried inside, gripped in the foul hands that were all about her.

She was in gloom—in darkness. She could see nothing. Her feet, момент момент, struggled desperately, and then she was carried inside, gripped in the foul hands that were all about her.

She saw first a glimmering glare of a fire on the floor, with a bubbling pot over it. This threw a little illumination, which merged into the light of the day that came through a hole in the roof. A circle of mud walls enclosed her.

There were objects—shapes—all sorts of dimly-seen things. The mob could not identify, half hidden in the shadows. One of the shapes moved and made a sound. It rose up and showed a human form—was it entirely human? It was large, colossal in size, a great, fat, bellied, black creature more suggestive of a gorilla than of any human man.

The thing moved towards her on legs like pillars. The nose made was like the gurgling of a boiling kettle. Then the mouth opened cavernously and laughed, and she saw that truly this was some sort of a man.

She was shocked into a kind of course when from the fleshy lips came talk in words she understood—Portuguese.

"You are Psoko?" he mouthed gutturally.

"You white girl come see me, he-he-he! This very much great. You from ship on big river. Know all 'bout that. And fool white man plenty too much like for them, he-he-he! I chop now. You have chop with me, white girl?"

He dragged her with a huge paw over to where he had been sitting, and she saw he was feeding from a calabash which contained some stew-like stuff, meat with grain among it. A distinct shape of a small hand poked up from it. The sight gave her a shudder. It was probably the limb of a monkey, but she was not sure. He squatted down and thrust a huge paw into the stuff, shovelled it up, and held it in his mouth, and invited her to do the same.

She shook her head dumbly, all the while struggling to fight down her terror. At last she found her voice.

"You are Psoko?" she gasped, in a voice that was little better than a whisper.

"Oh, aye; you heard of—eh?"

"I come a long way to see you, Psoko," she said, recovering her voice as she used it.


He filled his mouth with the chop from the calabash, and while food oozed from the corners of his lips, continued to talk.


"Your name is known in England, Psoko. I come a long way to see you, because you are great man and very wise," she said, following his line of conversation.

"Very wise," he echoed, with his mouth full. "Know more ju-ju magic than any man."

And to prove his assertion he pulled out from under a skin a very battered oldgramophone, which he proceeded to wind up. A worn-out record scratched by a worn-out needle emitted a lamentable noise that was only faintly recognisable as a jazz band tune, and during the performance of it he sat back with an ecstatic look on his beast-like face. The composition of the horrific and the ridiculous.

"Ju-ju fine," he said, spluttering food from his lips. "I smash heads of ten men other day with that tune playing. You want ju-ju?"

"Yes. You can make men blind, Psoko. And you can make blind men to see. I want your ju-ju to make a blind man see."

His voice altered. His whole manner changed. She had never seen an evil fellow—great ju-ju man. I want the ointment that can give sight."

"From England! Ugh, I seen plenty ship come from there. What you give for stuff cure blindness?"

She held out her wrist-watch, which he grabbed eagerly.

"I know him—tik-tak. What else?"

She pulled out her bracelets and other trinkets.

"Oh, aye, but what else you got in bag?"

"No—not that!"

She stepped back, holding the little man, who had come armed with him. He paused and looked at her cunningly.

"You no can use that?" he said.

She got the courage of desperation. "It is my ju-ju," she said signally. "I can use it quicker than you can snap your eye, Psoko."

She spoke without a quiver in her voice, though deep down she was desperately afraid that things were not going as she wanted. But then he opened his great mouth in a laugh again, and he changed so much that his flesh lifted and fell as though he enjoyed a mighty joke that was for his own alone.

"Yes, I show you what you want. I give you, pra-ra. And he staggered to his feet and took hold of a cord that was fastened to a peg by the mud wall. He held suspended to the roof a wicker basket. He lowered the basket and took off the cover. It contained scores of little packets wrapper in skin and fastened with a string. And there was a great number of little dried gourds used as bottles, with stoppers in their narrow necks, and tied up with strips of skin, some of which were still wet, as if to differentiate them. He took one of each out and held them in his palm.

"One make man see; one make man not see," he said, with a malevolent grin. "And you see what I give for that." He held up the packet, pointing to the bubbling pot on the fire.

"I want make man see," she des- should believe.

"You take both," he said, still enjoying the grim humour of it.

"Which is which?"

"You find out."

"But I want to make my father see! He is already blind!"

"Why he blind, eh? Him blind up here in this country?"

"Yes," she answered, making a false step. "You blinded him."

"Oh!" he murmured, with a soft snarl, like a leopard that was about to spring. "That blind man here. Got away, eh? Not stay for worship palaver." He snapped his teeth together like a trap and looked at her. Her eyes were wide, but no white girl. Hey, you got skin like ivory. Hey, you got hair like gold. What you want struggle?

He chuckled her in a grasp that made her heart leap with terror. He enorted into her face like a wild beast.

She pulled the trigger of her little revolver without taking aim, knowing only his great bulk was before it. She gripped her shoulder and roared like a murderous maniac. She fired again and fell away, helpless, and collapsed, a mountain of flesh, over the calabash of food.

She stepped swiftly across to the basket that had contained the cat's body, and was fpert into her bag, and darted for the reed curtain. In the darkness beyond she crashed into a mud wall, but staggered on while the bellowing roar of the wounded monster followed her. She reeled into an obstruction, and arms grasped her. She fired blindly. There was a shriek, and she was free again.

She bore on, and saw daylight. She rushed out into the glaring light, and found terror giving her wings. And so to the dim lane where the white skulls leered at her as she fled. Voices followed her, but they gradually grew fainter. Narrowly avoiding a troop of blind men, so enchanted by the wandering about, she reached the track that led to the river.

She arrived at the muddy landing—to find the boat gone.

THE RESCUE.

She could not believe her eyes. She looked at the empty place with growing horror. She thought she had come to the wrong place, but then she saw in the mud the print of shoes pointing outwards. And there was the old dug-out native canoe, lying in the mud, that she had noticed on landing day, to love her.

Her heart fell. For the first time her courage failed. She sank down on a fallen log and tried frantically to think what she could do. She gripped at her failing courage until she had lost all confidence. The boat would come back. Smith would see to that, and she was sure Captain Christmas would back him up.

So she settled down to wait, and the day stole on; and, because she was waiting, the sweating horrors of the place settled on her soul. Occasionally she heard sounds of voices inshore, screams and yells that may have been animal or human. And there were queer sounds in the trees above her. She felt as though eyes looked at her from the branches above. She grew frightened.

How the last dreadful thing happened she did not know. She had dozed with fatigue. She broke into sudden wakefulness to find
hands on her. She screamed and looked into a blinded face horribly scarred. The face gaped at her and carrion eyes were filled with the hands of gripped her. She tried to break away and found herself surrounded by clutching hands. She was in the grip of the blind men who had come to the river for water and had come upon her.

She struggled desperately. She succeeded in getting her revoler out, but dropped it. She was borne off her feet and hurried away down the lane she had come.

She never came to consciousness, as though the last link in the fine chain of her endurance had snapped. Her brain throbbed into life after an unrecorded blank. On her ears fell a drumming noise. Voices gabbled about her right hand had come, but there was a light of a fiend somewhere behind her. It threw a glow on a great black stone—figure—a misshapen caricature of a human body with a head that had no eyes! The idol, Karmo, the blind god!

She did not move, because she could not. She was bound fast to a stone. With a sudden dreadful realisation she knew she was fastened there for sacrifice to the god. A mad terror pierced her between the idol and herself. He was swinging a club in the air. He went on, and another followed, similarly armed, thrusting the air like a cloud. In a moment of swift horror she realised that she was the sport of these blind priests. They were playing a ghastly form of blindman’s buff, starting from a point and trying to kill her with a blind club.

She heard their insane cackling laughter. She had no more control over herself, and she shrieked.

That shriek should have been fatal—a guide to the next blind killer, but miserably chance put a root of a tree in the path of him and he tripped up. Half a minute later there was a crashing explosion of a pistol not fifty yards from her. She turned quickly, and another. She saw two blind men fall forward on their faces, clawing the ground with their hands. Another collapsed at her feet. A figure rushed between her and the idol.

"It’s I—Smith," he said, firing once again.
"I mean Galloway. I’ve got a boat for you!"

She did not answer. She lay over limply. He cut the cords about her and carried her to the boat, but she showed no signs of life. He thought she was dead, and he had the momentary impulse to go back and kill some more of those blind fiends and make a sufficient sacrifice to the blind god. But then he thought he would come back and do that after he had taken her to the ship.

He spoke to her occasionally, as he pulled away downstream, but no answer came. Sometimes he cried out to her in desperation, begging her, if she loved him, to reply. But there came no response. He was convinced that he was taking to the ship a dead woman.

Sometimes when he implored her to speak there came mocking replies from the forest—peals of demoniac laughter that may have come from apes or men, but seemed to aim to be the voice of fiends from Hades. And always there was the diabolical drumming, now faint, now loud, like a perpetual symphony from the infernal. Once he got up in the boat and cursed aloud and shook his fist at the forest. He sat down on the thwart trembling.

"I’m mad myself!" he muttered.

At dawn Captain Christmas, with four men pulling the long-boat, met him.

"I thought I might be wanted," Christmas said. "How are things?"

Galloway’s face was enough answer. "I think they’ve killed her," he said.

"Nothing of the sort; she’s very much alive!" the skipper exclaimed.

Margaret was moving. She was struggling into a sitting position. She got up and looked into Galloway’s face.

"You—you saved me!" she exclaimed.

"Yes—I thought it was too late!"

"I—I think it was a pretty near thing," she answered tremulously. "I am afraid I collapsed. I did not hold on as well as I should, and I—"

She began to feel with frantic haste for the leather bag that was suspended to her waist. She had dropped her revolver from it. Just for a moment she had the ghastly fear that the bag might be quite empty. She found what she sought, the two little stopped gourds.

"What have you got there?" Galloway asked.

"What I went to get."

"By jing, you have a story to tell!" exclaimed Captain Christmas.

"I have a story I would rather forget," she said with a shudder.

"Do those gourds hold the stuff that is a cure for the blindness?"

"One does, but I don’t know which one," she answered in a weak voice.

"Because there are three blind men on board," Christmas said.

She looked at him with ashrift as he told the story in a dozen words, and she hastily put the gourd-bottles back into her leather bag.

The THE CURE.

For eight hours Galloway lay on deck under the poop awning, deep in a sleep of utter exhaustion. Then Christmas waked him.

"She’s improving finely," he said. "She’ll be all right in a bit. It’s just a case of going all out and collapsing under a strain that she had not enough strength to bear. You’ve known what strain this is, yourself."

"By Heaven, yes!" Galloway murmured.

"But I don’t know all that happened to her," Christmas continued, and I’m not asking. And if you’ll take my tip you’ll not press her memory—either. Some things are best forgotten. Things can happen in this country that white men can’t understand, and there’s more in this ju-ju than European philosophy has ever dreamed of. This is a country of devils."

"But is it devils, captain?—I mean, is it supernatural, or just infernal trickery of some sort?"

The digging before the idol ceased. In mortal agony, the crooks eloped their hands over their eyes, torn with a pain that nearly drove them mad.
“The Screaming Skull”?
What was the explanation of the terror that it inspired in all who saw it?

You like real thrills, excitement and rapid action? Good! Then you will revel in No. 11 of

The THRILLER
ON SALE SATURDAY NEXT.
she was told, one of the guards contains stuff used for blinding the poor wretches that fall into the priests' hands. So it looks as though some careful experimentations were needed."

Galloway nodded gravely.

"But I've got to run the risk, anyhow," he said. "It's my job. I've got to go up to that idol to get the stuff that's there—oh, the plunder that Samuel Radcliffe buried."

"By ginger, I don't like that idea. Hallo, what the—"

A cry fell on their ears—the girl's voice. She was protesting loudly, violently. Her cry ended in a shriek. There was the sound of a door banging, moving feet and men's voices below. Christmas leaped towards the companion stairs, with Galloway following unsteadily at his heels. They both stopped at the top, for half-way down was Finkhill. He was holding to the rail with one hand, and with the other he was holding one of Margaret Radcliffe's gourds, from which the stopper had been torn away. It seemed that he had already applied some of the contents to his eyes, for they were wet, and a yellow, gummy-looking substance was trickling down his face. He was frantically scrambling up the stairs, with Stokes in pursuit.

"My share! Let me have my share!" Stokes was gasping.

"Wait a bit! I've got to soak my own eyes first, and then—oh, heaven!"

At the top of the companion stairs Finkhill stopped, his face becoming distorted, as though he were seized with the most diabolical agony. He swayed, clapping one hand to his eyes, and clenching the un-stoppered gourd to him with the other. And he cried out a jumble of incoherent words that ended in a shriek. A second later Stokes, stumbling up the stairs and guided by his voice, came upon him and seized him from behind.

"My share of the stuff, you thieving hound! I got it, and you snatched it from me—"

He clutched Finkhill. The latter, in a frenzy of agony, tried to break away. There were two seconds of frantic struggle when Finkhill made a blind shift with the other clinging to him. They banged up against the rail, over-balanced, and, before anyone could put out a hand to stay them, tumbled over and splashed into the river like jettisoned cargo.

They fell beside a boat, and Christmas was in the boat long before the ripples had died down, but they sank like lead, and not a head came up above the water again. And there followed swiftly other splashes from the muddy bank, and streaks on the surface indicating the movement of shapes beneath the water. Where the two men had disappeared came up bubbles. And some of them were red.

"I think," said Christmas to Galloway, "you had better go below and tell Miss Radcliffe what has happened. There isn't a doubt that he picked the wrong gourd."

DESPERATION.

"I'm part of my job," Galloway said stubbornly, "and I'd better go and get it done."

"But everything failed, so why should you succeed?" Margaret declared, at the end of a long argument. "Suppose you, too, are blinded?"

"I must escape it. I am forewarned, anyhow. In case I am unlucky, how much of the cure have you?"

"Enough for two. But half of it is for my father—"

"Yes, of course. Anyhow, whatever happens, I've got to go through with this. That buried plunder has to be delivered where it belongs. You must see that."

Fighting savagely, they crashed against the ship's rail and pitched over the side into the river.

"I don't see anything of the sort," Margaret said.

"The risk is enormous."

"Oh, who are you to talk of risk?" he said. "Put it to yourself. Could I go back to the Yard with the story that I was too frightened to attempt to do less than you have done?"

"I don't want you to go," she answered, with the illogical unreason of love. But, he went, because there was no way out, and because, as he had stated simply, it was his job, which is the reason for a good many heroisms performed in the world by men who would laugh at the claim to be heroes.

"He's business-like enough, and a capable lad," commented Christmas after Galloway had departed, "and he may get through. Four men have gone with him to do the pulling up and down river, but the digging at the idol in his palaver alone. He won't have it any other way. He wants all the risk. Well, it's a pity, in a way, that he's a detective. Good cooks are scarce and useful, and if he comes back with his eyes—"

"Oh, don't, captain! I can't bear it!" Margaret gasped. And she went to her cabin to look at the gourd of precious stuff, and wondered if truly there was enough here to cure more than one of the mysterious blindness. She locked it away in her valise as she heard the scuffling noise of Biskerton feeling his way up the companion-stairs. Most of the day he sat on deck, scarily speaking, although occasionally he muttered a despairing philosophy to Christmas.

"I'd sooner be with Stokes and Fink," he said. "What's the good taking me home a mere useless log? Who's going to take care of me? Well, I can confess to one or two misdemeanours that no one knows anything about that will make the police take care of me. Perhaps I shall join old Radcliffe. But I'd sooner join Stokes and Fink. And in the direction of the river he turned eyes that did not see anything."

That day passed, a night and another day. That night Margaret sat late on deck, because it was too hopeless to expect to sleep, but when midnight was passed she went at last to her cabin. She struck a match and put a light to the swinging candle, but with the first glimmering of light she saw that something dreadful had happened. On her bunk her valise was
lying, torn open at the lock by the insertion of some powerful lever. Its contents were scattered about the bunk. The sealed gourd was gone!

For a moment she looked about the berth with despairing passion. She needed someone prompting. She ran out into the alleyway, and met Captain Christmas coming down into the saloon. She blundered out news of her discovery in a howl.

"Come with me," said Christmas swiftly.

They went into Biskerton's berth. They found him sitting up in his bunk. He was looking at them open-eyed.

"I can see, captain," he said. "I took the blooming risk. I'd had a gyrate on the top of this island. I think I should have followed him. But the stuff is right. It may be ju-ju magic, and I don't pretend to understand it, but I'm beginning to see, and my sight is improving every minute!"

"Have you used it all?" screamed Margaret.

"No, there's half of it left," said Biskerton, pointing to the gourd, which was presented up as a shoulder above his bunk.

"There'll be enough for your father."

She snatched hold of the gourd and ran out of the cabin, murmuring a desperate prayer that she might save her father, and needing it. She reached her berth, and through the open port heard the sound of ears, and a moment later the sound of a man's voice hulling the ship. She heard the bump of a boat on the ship's side.

She felt a paralysis of fear upon her. Her joints seemed to give way. Her heart sank. She forced herself to movement. She came out on deck and saw Galloway standing there in the light of a deck-lamp, carrying a metal case of some sort.

"Dear!" she cried, running to him. "Are you all right?"

"I've succeeded," he said. "It's in hundred-pound notes, all packed in a case."

"But you?" she gasped.

"I can hardly see anything," he answered in a level voice. "I found myself going blind on my way back. It's getting worse every minute."

CIVILISATION.

The little Matador went down the evil river to the sea, bearing the most poignant human drama that ever Fate produced on so small a stage. It was Captain Christmas who in bald, unsoftened, sea- man-like words told Galloway the position.

"I'll tell you straight, my lad," Christmas said, as the latter sat in the chart-room, "she's got a terrible choice to make that you've got to help her with. It's not going to be easy for you. If you remain blind, your life is done, and you can't think of marrying her, not even if she's willing. And though you might argue— and it would be reasonable enough for you to do it—that it was economically sounder for you, a man in your full vigour, to have your sight given back to you, rather than the same restored to a man who in other respects is no cleverer, and whose usefulness in life is ended, you are not going to do it."

"He is mad, too," Galloway said. "What is sight to him? While to me—but you are right, skipper. She's got to take the stuff home to her father. What remains is his share. I can only reckon that Biskerton has got my share. I shall tell her, even as she loves me, that she is to take the stuff to her father."

"Has she offered it to you?"

"No, but I seem to sense things. She has talked of her father. She has wondered if her father cares for her happiness. Women do strange things for love. She has even said she would dare going to the priest of Karmo again. I said I would sooner jump overboard at sea than she should think of it."

"That's the right view," Christmas said. "You've got to play the game. I'll tell you what I'm going to do. When we get out of this river I'm going to call at the coast town of Baloa. There is a doctor there, a friend of mine, who has been on this coast longer than any white doctor who takes his quinine pill every day. He knows tons about this country. I'm going to hear what he says."

"You're a good sort, skipper. Where's Biskerton?"

"In his cabin. He's all right, but he doesn't come out much. He prefers to keep to himself. Hash! She's at the door."

Margaret came in, and Christmas went out as she entered. Galloway looked up at her blindly, with a smile that she could not help knowing was forced.

"My dear, I am getting resigned already," he said.

"No, you are not," she answered him brokenly. "It is impossible that you should be."

She put her hands on his face and stroked her fingers round his eyebrows.

"Oh, my love, what am I to do? Perhaps my father will understand. Perhaps he will think of my happiness. Sight to him now cannot be so great a thing, but for you—and for me—"

And then a dreadful temptation came into her mind.

"He would never know I had succeeded in getting the stuff—"

"But you would know and I should know always," he answered huskily. "Happiness is not to be got that way. His arms were round her. He felt her tears on his cheek.

"And, besides, there may be another way. The skipper knows a doctor at Baloa."

Dr. Angus Ferguson, of Baloa, specialist in African diseases, received Captain Christmas with all joy.

"Mon, I'm glad tae see ye," he said.

"But ye're looking drawn and haggard. Are ye seriously sick?"

"No," said Christmas, "I'm only worried.

"In that case, and if ye're just hame- sick, I'll introduce ye to a voice from London. I've got a six-valve set that'll put the best limpid English straight from Savoy Hill that you've ever heard. Not that I wadnae rather hear a voice from Edinburgh talking Scottish. Listen, mon; I'll hear Big Ben. Ah, no, it's a minute or twa too late. Ye'll hear the news from London town then."

He switched on, and from the loud-speaker there boomed the fag-end of some Parliamentary news, and then:

"Among the general news is a report of the Bank of England. I've got the most notorious absconding bank-manager, Samuel Radcliffe, who four years ago robbed the Southern Joint Bank of one hundred thousand pounds. He was discovered in London, dead and dumb and blind, and—"

"I'm going!" roared Christmas, springing to his feet.

"What's the matter, mon?"

"That news," gasped Christmas, c ramming on his hat, "is going to make all the difference to two lives! Come along with me if you want to see a miracle."

Africa, the land that still contains so many mysteries, lay astern. In the chart room sat Galloway and Captain Christmas, reading them on the table lay the crumpled piece of skin that Samuel Radcliffe brough to London.

"It's the queerest chart I've ever seen. Christmas commented. "And you say it's human skin."

"It was torn from the back of Samuel Radcliffe himself," Galloway said.

"By ginger!"

"You will notice the script is written in Spanish. When I was ashore in Balboa Dr. Ferguson introduced me to a Spaniard who had been up-country with Radcliffe. It was this man who helped to hide the plunder to begin with. It was he who drew the chart and wrote the directions in Spanish (because he knew no other tongue) on Radcliffe's back in an indelible native stain. This, they judged, was the only safe way of keeping a record of the route up the river. You can guess that the priests of the ju-ju idol, subsequently capturing Radcliffe, tore the skin from his back. How Radcliffe, in escaping, got hold of the piece of skin, can only be guessed. There is a doctor at Charing Cross Hospital who noticed the pink scar on the old man's back, and will be interested to see this story."

"Does she know this?" asked Christmas.

"No, I shall not tell her. She has enough to forget."

"You'll make her forget."

"I hope so."

"What's going to happen to Biskerton?"

"From this affair, nothing. He's failed. I've succeeded. I fancy he put his last penny into this expedition, so he'll get his punishment."

THE END.

("The Screaming Skull" is another novel-length story of powerful thriller fiction by a star author. Appearing in next Saturday's issue of The THRILLER. Order your copy today.)
THE MYSTERY OF THE JAPANNED BOX

Problem No. 10 of—BAFFLERS!

The Popular Detective Story Game.

been in the room during Lorian's absence, as had Ada Gowans, Ethel Smith, and May Jones, maids, but these servants were of good character, and denied all knowledge of the matter.

For two hours the entire household was in the throes of an excited search on the theory that the jewel had been accidentally lost. But at last Lorian was compelled to face the truth—someone had taken it.

To call in the police on so obviously an "inside job" was revolting to Lorian. Absolving everyone from blame in the matter except himself, and insisting that he must have spilled it from the box, he forbade further discussion of the subject, and with remarkable sang-froid swept his guests into a game of bridge.

It would "turn up," said Lorian.

Afterwards, in his own room, with the japanned box before him, Lorian, who was something of an amateur detective, examined the box carefully. Its surface was highly polished. On the outer rim of the inside of the cover he covered a remarkably clear thumbprint, which he believed was not his own. He sprinkled it with the white powder used to bring out fingerprints on black surfaces, and found it belonged to someone else. Then he set the box carefully aside.

Lorian knew that none of the company had laid hands on the jade when he had first showed it to them. He reasoned—and subsequent events justified his reasoning—that this must be the thumbprint of the thief. But whose thumbprint? The innocent ones must not suffer suspicion. He resorted to a stratagem.

Lorian put the japanned box carefully away in a wall safe. He then took from his Oriental collection a nest of small black lacquered boxes, whose surfaces were even more tell-tale than the jade case. The following morning Lorian contrived to exhibit to each guest and each servant a different one of the lacquered boxes. To each person separately he told an attractive story of the history of the box, and got each to test the strength of the apparently fragile sides by squeezing them between finger and thumb of the left hand; for the thief's thumbprint, as placed on the cover of the jewel indicated that a left hand had made it.

Each box, bearing a different thumbmark, Lorian duly secreted in his bureau. When this was done he withdrew to his room and treated the nine small lacquered boxes with white powder. Each of course he had subsequently labelled for purposes of identification.

In the accompanying diagram, you will notice a reproduction of the thumbprint on the lid of the japanned jewel case, and the thumbprints on the nine lacquered boxes.

What do you deduce? The questions to be answered are:

1. Did a guest or a servant steal Stephan Lorian's emerald? (Marks 5).
2. Who was the thief? (Marks 5).

THE RULES.

The rules are simplicity itself. On this page you are given details of Baffler Problem No. 10—there will be another next week. Briefly, you are told a story of a crime and given ALL the clues necessary for its solution. Be your own detective. Read the problem through very carefully, giving consideration to every detail, then try to answer the questions at the end.

Award yourself marks as indicated after comparing your answers with those given on page 28. These answers are printed upside-down so that they may not catch your eye before you have had a chance to test your skill. Remember, it is the sense of your solution, not its exact wording, that counts.

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

The fingerprints of those present on the night of the theft.
INTRODUCTION.

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

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

Estrehan, after embezzling $20,000 of his employers' money, had hit the high spots in the West End, and fallen victim to the wiles of Stella Cliff and Velvet Grimshaw, 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 Grimshaw is murdered under strange circumstances at a West End night club. On his coat is found a wire noose such as is used for trapping rabbits.

This was not the first appearance of the wire noose. It was used in a previous crime by the trade-mark, and Chief Constable Winter, of the C.T.P., is determined to get the mysterious criminal known as the Trapper. The job is given to Detective Martin Wilde.

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

Stella Cliffe again meets Dick Estrehan, but they both fall foul of the Trapper and are found by the police, gagged and bound, in a cellar.

Their conditions necessitates their going to a hospital, where they are interrogated by Wilde. Their information, particularly Stella's, leads him to informally arrest Quentin Thordol.

Later, Wilde hears that Stella, who had been out in the charge of a woman detective, has been shot at. She is not seriously injured, however, and he goes to see her in an infirmary. She tells him her story, and says that the man who fired the shot was—Quenton Thordol.

(Please continue the story.)
of being the criminal who calls himself the Trapper."

"What childish rubbish!" she ejaculated with an asperity that was foreign to her. "Why, Quentin is the last man in the world—— The thing is absurd. What have you got against him?"

A grim smile played on his face at the naiveté of the question, and he wagged his head tolerantly. "A lot, I am afraid," he replied. "Treading on your toes, I dare say. Here we are at Scotland Yard. I am at your disposal, if you would care to continue this talk."

It was at the back of his mind that this meeting had been arranged. If Patricia Langton had not sought him out, he would have had to find her. In her present mood she might be easier to handle than if he had taken the initiative. He had hoped to keep Thorold's friends for a time in ignorance of the fate that had befallen him.

Since, however, this woman now knew, there was no real point in preserving the traditional secretiveness of Scotland Yard. Certainly there was little possibility of any great harm being done. He had even disclosed some portion of his case, in the hope of eliciting an unguarded comment. He did not believe it probable that, in the circumstances, she and her associates would remain idle while their chief was behind the bars. Perhaps she might be courteous enough to give some hint of their future activities.

Although Scotland Yard is always open, night and day, the bulk of its active duties conclude at six in the evening. At that hour, like other well-ordered business houses, it closes down, leaving a skeleton staff to deal with emergencies. The detective office is compelled to sleep at his home, failing special permission, and the whole nine hundred men of the Criminal Investigation Department can be mobilized within half an hour, this is not so reckless as it sounds.

But as Wilde led her within the building, she noted how curiously deserted the place seemed, save for the occasional charwoman they stumbled across, who were here and there pursuing their nightly avocations.

Wilde thrust open a door as they passed along a corridor and addressed the inspector in charge.

"I shall be about for a little, Grey. I don't want to be disturbed."

Patricia Langton settled herself with a quizzical smile as they reached the chief inspector's severely furnished office. She was keen enough to realize something of what was passing in the man's mind. Nevertheless, she was serene and confident that whatever was gained during the interview, the balance would be on her side.

"Well," she said easily, "may I resume my position? What is the case against Quentin?"

He pressed the tips of his fingers together and leaned back in his chair.

"My dear lady, you know perfectly well that if I played the game as I ought, according to the official rules, to refuse to tell you anything. But there are certain things we both know. Why should we pretend to each other? We are on opposite sides. Say it, that I propose to land you in gaol sooner or later. There is nothing personal in that. I have learned this during the interview, the balance would be on your side."

"Well," she said, "may I resume my position? What is the case against Quentin?"

He nodded without comment. She got to her feet.

"May I make one suggestion? I shouldn't be in any hurry to prefer a formal charge, if I were you. For within twenty-four hours I will shoot a bullet through your brain and preposterously wrong you are. A blind and deaf idiot would see farther in his nose than you."

He bowed and strolled casually to the door as though to open it for her. Instead of doing so, he merely turned back against the panels and faced her.

"I think I see far enough," he said mildly, "just one moment, please. Before you go I much insist on one or two explanations."

She gripped the little bag she was carrying so tightly that her knuckles showed white.

"Insist?" she repeated.

"Yes, insist," he retorted sternly. "Even without that last remark I should have known you were keeping something. You have been in constant and close association with Thorold. An attempt has been made to murder a witness, who could give evidence on that point to-night. Believing what I believe, I cannot expose any more people to these risks. I am not satisfied. I call your bluff, Miss Langton. Unless you can give me some satisfactory explanation I shall have to detain you."

Although her face was white, there was an angry blaze in her grey eyes, and her thin form seemed to quiver with a suppressed emotion.

"You wouldn't dare. You had better let me pass," she said tersely.

Wilde leaned against the door and shook his head. Her bag dropped unheeded to the floor, and he became aware that the grim muzzle of a small automatic-pistol was pointed unwaveringly at his chest.

"I shall shoot if you compel me," she said resolutely, and he believed her.

A quick smile leapt to his face as he stood away and opened the door.

"This is very silly of you, Miss Langton," he said in matter-of-fact tones. "It will do you no good. But—go."

He waved a hand to the open door.

She moved forward a step and then hesitated, regarding him suspiciously. His ready capitulation had alarmed her.

"Please close that door again," she ordered sharply, and, as he obeyed, went on: "Of course, you meant to raise the alarm directly this pistol was off you. It would be impossible for me to get out of this place."

"Touché," he admitted. "You guessed it. You can't get away, not even by shooting me—which you aren't foolish enough to do. You might have pulled the trigger on a first impulse, but not now that you have had a few seconds to think."

Standing with his back firmly against the door, Inspector Wilde suddenly found the grim muzzle of Patricia Langton's gun pointed unwaveringly at his chest.
He thrust his hands in his pockets, and looked nonchalantly down upon her. The weapon remained steady. If just for one split fraction of a second he could distract her. 

"This is your weapon," he said slowly, "It's not working. I have given up."

"I hate to lose your good will, but if it makes you feel better, I would have preferred it to be the other way around."

She was silent. He turned and walked away. "I hate to see a man of your class go down," he said. "I hate to see an innocent person put to trouble and inconvenience because you have, in short, got the wrong man."

"The little stroke of melodrama used with the intention of emphasising this letter."

"I'm talking about your innuendo. And further, for which I have no evidence."

"Please take this as a friendly hint."

"I shall not attempt to escape," she said impassively. "You're too clever for me."

"I've noted the slight, glove-covered finger slowly increasing the tension on the trigger."

"He had been laughing at her."

"The probability was that her courage would carry her to the point of shooting him down in cold blood."

"But was it such a probability?"

"He realised that she was desperate, and that he could not stop her."

After all, he was beginning to see the end: Why boggle at a little delay?"

"Less harm could possibly result from that way than if she were placed out of action."

"You win," he declared. "I leave you alone for twenty-four hours."

THE FIRE AT CLARGES STREET.

It is a strange habit of Scotland Yard detectives, justified by generations of immunity, in the face of three new 新鲜 try to break into their personal security. What ever menaces a crook may make against a police-officer, he never goes out of his way to carry those threats into effect. The worst he will ever use violence to escape imminent arrest, but so long as a detective lets him alone, so long will he let a detective alone.

Since his encounter with the Trapper, Wilde had carried a revolver. He had even gone so far as to spend half an hour at target practice at a gunsmith's gallery in the Strand, and had come to the conclusion that marksmanship was not among his accomplishments. He had even doubted if he could lug the gun quickly enough from his pocket if he was ever faced with instant occasion for its use. Nevertheless, he continued to carry it because, in case of questions, he was able to say that he had taken the precaution. But beyond that he took no special steps to guard himself.

He was as regular in his habits as his profession would allow. "Every day, whether landlady from whom I took a couple of rooms in Bloomsbury had a vague notion that he was connected with the police. All she cared about was that he was a gentleman and considerate gentleman, who never gave any trouble, even though, once in a while, his business took him out or brought him in at odd hours.

So it was with surprise that she was roused from her bed in the vicinity of midnight; and discovered the disturbance of her slumbers to have been caused by the presence of a detective who was not one of those who normally occupied the rooms."

"I'm sorry to trouble you," he declared. "Has anyone called for me during the day?"

She huddled her dressing-gown more closely about her for the night was chilly.

"I don't mind," she said. "Yes, a man did call, a constable."

He brought a note from you, asking me to let him into your rooms to find a paper."

"I've found it."

"Have you got it?"

She thought for an instant.

"I don't know what I did with it. I believe I threw it away."

The Solution of this week's 'BAFFLER' PROBLEM on page 25.

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