THE THRILLER

THE PAPER WITH A THOUSAND THRILLS

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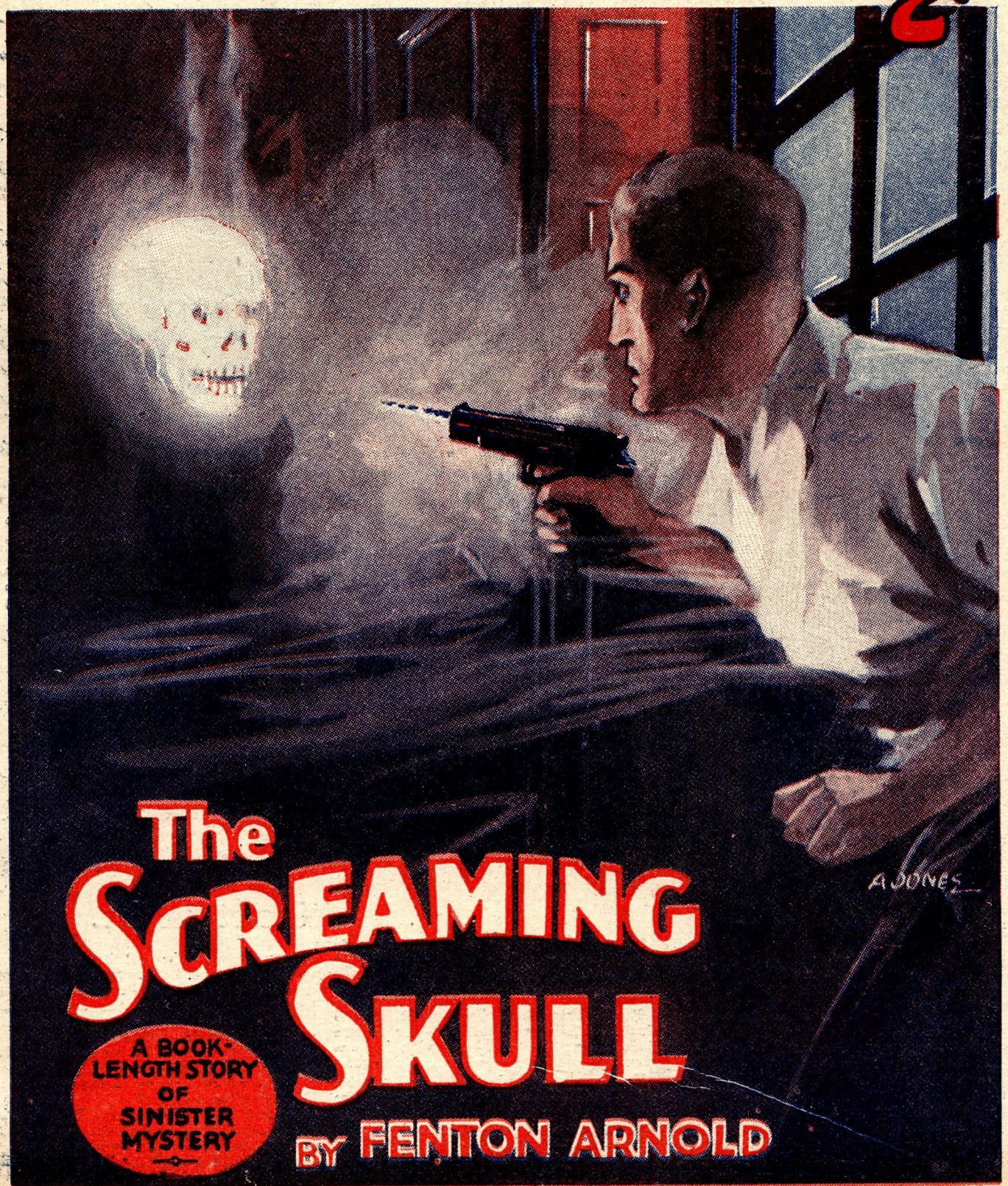

The SCREAMING SKULL

A BOOK-LENGTH STORY OF SINISTER MYSTERY

BY FENTON ARNOLD

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As the door gave with a sudden crash, the dago swung round from the bound figure on the couch and fired point blank.

THE SCREAMING SKULL

A Dramatic Complete Story of the Secret Service.

Chapter 1.
THE LOTUS CLUB.

MARTIN LORNE expressed his astonishment by staring.

"Is that all, sir?" he asked.

Sir Harker Bellamy nodded.

"You are to go to the Lotus Club to-night and see if a charming-looking girl is there in company with a dago—I believe the man to be a half-caste Portuguese."

"Sounds rather vague, sir."

"Nevertheless," was the answer, "if you bring me back the information that these two persons were together at this particular night club it will be sufficient for my purpose."

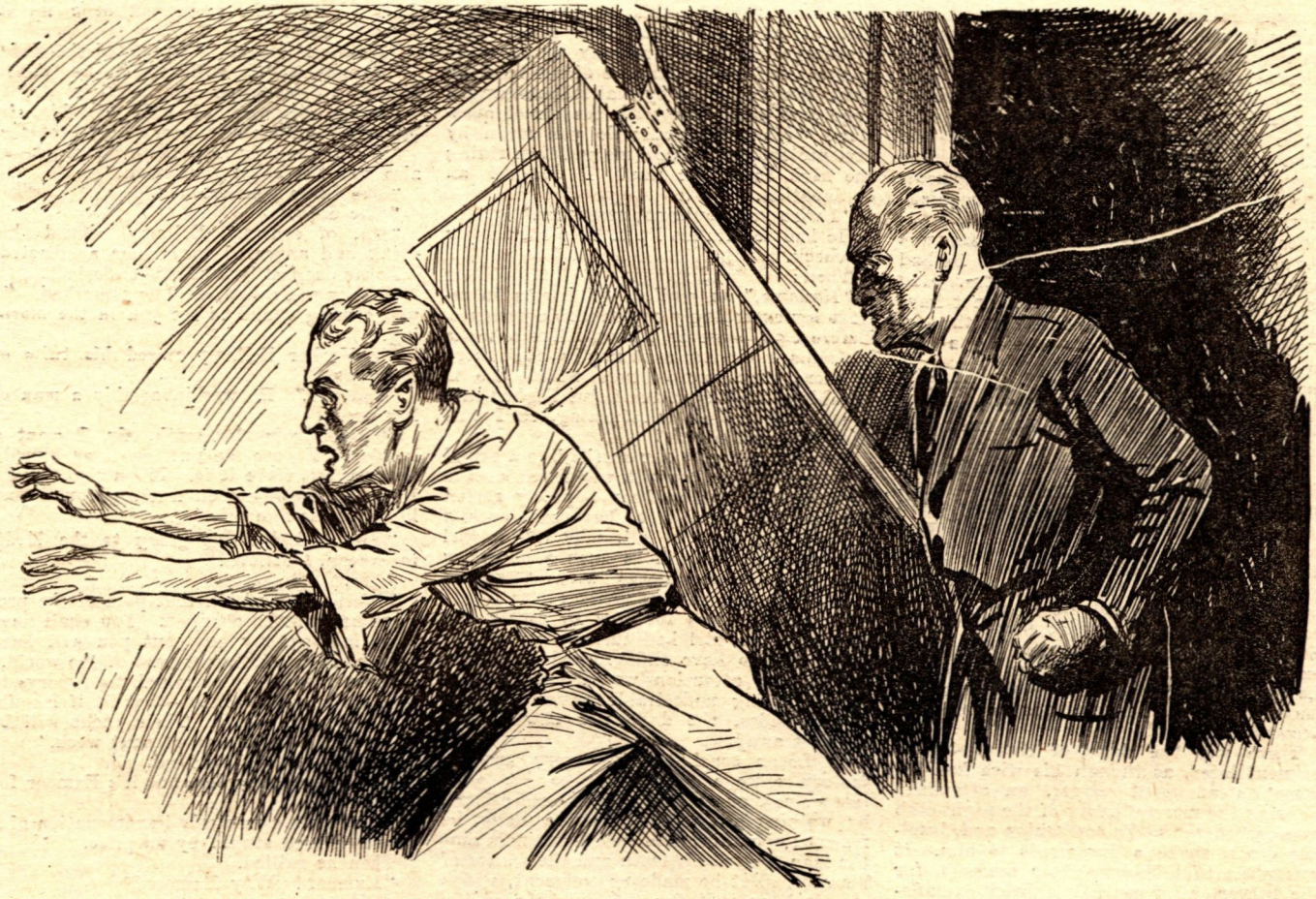
"All right, sir!" His not to reason why—so he buzzed off to obey orders.

. . . . . .

The old man had been right in his surmise. There was the girl—her charm made her unmistakable—and with her was an unpleasant person pronouncedly dago.

Because of the trade he followed, Martin Lorne was not easily surprised, but as he watched the girl flash a smile at her dancing partner, he murmured a few entirely unconventional words beneath his breath. He prided himself upon being the least conceited of men, but if there were glances of hero-worship going begging, what was wrong with the girl bestowing them upon him? True, he wasn't the handsomest man alive—not quite—but compared to that dago nastiness—— In any case, he hated to see an Englishwoman associating with such a type—and the girl stood in a class of her own. Half an hour's careful scrutiny of her had done nothing to lessen this original impression. But why did the Mole want her watched?

He had sauntered into the Lotus Night Club that evening in a mood of sheer boredom. It had seemed such a ridiculous commission. Life was pretty punk; nothing seemed to happen. Anyway, it hadn't happened recently. He had been told by the



BY FENTON ARNOLD

old man—that grey-haired taskmaster who seemed to possess no feeling of compassion whatever—that he must "hang on" in town. Hang on, indeed, when he hadn't had a spot of leave for over twelve months, and when he had made all plans to join the Amerys in an early Mediterranean cruise! It wasn't as though he had really done anything worth while during this period of loafing; it had been merely a case of killing time—and he was utterly fed-up with it. To-morrow, he decided, as he ordered a second whisky-and-soda, he would see the chief and get something definite out of him. Either that, or he would take French leave and pack off with the Amerys.

In the meantime, his eyes wandered back to the girl. The dance had finished, and the unpleasant-looking gentleman with the yellow complexion had piloted her to a table not far from where he himself was sitting. With an elaborate gallantry that made Lorne long to kick him afresh, the creature bowed his companion into a chair.

Lorne, sipping his drink, was puzzled; he could not "get" the situation. Women at the best were curious creatures, but by every instinct he felt she possessed, this girl should have shrunk from the man with whom she was obviously on such terms of familiarity. Granted that he had a prejudice against all dagoes; granted, also, that it was no business of his, yet Martin could not help feeling furious. Other people besides himself were looking curiously at the ill-assorted pair. No doubt they shared his opinions—first, that there was something peculiar about this acquaintanceship, and, secondly, that Joseph, the presiding genius of the Lotus, would have to watch his membership roll more carefully if he wished to keep up the good character of his night club.

Cursing himself for his folly, he kept on studying the pair. And the more he looked the greater became his wonderment. By every standard he knew, this girl appeared a thoroughbred—a lady, in the best sense of the word. She had dignity of bearing, she was simply, but exquisitely dressed, and she was utterly and completely feminine in every dainty curve of her. A woman, in short, which in modern London, filled with hipless, masculine, hairless multitudes of the sex, was a surprise that almost took his breath away.

That unassuming black frock—how well it suited her! How charming were her unringed hands, how graceful the unadorned neck. Martin, old-fashioned enough to enjoy these delights—he was twenty-eight—pulled himself up short. He was well on the way to becoming maudlin. The words of the old man, on the first day he joined that grim ogre's staff, recalled themselves once again: "Women are the very devil in this job. Use them, if forced, but avoid them otherwise like the plague. More good men in our game have been ruined by women than I care to think about."

The Mole—he was called that because, like all Secret Service chiefs, he burrowed underground—had snapped his teeth as he included this piece of advice. He was in deadly earnest. "Never forget what I've just told you, young man!" he growled; and Martin had sworn mentally and audibly that he never would.

It had not been difficult up to the present. The keenness with which he had done his job had been a strong, influencing factor. But now, looking at the girl again, he told himself it was all very well for the Mole (sixty years of age, quite bald, and very wrinkled) preaching this monkish gospel. What did he know about it, anyway? His time for dallying with the wenches had long since passed. Supposing the Mole could switch the clock back thirty-two years, and sit where he was sitting now, looking across. . . . Martin finished his drink quickly—he was becoming asinine again. This girl had nothing on earth to do with him. Supposing a spark of electricity had passed from her to him? He mustn't become hysterical simply because he considered her devilishly attractive. And, besides, there was her companion. He didn't intend to compete with a dago—that came under the heading of "The Things Which Are Not Done."

He would clear out—walk back to the Mole's rooms and give in his report. A little exercise was indicated. It would banish the whim-whams. He could have danced; but the style of dancing popular at the Lotus Club consisted of clutching some strange and untidy female and jazzing around in a state of semi-intoxication. It did not appeal to him—it never had done.

Martin had half-risen when he sat down again. A sensation which was distinctly

pleasurable had swept through him. His nerves tingled. The girl noticing, perhaps, his movement, had turned her head. For a moment she had looked intently at him and into her eyes had flashed a look of recognition.

She knew him! Then that meant she must also know the job he was on. The dago, likewise turning at that moment, frowned. He, too, had evidently recognised him.

Search his memory as he would, Lorne was not able to "place" either of them. He had certainly never seen this girl before. Had he previously met her, he would not have had any difficulty in remembering the circumstance; she was far too arresting a type to slip from the mind. And yet the start she had made—instantaneous and involuntary, as it had been—was unmistakable. If she had not met him before, she knew who he was. Undoubtedly.

To receive a look of recognition from a singularly attractive girl—from a girl, moreover, who has been engaging one's attention for the past half an hour—is one of those experiences which give a fillip to a jaded soul, and Martin Lorne would have been inhuman had he not warmed to it. Dependable member as he had proved himself of that branch of the British Secret Service known as X2, he now made himself a promise: before he left the Lotus Club that night, he would certainly make this girl's acquaintance on his own account.

There was the dago, of course—but a moment later, as though his wish had become an answered prayer, an attendant wearing the maroon livery of the night-club approached the girl's companion and, bending down, spoke a few words to him. It was plain that he brought a message, for the hearer, after making a brief explanation to the girl, rose and walked towards the entrance.

Now was his chance. One is still young enough at twenty-eight to plume one's feathers when approaching a pretty girl, and Martin straightened his tie, pulled down his waistcoat and did a little general preening before rising and walking through the throng of tables which separated him from the object of attraction.

The Lotus Club is exclusive—at least, Joseph, the former *restaurateur* who runs it, invariably impresses that fact upon people he is anxious to enlist as new members—but it is also mildly unconventional. Within the precincts of the Lotus (where minor Royalty has been known to dance and generally make merry) the circumstance of a lady having smiled is sufficient excuse for the recipient of such a favour to approach the donor of largesse and improve the shining hour of the night by making her acquaintance.

Martin Lorne, as a member of eighteen months' experience, knew this. Everyone speaking to everyone was the sort of thing done in the Lotus; the majority of the unattended women, indeed, asked for attention. There could be no possible risk in talking to this unknown.

He stopped at her table, looking down at her. To his surprise, she made no response. Mortification followed surprise, for when he spoke, saying the conventional "Good-evening," she stared at him without reply.

Embarrassment brought confusion.

"I—I thought just now that I knew you—must have met you somewhere," he dithered.

"It's so easy to make mistakes of that sort, isn't it?" Her tone was cold, and her manner showed that her dignity had been offended.

"Quite—only, you see, I happen to be speaking the truth." The minx, to turn him down flat like this, making a public fool of him, after she had given that encouragement! It was only by an effort of great self-control that he didn't take the chair lately occupied by that saffron-visaged dago and tackle her with the direct question: "What the deuce do you mean by first pretending to know me and then riding the high horse like this? I demand an explanation."

"I wish you would not annoy me."

He had to bite his lip to keep his temper in check.

Then:

"Madame," he replied, "I hasten to remove my exceedingly objectionable presence. Before I go, however, I should like to make the remark, obvious as it may be, that there is more than one mistake which one is capable of making at the Lotus Night Club. I see your friend is returning, so I will wish you good-night."

Scarlet leapt into her cheeks like a brand of shame. Equally quick was Lorne's sense of remorse. He had been a pretty rotten cad, he told himself, to have said such a thing. Yet, hang it all, why did a girl like this show herself in such a notorious gossip-shop as the Lotus with a dago? Hadn't she any sense of fitness?

It was too late for him to repair the damage. The girl had turned deliberately away, and to have endeavoured to attract her further attention would merely have meant calling undesirable notice to himself. Besides, the dago was now only a few feet away.

So Lorne concluded this very unsatisfactory episode, disturbing to his good temper and annihilating to his self-esteem, by walking away. Passing the dago, he frowned upon him with such heartiness that the man showed his teeth and the whites of his eyes. But he made no comment, which was just as well for the quietude of the Lotus Club, for Lorne was in that inflammatory condition whose only solace is to hit something very hard indeed.

As for women, he muttered an anathema upon them all.

SEALED ORDERS.

Not being able to take a large-sized, hefty whack at the dago, whose existence seemed so unnecessary, Martin endeavoured to find relief in walking the few hundred yards to his rooms. He would have a drink first, and then go on to see Bellamy, his chief. As he climbed the stairway of the block of chambers, he saw a figure waiting outside his flat door.

It was the Mole himself.

"Expected you back earlier," the latter growled. "I am coming in for a minute."

"Do!" urged Lorne, who felt like murder. Unlocking the front door, he ushered his chief into the flat.

"Whisky? Cigar? Or both?"

He was in the mood when he wanted to annoy someone very much, and what better subject that this grey-faced individual who, judging by his demeanour, assumed that he had powers of life and death over his staff?

He expected an explosion; but, perhaps because he would have welcomed it, the fusillade did not come. Instead, the caller, seating himself comfortably by the side of the still-existent fire, threw a lump of coal on the flame with his bare hand, and replied like an ordinary human being:

"A whisky-and-soda, by all means, my boy."

Staggering beneath the shock. Lorne shuffled across the room and drew up at the sideboard.

"Have one yourself," suggested the Mole.

"Thanks—er—I will." And he mixed himself a three-finger on.

Having disposed of half of this, he brought the remainder over to the fireplace.

"Well, the lady was there all right—so also was the beige gentleman."

"The beige gentleman?"

"The dago."

"Oh, of course." Bellamy sipped his drink and appeared to become abstracted.

Lorne decided to hurl a thunderbolt.

"Lucky you called, sir," he remarked. "I was coming round to see you in the morning."

Sir Harker Bellamy raised his tufts of eyebrows.

"Indeed?" He was invariably a man of few words.

"To tell you the truth, sir, I want a holiday. Excuse me putting it as bluntly as that, but there it is. It isn't as though I was doing any good messing round just killing time like this."

"You talked about going to the Mediterranean, I believe?"

"Yes."

"Well, I am afraid that part of the programme must be changed. You shall have your holiday, my boy, but you will have to take it in a different part of the world."

"I've practically promised the Amerys to join them at Marseilles—that is, if I could get away, of course. Their yacht will be there at the beginning of next week."

The Mole shook his head.

"Very sorry, my boy, but it's Exmoor for you."

Lorne gave a masterly impersonation of a man rendered stupid by surprise.

Then he rallied.

"Exmoor! Why Exmoor?"

Sir Harker Bellamy met this demand with a brief, wintry smile.

"Personally, I see nothing wrong with Exmoor for a holiday. Providing the weather keeps as it is—you must admit we are having wonderful weather for the time of year—you ought to have a very pleasant time indeed. You can re-read 'Lorna Doone,' the stag-hounds will be meeting once or twice a week——"

"Just one moment, sir," broke in the bewildered listener. "What exactly is the idea?"

"The idea is that you catch the 9.30 from Paddington to-morrow for the West of England. You change at Taunton for the small, but picturesque village of Cleveley, not far from Minehead. Cleveley is famous for its castle, and was once the centre of a thriving yarn industry."

"Guide-book stuff, sir. I can look it up myself—if I want to."

This was the first occasion on which he had even remotely suspected the old man of having a sense of humour, and he did not relish being made the subject of it.

"Whilst you are at Cleveley," continued Bellamy, "I should strongly recommend you to pay a visit to the Cleveley Arms—the local hotel. It was the Prior's residence in the days when monks, in common with the parishioners, used the church. There is a famous oak-room in the Cleveley Arms which——"

"That must be the one you have booked for me," interrupted Lorne.

The pleasantry was lost upon Bellamy.

"Thinking you would be less conspicuous, I have taken the liberty of fixing you up at the Yew Tree Farmhouse just outside the village. The Yew Tree is kept by some people called Warriner. You may find yourself very comfortable there—again, you may not. I shall send a wire to Mr. Warriner

asking him to meet you at the station. I think that is all I need tell you." The speaker rose and stretched himself.

"A holiday, you say, sir?"

For the second time the Mole ignored the shaft of sarcasm.

"A holiday—under sealed orders, young man!" he replied sternly.

Then Martin understood.

He had not been able to catch the morning train from Paddington, and it was dusk by the time he stepped out on to the small platform at Cleveley. A tall, burly figure in tweeds greeted him.

"Mr. Blake?" ("Gerald Blake" was the accommodation name with which he had been furnished by Sir Harker Bellamy.)

"Yes—are you Mr. Warriner?"

"I am," declared the giant, holding out an enormous hand.

"Do you mind waiting a minute while I get a Bristol evening paper, Mr. Blake?" he inquired.

Naturally signifying his consent, Martin pulled out his case and lit a cigarette. As he did so, he heard a woman speaking.

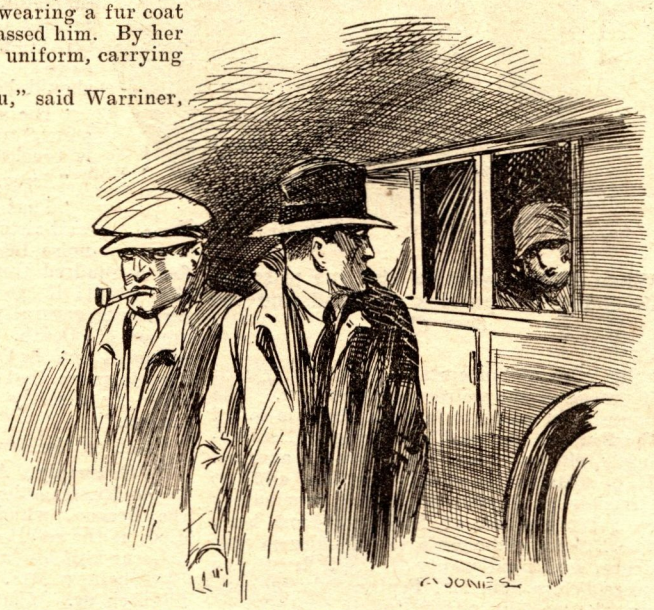
"There is only the suit-case, Max."

A smartly-dressed girl, wearing a fur coat and a tight-fitting hat, passed him. By her side walked a chauffeur in uniform, carrying a suit-case.

"Sorry to have kept you," said Warriner, returning with the Bristol evening paper. "Mind these steps—they will keep this station so darned dark, somebody'll break their neck one day. We cross the line here. Hope we shall be able to make you comfortable."

Martin followed his host up the road, and a few moments later a huge limousine swept past. The interior of the car was lit up, and, turning his head, he found himself staring in astonishment.

The occupant of the car was looking out of the window so that she could not have failed to see him. It was the girl he had seen at the Lotus Club the night before.



Martin turned in astonishment. Gazing at him from the car window was the girl he had seen at the Lotus Club.

Martin's head was in a whirl. Here he was in Somerset for a purpose all unknown. He was under sealed orders without the slightest hint of the nature of the duties that were to fall to his lot. He considered his position, and concluded that for the moment his job was to keep his eyes open and trust nobody. The sudden appearance of that girl seemed to indicate he was in enemy country.

"Nice car," he commented, after the first shock of surprise had passed.

"Yes; although, for my liking, give me a good horse."

Martin made no comment. Mr. Warriner's views on present-day road traffic did not concern him. The situation in which he found himself was peculiar. What was that girl doing on Exmoor? What strange coincidence had induced her to tread on his heels in this manner? Although the Mole had refused to open out, something had happened, was happening, or was about to happen in that part of the country which demanded investigation. A sixth sense gave him warning that this girl might be mixed up in it. After the way she had behaved the night before, she deserved little consideration—and she would not receive much from him. If only the Mole hadn't been so confoundedly secretive he would know better how to get about things. "Sealed orders"—his orders were sealed so tightly that he was plunging along in complete darkness.

"I suppose the car that passed just now belonged to the local squire?" he queried idly.

His guide, helping him over a rough piece of the road, laughed shortly.

"I'm afraid the squire of Cleveley isn't well enough off to be able to afford a Rolls-Royce of that size. That car belongs to a man who's lately come to stay out Greenaleigh way, just the other side of Minehead. Nobody knows much about him except that he's supposed to be very rich—and has a black servant."

"Why a black servant? Has he come from abroad?" Lorne's thoughts somehow went instantly to the dago who had been with the girl at the Lotus Night Club.

His companion knocked his pipe out somewhat noisily upon the side of a wall they were passing.

"I daresay it's nothing but local gossip," he replied, "though people round about here believe quite a lot of queer things about the Beacon, and folks who live there." His manner indicated that he had no wish to pursue the subject.

A minute later lights gleamed ahead, showing up cheerily in the murk.

"Here's the farm, sir," announced Warriner. "We dine at seven, so you'll have nice time. Hallo, there!" he called, as a door opened to show a woman standing, ready to admit them. "This is my wife, Mr. Blake, who'll do her best to make you comfortable."

Martin bowed his greeting, and reflected on the words of his chief: "You may be comfortable there; again, you may not."

Like practically every other building in the neighbourhood, Yew Tree Farm belonged to the distant past. It's origin was lost somewhere in the early fifteenth century, when it was supposed to have been built, so Lorne was to learn later, by the Abbot of a neighbouring monastery as an additional rest-house for travelling friars.

Martin was shown into a room that might, for its size, have harboured in earlier times a whole order of monks. Huge oak rafters straddled the ceiling, the fireplace could have accommodated an ox, and the door, although swinging easily on its hinges, was three inches thick, and solid oak at that.

As he changed, Martin pondered over one question: Had that girl followed him? Was it because she knew who he was that that involuntary look of recognition had leapt into her face at the Lotus Club?

He spread a map of the district out on the bed. Here was Cleveley standing a little way back from the sea—perhaps a mile away. This place, Greenaleigh, which Warriner had mentioned, was beyond Minehead on the coast.

Then why had the girl left the train at Cleveley when her natural destination was Minehead, the end of the railway line? Was it because she wished to make sure where he went? And what of Warriner? He seemed to know more than he had cared to say concerning the owner of that car.

In a room that must have caused the wandering monks' eyes to gleam, dinner was served. It was a meal to put heart into a man—freshly-caught fish, a couple of ducklings, a noble rib of beef with apple tart to follow, the whole washed down, as they used to say, in the ancient histories, with honest beer.

Apart from his host and hostess, there was only one other diner. This was an elderly, charmingly-mannered man, who was introduced to Lorne as Mr. Robert McHugh. The latter gave his fellow-guest a friendly greeting, and, far from being a bore, engaged him straight away in a conversation that was to prove exceedingly entertaining. McHugh stated that he was devoting his leisure to the study of archæology, and especially that of ancient churches. "This part of Somerset, you know, is full of them," he added. "Perhaps, if you feel inclined, you would like to accompany me on some of my rambles."

"Not to-morrow, anyway," put in Warriner. "If the weather holds good, we'll drive to the meet of the local staghounds in the morning. "Being from London, Mr. Blake, it should be a novelty to you."

"It will, indeed—I should like nothing better." A day in the Exmoor air sounded attractive. Later on in the evening he intended to draw Warriner—or his wife—out about the owner of the Rolls-Royce car, but for the moment he was content to allow his mind to dwell on the pleasure promised for the morrow.

"THE SCREAMING SKULL."

COFFEE was served in a room that was panelled in dark oak from floor to ceiling. With the log fire lighting up the beauty of the wonderful old wood, the apartment was cheery enough, but without that heartening blaze Lorne could have imagined depression descending upon the scene. He himself had the feeling that time had slipped away, and that he was back amidst the Cistercian monks, who, centuries before, must have held high revel in that very room.

The Warriners and their guests settled around the blazing hearth, and the conversation soon took on an intimate tone.

"Did you see anyone at the station?" inquired Mrs. Warriner, busy with a work-basket.

"Saw that great car of Mr. Sylvaine's," replied her husband, puffing at his pipe.

Robert McHugh looked up from the copy of the "Times Literary Supplement" he was reading.

"Do you mean the man who has taken that peculiar house at Greenaleigh?" he asked.

"That's the fellow," answered Warriner, after a glance at his wife.

Lorne considered this an appropriate time to intervene.

"Supposed to be very rich, isn't he?" he inquired casually. "At least, one would assume so, judging by his car."

Mrs. Warriner took upon herself to reply. Lorne imagined that she welcomed the opportunity to talk as though she had received her queue.

"We really know very little about this Mr. Fenton Sylvaine," she explained. "It was about a month ago that everyone in this neighbourhood, including the whole of Minehead, was thoroughly excited over the news that the most notorious house in the whole of Somerset had been bought by a very rich man—a stranger—who intended to live in it. I should explain, perhaps, Mr. Blake, that Somerset is a county saturated, as you may say, in superstition. The fact that so many of the bigger houses, especially in this neighbourhood, date back for hundreds of years, possibly accounts for these stories in some way, but I must say that there seems to exist a great deal of substantiation in certain cases. There is very good reason, for instance, to say that this house is haunted."

The speaker's husband frowned his displeasure.

"You shouldn't have said that, especially——" He stopped, and the archæologist completed the sentence.

"Especially as you have been given the identical room, Blake."

Noticing that the atmosphere seemed to have become a trifle strained, Martin endeavoured to clear the air. He was eager to know just what was in store for him.

"I say, that's rather jolly! So you've given me the room of honour, Mrs. Warriner! How awfully kind of you! Naturally, one cannot expect to stay in a house as old as this without bumping up against a ghost. What is the story?"

"Perhaps you will declare it all nonsense."

"I'm keeping an absolutely open mind until I meet the fellow. Is it a man?"

"Yes. A servant of the house at the time of the Civil Wars. A party of Cromwell's men is said to have broken into the Manor, as it was then called, and done to death a servant who remained faithful to his trust."

"Does he do anything violent?"

"Not so far as we know. He merely shows himself, pointing out the wound in his chest where he was stabbed."

"Well, if he turns up to-night I'll do my best to console him, ma'am. Has he any particular time for going the rounds?"

"He is supposed to appear usually at the time he is presumed to have been murdered —at a quarter past one in the morning, but sometimes he is late."

"Well, he needn't think I'm going to wait up for him! If I'm awake, all well and good, but if I'm asleep he'll have to cut along and unburden himself to you, McHugh."

The Scotsman chuckled. Talk of ghosts did not appear to dampen his spirits.

"Some people who have stayed here profess to have seen this particular specimen, don't they, Mrs. Warriner?" he inquired.

"Oh, yes. And others have sworn that, although they did not actually see it, they have been placed under its influence. But I am getting away from my original story."

"Are you referring to the notorious house in which you say this mysterious rich man, Sylvaine, is now living?" asked Blake.

"Yes."

"Is this another ghost story?"

"It's worse than a ghost story."

"Yes—yes!" boomed her husband.

"Then by all means let us hear it, Mrs. Warriner," said McHugh, finally laying aside his newspaper; "I dote on horror stories."

Mrs. Warriner now rose to the occasion by abandoning her work and concentrating all her energies on making an effect.

"As I have already said," she resumed,

When Martin went to visit his prisoner, he found the padlock smashed and the door ajar.

"this part of Somerset is particularly rich in stories of the weird and wonderful. The house I am going to tell you about is called the Beacon. At least"—pausing and shivering slightly—"that is the postal address. It is situated practically on the cliff at Greenaleigh Point, which is a promontory on the other side of Minehead from here. The Beacon, although a very handsome residence, had been empty for at least ten years before this Mr. Fenton Sylvaine surprised us all by purchasing it."

"It had been unoccupied because of the story, I presume?" put in Lorne.

"Yes. I happen to know that at least two millionaires, one of them an American, and both interested in hunting, had a look over the Beacon with a view to buying it only two years ago. They heard the legend, and in both cases that meant an end to the negotiations."

"You're working me up into a tremendous state of excitement, Mrs. Warriner!" stated McHugh. "Do get on with the story!"

"Well, the legend is this: This House of the Screaming Skull, as it is called locally, was owned hundreds of years ago by a man who had made a fortune out of the slave trade and had come to this lonely spot from Bristol on account of his being ostracised by the local society.

"This Mr. Delamere brought with him, among his large household staff, a faithful negro servant who was a slave. Delamere was undoubtedly a monster, and one night in a fit of drunken fury he murdered this servant. It was a foul and horrible crime; and this is the point: Whilst the negro was dying he told his slayer that, if his body was not sent back to Ethiopia, he would be in unrest for ever.

"This request was disregarded by the drunken murderer; in fact, the body was not even laid in the neighbouring churchyard. Afraid that his crime would become known, Delamere himself dug a shallow grave in the grounds of the house that same night and flung the corpse into it.

"Not many hours afterwards the night was made hideous. From the direction of the crude grave came the most terrifying screams; the windows of the Beacon rattled, the floors heaved, doors creaked, until finally they came off their hinges, and a state of nightmare reigned generally.

"The final horror was to come. At dawn, the servants, frightened out of their wits by these unnatural occurrences, burst open the locked door of Delamere's room, to find—*nothing but a grinning, naked skull in the bed!* Delamere had vanished, and from that day to this no trace of his body has ever been found. The skull was that of a negro, and the local superstition is that the Devil came during some period of that dreadful night to carry away his henchman, leaving the skull of Delamere's victim in mockery."

"Pretty gruesome," admitted McHugh, "if rather more far-fetched than the average story of its kind. What became of the skull? They destroyed it, I should hope?"

"The skull is the kernel of the story," was the reply; "directly it is touched, it starts to scream."

"*Scream?*"

"That is the story—a fairly well-authenticated one, too. A noise like a scream, only magnified a hundred times, is said to come from the skull if it is touched—and that scream is generally supposed to be the precursor of Death. Old Dr. Gamble, who attended the last owner of the Beacon, always swore that the man died in a fit of apoplexy directly after hearing the skull scream."

"And so the skull is still in the house?"

"Presumably. At least, it was according to old Dr. Gamble the last time he went to the Beacon, which was shortly before he died, as the result of a fall whilst hunting."

Lorne knit his brow.

"I believe Mrs. Warriner is trying to frighten us. What do you say, McHugh?"

The archæologist carefully lit a cigarette.

"I would rather like to have a look at the Beacon, and examine that skull," was his answer.

"No—no! You'd best keep away, gentlemen!" broke in Warriner. "The story in Minehead is that this new owner is peculiar in many of his ways. For one thing, he is a chronic invalid—lost the use of his legs, or something—and he has let it be known that he does not intend to do any entertaining. Callers won't be welcomed there, I'm sure."

"Does he live alone?" asked Lorne. Into his mind had flashed the thought of that beautiful girl whose face he had seen only a few hours before looking out at him from the Rolls-Royce, living under such a roof. In the name of all that was devilish, what could she be doing there?

Warriner choked over his pipe, glanced hurriedly at his wife, and turned the subject.

"Well, what do you say to a whisky-and-soda as a nightcap, gentlemen?" he asked.

"By Jove, yes!" came from McHugh.

"Make it a large one," said Martin Lorne. "What with screaming skulls and the gentleman who may be waiting for me upstairs—I feel I want it."

ON DUNKERY BEACON.

By eleven o'clock Martin was in his room. Early hours were kept at Yew Tree Farm, seemingly. Undressing quickly, he got between the sheets.

In the ordinary way, he would have been quickly asleep, for he possessed that inestimable gift of being able to drop off directly his head touched the pillow.

To-night was different. The fact of being in a room which was supposed to be haunted was not the influencing factor, however; the features his imagination conjured up out of the darkness were not those of a Royalist servant of the seventeenth century, but of a girl of the modern day.

He fell asleep at last; but even then the face of this girl, who had enchained herself to his mind, persisted. In a dream which was particularly vivid she appeared to stand before him as he was about to enter a huge, gloomy-looking house. Her hand was uplifted—she was giving him a warning. He saw her lips move; they formed a single word—Death!

* * * * * *

He awoke with a start. A sixth sense warned him—he was in danger. There was someone in the room. Whilst he still lay in that curious state of semi-consciousness, he knew this.

Opening his eyes, he looked cautiously around. The recent dream was imprinted so vividly on his mind that he felt himself to be facing deadly peril.

Peril unseen—for the darkness was still impenetrable. Then something—some vague shape which might be a man—detached itself from the rest of the gloom and started to move across the floor.

The ghost! He was one of those privileged to see it.

The next moment Lorne rebuked himself for being a fool. Ghost! This intruder was human—now that he was able to see better, he could discern the open window through which the shape must have come.

Who was he? An enemy, for certain. But what was he doing at the mantelpiece? He seemed to be messing about with something or other. This couldn't go on.

Using infinite care, Lorne crept out of bed on the "blind" side. Thank Heaven, neither the bed nor the floor-board creaked. On hands and knees he crawled towards the figure still standing by the mantelpiece.

A sudden lunge forward, and he had hold of solid flesh — the man's left leg. A violent jerk, and the fellow was on the floor. Then it was tooth and claw, and Lorne, who was rather good at that sort of thing, asked nothing better. The intruder had been taken by surprise, and he was not given time to recover. He fought like a trapped beast, however—desperately, silently, and with utter ruthlessness.

This gloriously-satisfying scrap lasted a full ten minutes, and at the end it was Martin Lorne who was on his feet. The unknown lay still—slugged into insensibility.

While Lorne was recovering his breath, the door unexpectedly opened, and the light was suddenly switched on.

"Blake!" called a voice.

"Come right in!" retorted Martin. He had recognised the owner.

McHugh, wearing a dressing-gown and carrying a revolver, stepped forward.

"I thought I heard a most unholy row going on," he started to explain.

"No doubt you did, my friend—there's the reason." Martin pointed to the figure on the floor.

McHugh stared.

"Do you know who he is?"

"Unless he's the family ghost—and his clothes seem rather too modern for a family servant of Cromwell's period, don't you think? I haven't the foggiest notion. I woke up suddenly to find him in the room. That's all I know, except that he apparently made his entry through that window. What is it at the back?"

"The farmyard—he must have used a ladder. Did he attack you at once?"

He didn't attack me at all until I went for him. That's the rummy thing about it. When my eyes became accustomed to the darkness, I saw him standing by the mantelpiece there, doing something or other. I got out of bed, crept towards him, got him on the floor—and then it was pure dog-fight. The fellow was as strong as a horse, and I had to be pretty savage to win the trick."

McHugh stepped to the mantelpiece.

"I shouldn't like to be positive," he said, "but, from the look of things, I should imagine he was preparing a particularly unpleasant brew for you." He pointed to a brownish powder at the bottom of a fairly deep earthenware bowl.

"Unless this when ignited gives off a virulent form of poison-gas, or lets loose some other form of destruction, I shall be very surprised. Not that I am going to make the attempt," he added quickly. "With your permission I'll lock this fellow safely away in one of the cellars, and in the morning we will hand him over safe and snug to the local police."

Lorne surveyed the speaker thoughtfully as he considered the suggestion.

"What brought you along here just now, McHugh?" he countered.

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"Great Scott, man! You've been making enough noise to waken the dead. I was all cosily tucked away between the sheets and sleeping like a J.P., when I awakened to a din like a bull in a china shop. By the way, where is Warriner? Surely he can't have slept through this lot?"

"One would hardly think so," agreed Lorne. "It would be of immediate interest to me to make a few investigations. I'll just have a trot around, McHugh."

His fellow-guest made way for him to pass.

"By all means, old man," he agreed readily. "You satisfy yourself there aren't any more unwelcome guests whilst I put this fellow under lock and key in the cellars."

Lorne hurled himself upon the intruder, and in a moment they were engaged in a desperate battle for the gun.

Oh, and Lorne, I don't think there's any need to worry the Warriners over this little affair until morning, do you? That is, unless they are awake or have heard the row, of course."

"Why not?"

"Well, you see, Mrs. Warriner is—— Oh, all right. Do as you think best!"

"I shall!" announced Lorne, taking his departure.

A GIRL'S WARNING.

When next Martin Lorne opened his eyes a bright autumn sun was shining in at his window. He leapt from his bed and drew an appreciative breath of the Exmoor air.

But Lorne had other matters to attend to besides admiring the morning.

His first move after dressing was to pay a visit to the cellar in which his capture of the previous night had been housed by McHugh. And here a surprise awaited him. The padlock was smashed from the door—which now stood ajar—and his bird had flown.

For some ten minutes or more he paced around the garden digesting this new surprise in a puzzle to which, as yet, he possessed no key.

How had the prisoner escaped? Had he broken his way out? Had he been rescued by a companion who may have been lurking in the grounds? Had he ever been locked in the cellar?

Martin Lorne was in the unfortunate position of not knowing why he was placed in his present circumstances. Was the mystery he was to investigate concerned with this farm? Had the Warriners any bearing on the case? Or McHugh? He must watch them all carefully, and try to pick up points. One thing was certain, at any rate—an attempt had been made on his life.

Whilst he was considering these points McHugh himself came hurrying to him to announce the escape of the captive.

"I'm exceedingly sorry, my dear fellow, but I never suspected the scoundrel would manage to slip us," he explained. The door is of oak, and there was a stout padlock on it."

"I know," announced Lorne cheerfully. "I've been having a look around myself. I'm not blaming you, McHugh. Possibly the man had a pal handy. We ought to have searched the grounds. It's disappointing to have mislaid a bird who very nearly succeeded in murdering one, but maybe we shall meet again. No use informing the police now. I suggest we go and get some breakfast."

"Agreed," cried McHugh, apparently much relieved, and together they strolled into the house.

Breakfast at Yew Tree Farm came under the same category as dinner, and was, therefore, a substantial meal.

Warriner was in high spirits. He declared he had slept like a top, and was now eager to exhibit Exmoor to his new guest, and, as he said, "there couldn't have been a better day for it." It was certainly a most glorious morning—one of those days when autumn catches summer in a close embrace.

"You won't mind sitting in the dicky, Lorne?" inquired Warriner. By this time he had run out from the cow-shed-turned garage a Morris, which, although somewhat time-worn, looked as though it still promised useful service.

For the next couple of hours Lorne almost forgot everything but the joy of the morning. A blue sky overhead, a sweeping panorama of hill and dale, composing vistas of beauty so exquisite that the sight of it caught the breath, the steady drone of the engine taking them higher and higher into these romantic steeps. He was just content to keep his pipe going and allow the wonder of this day of days to sink into his soul. There would never be another one quite like this—of that he was sure. He could even be glad his orders were not yet to hand, and that he was free to idle.

They had not gone many miles from Yew Tree Farm when they saw the first rider hacking to the meet, and presently, at a crest of a commanding slope, the driver pulled up the car and swung his legs over the side.

"Shanks' pony from now on, gents!" he explained.

Shanks' pony it was—jumping streams that wended their rippling way to the deep valleys beneath, through pine woods, the scent of which was a separate glory, up zig-zag paths that tested wind and muscle, and into a huge meadow where the meet was to be.

The fine morning had drawn a splendid field. Upwards of three hundred riders could be counted, including one scarlet-coated huntsman whose wiry frame told the lie to his grey hairs.

With pipes going sweetly, the party from the farm watched the hounds getting the scent in the distance, heard the thunder of hoofs on the road below, caught a view of the stag speeding swiftly towards the shelter of Horner Woods, and then, after a morning of fatiguing walking, decided to set about the serious business of lunch.

From out of a knapsack Warriner produced a homely lunch, and invited his companions to help themselves.

"Not much of a place, *this*, for ghosts—at any rate just about now," he remarked to Lorne, after passing over some more crab sandwiches. "By the way, I haven't asked you—did you happen to see *our* particular fellow last night?"

Martin cast a quick glance at McHugh, and was just about to turn the subject when the sound of a heavy car being pulled up caused him to turn his head. The words he had been about to say remained unuttered—the girl who had come to him in that vivid dream had once again appeared in the flesh!

She was sitting in a Rolls—the same car, no doubt, that had passed him on the way from Cleveley Station the previous evening. By her side was an elderly man wearing a heavy overcoat, the fur collar of which was turned up round the neck.

Lorne felt himself change; every nerve in his body stiffened to attention. This girl, beautiful and attractive as she was, had brought with her an atmosphere altogether antagonistic.

Noticing that the other had not replied, Warriner turned to see the cause. "By Jove!" he muttered to Robert McHugh. "There's Fenton Sylvaine—what's brought *him* here?"

The archæologist shook his head as he glanced at the new owner of the Beacon.

"Hallo, here's the chauffeur coming. What the deuce can he want?"

The driver of the Rolls had left his seat and was walking towards them.

"My master's compliments, gentlemen, and he would be glad to know if the hunt has killed yet." Although the speaker might have been taken for an Englishman, there was more than a hint of some foreign accent which Lorne could not trace, but which, nevertheless, was unmistakable to his trained ear.

All three sprang to their feet.

"No," replied Warriner, "they haven't killed. The hunt is still on. The last we saw of the stag was a few minutes ago, when he was heading for Horner Woods."

"Thank you, sir; I will tell my master." The man, with a short bow, which owed something to Latin ancestry, the closely-observant Lorne would have been ready to swear, acknowledged the information and turned on his heel.

At that moment the hounds in full cry burst through a coppice only a few hundred yards away, and Warriner started off at a quick pace, calling the others to follow him.

"Come on, you chaps!" he cried.

McHugh looked at Lorne.

"Go on, McHugh—I'll follow!"

The archæologist did not raise any quibble; he accepted the remark and made no attempt to argue about it.

Martin had said the first words that entered his mind. An impulse had come to him. If it was humanly possible, he intended to have a word with this girl. How, he did not at present know, but if the car remained he could approach and volunteer some information about the beauty of the day or the progress of the hunt. He had noticed that, as at all sporting meetings, a certain *camaraderie* existed amongst the spectators. And, besides, the man Sylvaine, her companion, had opened the ball.

The car had not moved, although the chauffeur had resumed his place at the wheel. He walked the twenty yards or so between them and raised his hat.

"Did you notice the hounds just now, sir?"

He was close enough to see distinctly the man he addressed. Fenton Sylvaine—if this was he—was not an agreeable object. His complexion was that of a chronic invalid; he looked as though he was ridden hard by some disease.

He turned his face at the words and looked at the speaker.

"Yes—a wonderful sight. It made the journey here quite worth while."

The voice was that of a cultured man, and fairly agreeable. But it was not the man's voice which held Martin Lorne's attention.

The eyes are always the windows of a man's mind. If he had not known it by instinct, his training under Sir Harker Bellamy would have taught him this truth.

And the eyes of this man were evil.

A light, weird and devilish, gleamed in them—a hellish malignancy which made Martin think at first he was facing a madman. If he had not kept an iron grip on his nerves he would have betrayed himself. As it was, he pretended not to have noticed anything, and looked across at the girl.

The latter surveyed him with the same hostile blankness she had shown at the Lotus Night Club.

"I am afraid you are feeling the cold," she said to the man beside her. "Shall Max drive on?"

"If you wish it, my dear." Sylvaine raised his hat, smiling with his lips, whilst his eyes raked Lorne again with that same disturbing malignancy. Martin was left staring after the car, feeling a fool.

Yet he had some measure of consolation. He had been snubbed yet again by the girl—but he had learned something from the man. He had discovered that Fenton Sylvaine was possessed by some potent evil force which betrayed itself perhaps without his knowledge.

And that girl lived with him—and in a house from which the ordinary person would have turned away in justifiable dread.

He sank down in the sweet-smelling heather. The crowd had gone, following the main body of the hunt; he was alone. The beauty of the landscape had not changed; it

seemed incredible that evil could lurk behind such a scene. And yet he had just stood face to face with it. There had been no mistake.

One thought was inevitable. Did this man Sylvaine represent the danger against which the girl had warned him in the dream the night before?

He filled and lit a pipe. Then, reclining on one elbow, he watched the blue smoke float lazily into the air. The promise he had made to McHugh to follow on was forgotten—a greater matter was occupying his thoughts than the eventual kill of an Exmoor red deer.

The tobacco in the bowl of his pipe was half-consumed when he heard a step. Turning, he saw to his astonishment it was the girl. He sprang to his feet instantly.

"Mr. Fenton Sylvaine presents his compliments, and hopes you will give him the pleasure of coming to dinner one evening soon," was what he heard after waiting for her to address him.

Fateful as were the words, it was the girl's face which held his attention. She had something far more than mere beauty; there was an undefinable quality about her which gripped him in spite of himself. Friend or foe, this girl was unforgettable; and he knew that, through all the years that might stretch ahead, he would never forget her. The memory of her would be imperishable.

"That is very kind of Mr. Sylvaine—especially as I am a stranger," he found himself replying.

The girl drew herself up; she became taut. In an instant she had changed completely.

"I have given the message," she said; "now I will give you the warning. *Do not go!*" Her tone was low, but vibrant. She was in desperate earnest.

"But——" he started to remonstrate.

"I have already risked a great deal by warning you," came the interruption. "Why have you come down here meddling?"

This was becoming rather difficult to follow and somewhat trying to the temper.

"I am afraid, Miss——"

"My name does not matter."

"Snub number three," said Lorne. "Well, as I was saying, Miss-Whose-Name-Does-Not-Matter—I don't quite understand why you should go out of your way to scatter warnings broadcast in this manner to a perfect stranger. No doubt you have your reason, but it seems a curious habit. If the information interests you sufficiently, I came down to this quarter of the globe with the intention of having a quiet holiday."

"You came here to spy!" she said sharply.

Lorne almost lost his temper.

"The boot would seem to be on the other foot, if I may say so. I understand you live at Greenaleigh, on the further side of Minehead. Yet you left the train at Cleveley Station last night. Presumably you already know where I am staying, but in case you don't, any communication sent to the Yew Tree Farm, Cleveley, will find me. The name is Blake."

The girl disregarded his militant banter. She leaned forward; her eyes were bright with some sense of excitement, and her voice when she spoke shook with earnestness.

"I warn you again not to accept this invitation, Mr. Lorne—it will mean——" Then she broke off suddenly, for the chauffeur's voice suddenly interrupted: "The master complains of feeling cold, miss."

"Very well, Max; I will come!"

Knocking the cold ashes out of his pipe, Lorne watched her out of sight.

This was a dashed rummy business.

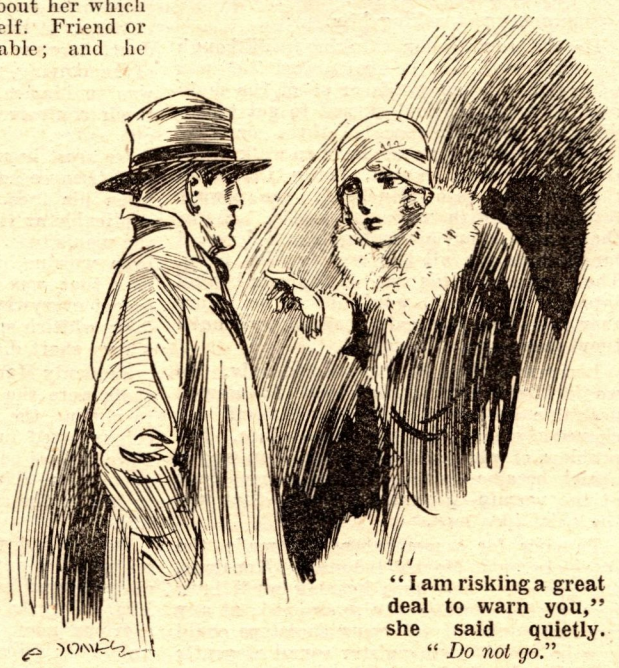
The rumminess increased after he had decoded the letter which he found waiting for him upon his return to Yew Tree Farm at dusk.

Martin locked the door of his room before he tore open the letter. The scrawl on the envelope was that of the Mole. What Bellamy wrote was usually very secret—and invariably it was written in code.

Five minutes later the following message was fixed firmly in the reader's mind:

"There is a man calling himself Fenton Sylvaine, living at a house known as the Beacon at Greenaleigh, a few miles away. Watch him carefully. He is up to some mischief, and I want to know what the devil it is. He is not working alone Report quickly.—B."

The letter burned, Lorne whistled softly to himself as he went to have his bath.



"I am risking a great deal to warn you," she said quietly. "*Do not go.*"

THE GIRL WHO TOOK AN OATH.

Jessie Milburn returned to the Rolls with eyes fixed steadily in front of her. She hated this foreign chauffeur with his too elaborate politeness, his babyish pink and white complexion, and his stealthy manner. When she first met him, his clear skin had led her to believe he was English, but she soon learned that the Latin predominated. His foreign blood showed itself unmistakably many times a day.

How much had he heard? Had she betrayed herself? If so, Max would pass the word to Sylvaine, and then—— Well-disciplined, as she had forced herself to be, she shuddered at that prospect. Life with Fenton Sylvaine had become far more nerve-racking than she had ever imagined it could be. Alone in that horrible house with him. Even meeting Valdez in London, and having to pretend to be flattered by his nauseating gallantry, had been a relief. Valdez would be coming to the Beacon the next day, and would then continue, no doubt, his sickening attentions. If only she dared slap him across the face just once! But, because of the task she had set herself, she had to smile—and go on smiling. For how much longer she could depend upon her resolution she did not know; her will had practically reached cracking-point a week ago.

But she must keep on. The oath she had made years before compelled her. If she were false to that trust now, she would never forgive herself. Eight years before, on the night that her dying father had made the confidence, she had sworn to seek his murderer out and expose him to the world. Eight years—and now, after what had seemed insurmountable difficulties, she believed the end was in sight.

She would do it alone; she had to do it alone. There must be no interference, no outside help. That was why she had warned this man Lorne, who Valdez had told her in the Lotus Night Club was a British Secret Service agent, to keep away. The reckoning with this monster, Fenton Sylvaine, had to be with her first; afterwards the law could step in, if it liked. But hers would be the hand to strike the first blow. She must be the one to strip the pretence from this master-mummer.

Sylvaine looked at her intently when she reached the car.

"Did he accept?" he asked. The evil eyes seemed intent on reading her soul.

"I gave him your message, Mr. Sylvaine, but he did not say if he would come or not. He asked me to tell you, however, that he was staying at the Yew Tree Farm. Perhaps that means he would like a more formal invitation." She had to say something.

"Well, step in—I want to get home." The tone was sharp and incisive; he might have been speaking to a servant. But that, Jessie reflected with bitterness, was exactly what she was. The word 'secretary' in her case was a mere mockery. Sylvaine treated her as a natural bully treats one whom he considers to be absolutely in his power.

During the drive home she speculated what the man she had warned, and whom she had purposely treated with such coldness, must be thinking of her. Apparently others besides herself were now aware of Sylvaine's true character, how he spent his energies in evil machinations; and this Martin Lorne, masquerading under another name, had evidently been sent down by the authorities to watch him. Taking up the attitude she had done, Lorne would probably think that she was connected with her employer's plans. What did it matter if he did? And yet, as a rush of blood flushed her cheeks, she found she could not ignore the tense expression which had been in his eyes. And the mockery of his voice—how it had stung!

They had passed Minehead by now, and were out on the cliff road. The gloomy mass of the Beacon soon showed against the skyline. If only she could master the secret of this house! The legend, ghastly as it was, she felt she could dismiss—her affair was with a monster of flesh and blood.

"I shall dine alone to-night—I have some problems to solve," stated Sylvaine, as the car stopped outside the entrance.

She bit her lip. To have to suffer such treatment! Then: "Very well, Mr. Sylvaine—if you should want me, will you kindly let me know?"

A grunt was the only answer.

A NIGHT ADVENTURE.

After dinner that night, Lorne, making an excuse, slipped out of the room. He put on hat and overcoat and quietly left the house. On the table in the hall was an electric-torch, and he took the liberty of borrowing it. The next morning

he would have to run into Minehead and purchase one.

It was as well he had borrowed this torch, he found, as he struck into the lane branching off into the high road, that led in turn to the village a mile or so away. There was no moon, a few stars were out, and it was as black as the inside of a bag. Unless one had the eyes of a cat, it would have been impossible to have seen a foot ahead.

He knew the general direction of the village from a talk he had had with Warriner; and, after leaving the police superintendent's house on the left, it was a comparatively easy matter to find the turning which led upwards into the main street of what he had heard Mr. Robert McHugh describe as one of the three prettiest villages in England.

Arrived at Cleveley Arms, which he had made his destination, Lorne ordered a drink in the snuggery to the left of the entrance, and joined for a short time in the conversation of the three men already present. Then, catching the landlord's eye, he asked if it was possible for him to use the telephone. "I want to get through to London," he explained.

The landlord led the way into what appeared to be a private sitting-room.

"But, excuse me, sir, aren't you the gentleman who's staying along with Mr. Warriner down at Yew Tree Farm? I fancy I saw you at the meet to-day."

"I daresay, landlord; I was there with Mr. Warriner. And you're quite right about me staying at the farm."

"Well, sir, you mustn't think me personal, or anything like that, but the farm is on the telephone; you could have saved yourself this walk if you had had a mind to."

"Well, I'm hanged!" was the reply. "You don't mean to say Warriner has the 'phone?"

"Yes, sir—he has!"

"Who'd have thought it; but then, you see, this is my first visit—and I only arrived last night. In any case, the walk back won't do me any harm—at least, I hope not. No dangerous characters about here, I suppose, landlord?"

The other laughed.

"Not since they sent old Bob Amos—Tom Baker, as he was called—to prison for beating his wife. That'll be your call, sir," as the telephone shrilled.

As he came out of the room five minutes later, Martin noticed a man whose hat was pulled well down over his eyes dart rapidly away in the direction of the hotel entrance. The sight caused a slight smile to appear round his lips; and, because he had anticipated that something of this sort might happen, he felt a glow of satisfaction. The walk had been worth while. He knew he could have telephoned from the farm, but he had not wanted to.

"Everything all right, sir?" inquired the landlord, emerging from his snuggery.

"Perfectly, thank you. I got a good line through to London, and there wasn't any trouble of any sort. I hope you won't mind having a drink with me, landlord?"

"Lord bless you, no, sir—thank you kindly. Won't you be staying, sir?"

"No; I must get back, I am afraid—Mr. Warriner will wonder where I've disappeared. Good-night!"

"Good-night, sir!"

Gripping the stick he had brought with him tightly by the ferrule-end, Lorne stepped out into the middle of the road and commenced his return journey without using his torch. He had established one fact—namely, that he had been spied upon whilst telephoning—and he was curious about establishing another. He had no idea who the listener-in might be, but he wondered what the eavesdropper's thoughts were as he overheard the request he had made over the 'phone—to tell Aunt Bessie that he had received her postcard, and that he certainly wouldn't forget to wear the bed-socks she had so kindly sent him!

More important than the thoughts of the man, however, was the action, if any, the fellow proposed to take. There was a matter of a mile to be traversed before he arrived back at the farm—with the blackness of the pit every inch of the way. A perverse sense of humour prevented Martin from switching on the torch; besides, the man, if he attacked, would do so from behind. On the other hand, of course, he might by this time have gone about his business, pondering over the peculiar problem of Aunt Bessie and the bed-socks.

But when he had walked into that pitch darkness for perhaps a quarter of a mile, Martin fancied he heard the sound for which he had been straining his ears. This was the soft pad-pad of footsteps on the hard roadway behind.

Someone was tracking him.

He did some quick thinking. Although he could not see, he calculated he was within a hundred yards or so of the main road off which he had turned to get to the village. For the space of three or four hundred yards he would have to walk along this main road, which, being the main thoroughfare into Minehead, was always fairly busy with vehicular traffic. After that, there came a turning into a deserted lane which ran all the way to the farm. The point of all this was—if the man behind intended to attack, would he do so before they came into the main road, or wait until they were nearer the farm?

Lorne smiled as he stopped suddenly. He would like a look at the man. It seemed desirable that he should give himself the chance of memorising the fellow's face. The problem of when and where the man might attack became waived. To get a good look at the vermin—he had his torch—that was the chief idea now.

Pausing for a moment as he made the complete turn, Martin listened. Monsieur, the enemy, whose own hearing must have been pretty acute, had also stopped; at any rate, no sound of following footsteps could now be heard—that sinister sound of gentle padding after had ceased.

Lorne, from his experience in this sort of work, argued that if the tracker had the least idea that he had aroused suspicion in the man he was following, he would not remain in the middle of the road; rather would he slink into the greater security of one of the hedges. Then, if the quarry should happen to turn, he would be in the better position of pouncing on him—should he want to pounce.

In this particular instance Lorne had resolved to do the pouncing. He had proved to himself on previous occasions that he possessed the faculty of being able to sense a man's presence even in the darkness, and he was now going to put this gift to the test.

Creeping along the side of the road nearest the right-hand hedge, he had proceeded for perhaps sixty yards, when he suddenly stopped. What he sought was in front—just in front—not more, perhaps, than a bare yard away.

He could see nothing—but he could hear a sound which, to him, was unmistakable—the sound of a man's rather hurried breathing.

Still, he was unable to visualise anything clearly. There was a vague outline which was probably the man's body, but beyond that—nothing. And yet—straining forward—he was able to see two whitish spots at a height of a man's head.

One quiet step forward—and he switched on his torch.

There was a dull click—but no light came. Something must have gone wrong with the battery. It must have been the purest accident, because no one had the opportunity of monkeying with the thing. He himself was to blame; he should have given the torch a closer examination before setting out.

He must be now within a foot or so of the man because he could feel the other's breath upon his face. And yet, uncanny and inexplicable as it was, he was unable to trace the man's face. Where his face should have been was nothing but blackness—a blackness that was no different to the abysmal gloom everywhere around. Only those two dirty-whitish spots showed. There was only a very short distance between them.

Suddenly Martin understood. Those white spots were the man's eyes. He was unable to outline the rest of the face because the colour fitted in so well with the darkness. Here, unless he was mistaken, was the beige gentleman—friend dago come unexpectedly to life in the strange setting of an Exmoor lane!

He did not waste any words. There was no need for any explanation. The man had eavesdropped and then stealthfully followed him. Why he should remain mute and inglorious now he could not understand, unless the fellow was rigid with fear.

Stepping back a pace, Martin put all he had into a swinging right. Aiming at a spot six inches below the now flickering white spots, he had the satisfaction of feeling his fist connect with something that felt substantially like a jaw-bone.

A crash followed. The beige gentleman, if, indeed, it was he, had billowed back into the thorny embrace of the hedge.

If there had been any rustic lovers within hearing, their mating whispers would have been interrupted a moment later by a series of strange-sounding, but vehement oaths. Being in a foreign language, they, mercifully, would not have understood the dire import of the words, but all the same they would have been shocked.

Martin Lorne was not shocked; but he was extremely interested. So well as he was able to understand, the gentleman who had fallen into the briars was cursing him in a mixture of three languages—French, Portuguese, and Spanish—and after this he had no longer any reason to doubt that here, in the flesh, was the very man he had desired so ardently to hit when seeing him for the first time at the Lotus Club two nights before.

But to hit him was not sufficient—however satisfying this was when he remembered the girl. He had to try to discover the motive the man had first, in endeavouring to listen-in to his telephonic talk; and, secondly, in sneaking after him like a footpad.

With this intention, he reached forward, groped for a moment or so, and then, catching hold of the other's collar, he started to pull him to his feet.

But the linguist evidently had other ideas. Unexpectedly, Lorne received a violent blow in the pit of the stomach. The man must have kicked him, and the pain was so excruciating that he was forced to relinquish his hold. There was a quick scuttle—the other, having got away, was, judging by the sound, running as fast as his legs would carry him down the country road. Meanwhile, Lorne was gasping in agony.

By the time he was able to stand upright, Martin realised it would be useless to attempt to follow the man. The thought of how he had been worsted was galling, but he had this satisfaction—for how much it was worth—the fellow was dark-skinned. It must have been either the dago or the black servant Warriner had said was in Sylvaine's household. Were these two the same? He determined soon to find out.

THE INVISIBLE DEATH.

He reached Yew Tree Farm without any further incident; but, upon arrival, discovered the Warriner household in a state of the utmost commotion. Mrs. Warriner was speaking agitatedly through the telephone in the hall. Her husband was obviously in a state of considerable excitement, and Robert McHugh was frowning over a cigarette.

Lorne caught Mrs. Warriner's final words: "Yes; come at once, doctor. Yes, very serious. She may be dead!"

Warriner, noticing Martin, walked across to him.

"Nasty business, this," he said.

"But what's happened? I've been out—up to the village." He didn't proceed to explain further, though he noticed McHugh raise his eyes at the words.

"A most extraordinary and unfortunate thing occurred here, Blake," explained McHugh. "We were sitting chatting in the lounge when we heard a scream. Before any of us could get to the door, Marjorie, one of the maids, burst in. Her face was white, and she was in a state of great fright.

"Apparently," resumed the speaker after a short pause, "Ellen, the other maid in the kitchen, had been listening-in to the wireless programme, and was entertaining Marjorie with scraps of information from the News Bulletin, when, without any warning, this poor girl Ellen suddenly gave a low cry and collapsed across the kitchen table. Marjorie, as she explained to us, was so startled that at first she did not know what to do. Then she rushed to Ellen's assistance and took the earphones off. As she did so, she said she felt what she described as 'a tingling feeling, something like an electric shock,' in her hands. She had something else to think about at the time, however; and when she found that Ellen had gone off in a dead faint she rushed to her mistress."

"Was it a heart attack, do you think, Mrs. Warriner?" Lorne asked.

"Something far worse than that, I am afraid. It seems an extraordinary thing to say, but the girl appears to be in a trance. I have 'phoned for the doctor—and now I must go up to Ellen again!"

"Is this girl strong?" McHugh asked Warriner, when the latter's wife had left them.

Stealthily a black shadow detached itself from the darkness and slunk along in the wake of the detective.

"So far as I know. But she's in a bad way now, at any rate. I thought at first the girl was dead when we picked her up, but when I felt her heart I found it was still beating faintly, though the action was irregular."

"Let us hope the doctor, when he comes, will be able to reassure us," commented McHugh.

But before Dr. Wyngate from Minehead could arrive, Ellen, the maid, was dead.

The doctor could only give confirmation. He asked a number of questions, made an exhaustive examination of the body, and then frankly admitted that, without a post-mortem examination, he was quite in the dark as to the cause of death.

"There will have to be an inquest. When I get back I will ring up the coroner," he said, and departed, leaving the occupants of Yew Tree Farm as bewildered as ever.

"Sounds almost like black magic," commented McHugh to Lorne, when they were left alone. "It's a horrible thing to think of a young and presumably healthy girl like that dying in this extraordinarily mysterious fashion. What's your idea, Blake?"

The man he addressed busied himself with filling a pipe. He had come to the conclusion he was engaged on the elucidation of a mystery unique in his experience. He must trust no one until he had proof of them.

"Like you, I am absolutely stumped, McHugh. As you say, the affair is extraordinarily mysterious."

"I will tell you something, young man," went on McHugh, with an earnestness that seemed entirely genuine. "This tragedy to-night is no ordinary occurrence. It is bound to create a tremendous commotion—not to say panic—and I would give a great deal to be able even to start to solve the mystery."

"You think there is something behind it?"

"I do!" was the emphatic answer. "And now let's go to bed, for we can't do anything for the poor soul, and, I must confess, the affair has distressed me."

Alone in his room, Lorne considered seriously McHugh's startling words. What had he meant when he said he was convinced there was something behind the girl's death? The tragedy was certainly peculiar, but to suggest, as McHugh had done, that some evil agency had been at work that night, seemed a strange stretching of the imagination—unless the speaker had some good reason for such a statement. Did McHugh know more than he chose to say? Was he all he appeared. If he were acting he must be a master of the art, for he seemed genuine enough. Again, who could wish to bring about the death of an ordinary servant-girl? And, even assuming that the girl did possess an enemy sufficiently malignant, how could her death have been brought about?

Death by wireless! It might be good enough for the basis of a sensational film, but such a weird possibility had to be ruled out of any practical consideration.

And yet—— This thing had happened whilst he had been, not in the house, it was true, but certainly in the district. Had that fact any significance? That girl had said something about death—it had been the whole substance of her warning. The puzzle seemed insoluble, and he decided to give it up, at least for that night. But he locked the door and saw to the fastenings of the windows before getting into bed.

As he dressed the following morning he noticed Warriner rushing across the paddock, evidently in a state of intense excitement. He was clutching what looked like a newspaper.

Soon he heard pounding on the stairs. Then a knock sounded on his door.

"Blake—Blake!"

"Come in—the door's not locked," he replied; and, as a staring-eyed Warriner rushed into the room: "Why, what's the matter?"

"Matter enough!" replied Warriner. "Read that!" He pointed to an article on the front page of the "Daily Comet," which he was holding.

Lorne took the paper from him, caught sight of the staring headlines, and read:

"MYSTERY WIRELESS DEATHS.

"OVER 100 IN SOMERSET AND DEVON.

"WIDESPREAD CONSTERNATION.

"At a late hour last night the 'Daily Comet' received a number of telegrams and telephone messages from its correspondents in different parts of Devon and Cornwall containing news of the most startling character. The information sent in each case was that whilst listening-in to the Second News Bulletin last night various wireless enthusiasts collapsed mysteriously, and, in practically every case, died shortly afterwards.

"Upwards of a hundred deaths are reported altogether. The occurrences, as may be imagined, have caused the utmost consternation, and it is expected that questions will be asked when Parliament sits to-day.

"Meanwhile, the authorities have taken the matter in hand."

Suddenly the girl seemed to shudder. Then with a low cry she collapsed across the table.

"So there were others," said Lorne, as he handed back the paper. "This is a serious business. Have you seen McHugh yet?"

"No; I'm just going along to him. I came in here because your room was first. This will finish wireless; I'll have the dashed aerial taken down and the whole thing done away with."

"I think it would be wise, Warriner—at least, until we get some sort of official explanation."

"The whole country will be panic-stricken. Oh, well; we'd better have some breakfast, I suppose. I'll go along and see McHugh."

It was a very solemn party that met at the breakfast-table a quarter of an hour later. A shadow hung over the room.

After the meal was over, McHugh touched his fellow-guest on the shoulder.

"I want to walk up to the village. Care to come?" he asked.

"Yes, I'd like to."

For a hundred yards or so, after leaving the house, the two men were silent. Then McHugh started the conversation with a challenge. "Look here, Blake, I don't know who the deuce you are, but it seems to me you're an honest man. The point is, are you here as an ordinary guest of the farm, or have you some special purpose in your visit. I've been watching points, and it strikes me you have."

"I'm not prepared to answer you, McHugh."

"The devil, you're not! Well, then, I'm going to take it for granted I'm right and get my ideas off my chest. After seeing the morning paper I am more than ever convinced that there is some devilish agency at the back of this business, and as honest citizens it's up to us to see if we can clear things up."

"I agree. Go ahead!"

"Well, there's a fiend loose somewhere—perhaps not far away—and it's up to every decent-minded member of the community to try to find him."

Lorne looked at the smoke curling upwards from his pipe. Could he trust this man, McHugh? At first he had suspected him on account, chiefly, of the escape of the intruder on the first night of his stay at the farm. But there was something genuine about McHugh. Should he take him for what he appeared to be?

Lorne was a man of quick decision. Within a minute he had made up his mind in his companion's favour.

"You can think what you like, my boy," went on McHugh, impatient of an answer. "I have my own ideas, and I am going to stick to them. And, if necessary, work them out, too."

"I'm with you, sir. We will proceed together. As to who I am, I must ask you to take me on trust for the time being."

"Agreed!" answered McHugh heartily, seizing his companion's hand in a warm grip.

By this time they had reached the police superintendent's house, outside of which they could see a small crowd. Listening to the remarks, they soon learned that there had been another Cleveley victim to the previous night's unseen death horror besides the maid at Yew Tree Farm. This was a widow, much beloved, who, since her eyesight had failed, had found in her wireless set her chief consolation. Living alone, the discovery had not been made until that morning. The news had been taken to the police superintendent, and the latter was in consultation with his superiors at Taunton. The crowd were waiting for him to come out and speak to them.

"We shan't get anything here," whispered McHugh, "so we might as well walk on. I have a telegram I want to send off."

At the small post-office they found the staff in a state of high nervous tension. To begin with, the news of the two Cleveley deaths had caused tremendous excitement in the village, and then again they were being heavily over-worked. The fine weather had caused a good many visitors to remain on in the district, and these persons' relatives, naturally anxious after reading the morning's sensational news, had sent off relays of telegrams begging for reassuring news.

It was apparent that McHugh would have to wait a considerable time before he could receive attention, for the office was crowded to the door, and Lorne stated that he would stroll up the village street in order to kill time.

"Very well; you might get me some Navy Cut tobacco, as you will be passing the tobacconist's."

As he walked away, Martin once more debated with himself the advisability of telling his companion at least a portion of the truth about himself.

Purchasing the tobacco, Martin returned to the post office just in time to see McHugh emerge.

"This seems to be for you, Blake," he said, extending a buff envelope; "from an anxious friend, no doubt."

"Perhaps," Lorne replied, because he did not know what else to say.

He took the telegram, feeling in his bones that it was from Sir Harker Bellamy.

His surmise was correct. The message to the ordinary person would have been conventional enough, being merely a statement, signed "Harry," to the effect that the sender was posting off the required magazines that day, but even without his code-book, the Secret Service man was able to decipher its meaning:

"Report on Sylvaine required urgently."

There was no signature—and none was needed.

"Not bad news, I hope?" inquired Mr. Robert McHugh politely.

"Oh, no—rather good, as a matter of fact," Lorne replied somewhat lamely. He had made up his mind about McHugh—he could not drag this man into a position of such danger as he was about to enter. The telegram from Bellamy was explicit; he had to get to close quarters with Fenton Sylvaine—find out as much as he could about the man, analyse his character, ascertain what he was doing in that house with its terrible history, and then report to London.

All this had to be done at once.

And he would have to do it alone.

SYLVAINE IS JUBILANT.

Jessie woke that morning with a curious sense of foreboding. She had the conviction that something dreadful was about to happen. This feeling had been always more or less with her during her six months' association with Fenton Sylvaine, and more particularly since arriving at the Beacon, but this morning it was particularly acute. She fancied the previous day's events—meeting the man whom Valdez had said was Martin Lorne—must have made her peculiarly sensitive, and she tried to master her feelings.

She found it extremely difficult to assume control of herself, however, after picking up the morning paper, which had been placed at the side of her plate at the breakfast-table. In her overwrought state—she had slept very badly the night before—her eyes had leapt at the sensational headlines on the front page of the "Comet," England's favourite morning journal. The "Comet" might be vivid, but it was certainly enterprising, and, as the occupants of Yew Tree Farm had previously been made aware, it had dealt ably with the best piece of home news that had come across the wires for a long time.

Allowing her food to get cold—Jessie was breakfasting alone—she read and re-read the announcement of the wireless deaths the night before. As she did so her mind went back to the weird moaning and whistling noises that, from time to time during the past month, had kept her awake at night. Upon her employer remarking on her washed-out appearance, Sylvaine made no pretence to gallantry. One morning, a week ago, when she had reported for duty, she had asked him what these singular sounds could be.

Sylvaine had smiled (if that twitching of the lips could be called a smile) in the

manner she had grown to loathe, and replied: "You must either have heard the skull screaming, Miss Milburn—you remember my telling you of the legend when we came to the Beacon—or your imagination must have been allowed to get the better of you." With that he had somewhat peremptorily dismissed the subject, with the additional remark: "It is foolish to give your mind to such idle fancies—in all probability what you heard was nothing but the wind."

She had not been convinced. Of course, it might have been the wind—the wind, when Nature was in an angry mood, could certainly howl like a demon being robbed of its prey; but her employer's manner, mocking and satirical as it had been, had forced her to believe that Sylvaine was hiding something. Coming to the Skull, did he himself believe in that gruesome legend? If so, strong-nerved as he might be in spite of his disability, why had he picked on this house, of all others, in which to live?

Laying aside the newspaper, she forced herself to eat some breakfast. It was stupid to go without food. When the crisis for which she had been preparing and steeling herself for so long at last came, she would have need of all her vitality. After she had been successful in accumulating sufficient evidence against the man who called himself Fenton Sylvaine to hand him over to Justice, then would come a further ordeal. She would have to give evidence in a court of law. It would be her word alone—backed by the evidence she had been able to gather—which would send this human devil to prison for the rest of his life. She would be alone—terribly alone—with no one to help or sustain her, but she was going through with it. The oath she had made to her father on his death-bed that night in Madras was a sacred bond.

The time came for her to take up her day's work. This started with a visit to her employer in his room. Max, who combined the duties of chauffeur with that of valet-attendant, had prepared Sylvaine, and when she entered the room she found her employer sitting up in bed finishing what had evidently been a hearty breakfast. Fenton Sylvaine's nervous system might be impaired, but his digestive apparatus remained in good condition.

Jessie was surprised to notice the jubilation which Sylvaine displayed—the man was positively beaming! Often, when she went to take correspondence after breakfast, he was almost unbearable. When he was in these vile moods it took all of even Max's tact to manage him.

But this morning he behaved like a man who had received some extraordinarily g o o d news.

"Sit down, my dear; I shan't keep you but a minute or so. Well, Max"—turning to his attendant—"so it's another fine morning, eh?"

"A very fine morning, sir. When I cleaned the car this morning I f o u n d m y s e l f whistling—it was so good to be alive!"

A burst of inexplicable laughter greeted the words. Sylvaine was shaking with mirth.

"Did you hear what this fool of a Max said, my dear?" he asked, turning to Jessie. "He felt so pleased with himself at being alive this beautiful October morning that he found himself whistling with joy!"

"There is nothing very strange in that, Mr. Sylvaine, surely?" she felt bound to reply. "I envy Max his feeling."

"Why?" came the sharp reply. "Are *you* not feeling like whistling for joy this beautiful October morning?"

"Not exactly; I've just been reading about all those poor people who died last night. It depressed me."

"The wireless deaths. Very remarkable," replied Sylvaine, after a pause; "but you mustn't allow it to affect you. I have a curious philosophy; I can't help thinking that more than two-thirds of the people encumbering the earth at the present time would be better dead So that, you see, this visitation, or whatever you may care to call it, which occurred last night, may, after all, have been nothing but a blessing in disguise. You will recall, no doubt, the words of Shakespeare:

"Of all the wonders that I yet have heard
It seems to me most strange that men should fear;
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come."

"And nothing we can do can stop it." As he looked at her, with his lips twitching in the way she had grown to hate, she thought his eyes had never before seemed so full of loathesome evil. For a man like this to prate about not being afraid to die! There should be a separate Hell being got ready for such as Fenton Sylvaine.

Without waiting for her to reply, Sylvaine dismissed the attendant and motioned for Jessie to commence taking dictation In addition to exchanging correspondence with a great many people all over the world on various scientific matters, Sylvaine occupied herself with compiling treatises which, so far as she could tell, were never published. Much of the matter thus dictated was almost unintelligible to her, and she had the greatest difficulty in finding the correct spelling of the technical terms. The mastery which Sylvaine possessed of obscure subjects induced her reluctant admiration for the man's intellect

It was his intellect, as much as the man himself, which she mistrusted. Although she had as yet only general principles to go upon, she sensed that Sylvaine was using his remarkable brain for an illegitimate and even evil purpose. What line of scoundrelism he was pursuing she could not tell, but for weeks past she had come to the conclusion that this scientific work which she typed was merely a hobby—and perhaps a blind. It was not the work which absorbed him. That he did in secret—with, perhaps, the help of Valdez.

For over an hour Sylvaine dictated letters and memoranda at such a rapid pace that the hand holding the fountain-pen ached with the strain. Then she was dismissed; and it was with a sigh of thankfulness that she escaped.

The secretary had scarcely gone before a door to the left of the bed opened and the person whom Martin Lorne had playfully termed "the beige gentleman" stepped into the room.

Fenton Sylvaine greeted the newcomer with a burst of laughter.

"Well, Valdez, have you nothing to say to me—the ruler of the fates of men? Confess, now, that, with your help, I have become a genius!"

The Portuguese did not respond in kind to this verbal extravagance. On the contrary, he frowned. He looked as though he had something on his mind.

"I did not know you would go so far as this. Don't you realise the danger?" He shuddered as he spoke in low, excited tones.

"Danger?" Sylvaine mouthed the word in bitter contempt. "Can you achieve anything without risk? You want money; so do I. Well, we hold a colossal fortune in our hands, and you prate like a weak-minded fool about danger! Faugh! Isn't this Thing so powerful that no one dare touch us? You have seen what I did last night?" And he pointed to the morning newspaper lying at the foot of the bed.

The other remained unconvinced.

"It is too dangerous," he repeated; "and"—sinking his voice—"already they are suspicious. There is, for instance, the fellow Lorne."

"You needn't worry about him," replied the man propped up by pillows; "I have invited Mr. Martin Lorne here to dinner tonight."

The Portuguese raised himself on his toes. He looked like a crouching beast preparing to spring.

"You have invited him here?" he screamed. "*Here*——"

The invalid whipped a revolver from behind his pillow and levelled it at the intruder. "Be careful what you say!" he snapped.

"Precisely. It may not have occurred to you, Valdez, that it is rather important I should know what exact motive has induced Mr. Martin Lorne, of the Department X2 in the British Secret Service, to come to this particular part of Exmoor at this particular time. I know no better way of extracting the necessary information from the gentleman in question than by inviting him to partake of my hospitality."

"He will not come."

"You seem rather positive about it; but I venture to differ, my dear Valdez. In fact, I am quite willing to wager that Mr. Lorne will be my guest at no later period than to-night. I will tell you on what line of reasoning I base that prediction: He is suspicious of me, perhaps (for what reason, I confess, I am yet in the dark), but I disarm that suspicion by inviting him to my house."

"That very fact will make him doubly suspicious!" interrupted the other with an oath. "Why should you, he will ask himself, invite a perfect stranger to your house? A thousand devils, Sylvaine, are you completely mad? Has this—this"—pointing with a quivering finger to the newspaper—"turned your brain? I am beginning to think so."

Had Jessie been present she would probably have marvelled at the control which Sylvaine continued to exercise. It was as though his good spirits that morning refused to allow him to lose his temper.

"I am very sane," he replied. "Unlike you, Valdez, I am at my best now that my dreams are beginning to bear fruit. I can look success in the face. But to reply to your argument: You are wrong when you say that Martin Lorne is a perfect stranger. On the contrary, Miss Milburn and I met him yesterday when we went to the meet of the local staghounds. He very courteously spoke to us, explaining something of the intricacies of the chase. He struck me, I must say, as a very likeable young fellow—so directly I get up I am going to send him a written invitation by Max to dine with me to-night."

"It is madness! I tell you, he is not a fool! And he has, already, his suspicions. He is one we should dispose of, not encourage——"

"Rest assured, my dear Valdez, that if I decide it is necessary, he *will* be disposed of." The evil eyes of the speaker gleamed.

"But it will be known that he has come here. Already the police of the country will be on the watch. Surely you have gone mad, Sylvaine."

"The tone of your conversation is becoming just a trifle wearisome, my dear Valdez; if you are so afraid, there is nothing to prevent you leaving this house—or, indeed, the country."

"And allow you to rob me of my brains! A thousand devils, do you tempt me to kill you?"

"Be careful what you are saying." The invalid put a hand behind him and produced a revolver. "You know me well enough to realise that I should not have the slightest hesitation in shooting you like a dog if you dared to attempt anything foolish, Valdez. But this is merely hysterical nonsense on your part," he added with a change of tone. "Let me assure you once again that you need have no alarm. If I decide it necessary to dispose of my visitor to-night, you can rest satisfied that it will be done in a thoroughly safe manner. But, first, it will be necessary to know what is in that young man's brain."

"It will be better that I should not be here. No; it is not that I am afraid, but ——"

"But—what? I can see you have something fresh on your mind. What is worrying you now?"

Valdez hesitated before making his reply. "I have not been happy about this man," he said finally; "so, last night, when you were making your experiment——"

"You were in such a funk that I was glad to get you out of the way," commented the other curtly.

"Granted I was afraid—and no wonder. As I have said, I did not expect you to go so far. But, enough. When I was in Cleveley, I saw this man, Lorne, enter the local hotel. He had come, I discovered, to telephone to London. Does that not tell you something?"

"Well. Did you manage to hear what he had to say?"

"It was difficult; but, yes, I managed it."

"And what did he say?"

"I only got near enough to the private room he used to catch the end. What he said sounded like the merest nonsense, but ——"

"You had better leave me to be the best judge of that."

"Well, all I could make out," continued the narrator with a grimace, "was that he wished to thank his Aunt Bessie for sending him the bed-socks."

"And this," scoffed Sylvaine, "is the man of whom you confess to be afraid!"

"It must have been a blind, that message. Perhaps he guessed he was being overheard—I do not know about that—but there must have been some reason. He was on his guard, in any case, because when I started to follow him after he left the hotel——"

"Why did you follow him?"

"I thought he might be going to put information before the police."

"Valdez, for a man possessing one of the greatest inventive brains in the world, you certainly possess very little commonsense."

"I tell you, I do not like this man, Lorne, being here," expostulated the Portuguese. "It was singular, was it not, that he should have been present at that night club the other evening?"

"There may have been nothing more in it than mere coincidence."

"You dismiss everything!" stormed the other. "Let me tell you that this man, Lorne, will not walk blindly into your trap; or, if he comes here, it will be for his own purpose. He guessed I—or at least someone—was following him last night."

"Did he speak to you?"

"No; he did not speak. He hit me instead." The speaker put a hand up to a jaw that still felt very tender.

"And what did *you* do?"

"I kicked—and ran away. It would have been suicidal had he recognised me, I think."

Sylvaine snorted in fresh contempt.

"You've been doing far too much thinking lately, my friend. Your nerves have gone back on you in consequence. It would be better, as I suggested just now, if you took a little holiday."

"I cannot do that, Sylvaine," was the answer, "because I do not trust you. The original idea was mine; I will not have it stolen. It is madness this attempt of yours to blackmail—it would have been far better had we sold it straightaway to——"

"That is sufficient," Sylvaine cut in before the Portuguese could say the name. In this I am determined to have my own way. As for the man, Lorne, he shall be dealt with as I have promised."

Squirming with impotent fury, Valdez backed to the door. Whilst he had a hand on the knob, he turned.

"And this girl. She, also, is not a fool—that I know. When we were in London she asked me many questions—too many. You will let me deal with her if what I think is true?" His voice was febrile with excitement.

"And what is it you think about my secretary?"

"That she also is a spy!" declared Valdez, and went out, banging the door.

"The man hasn't the heart of a herring," Sylvaine told himself as he reached forward to pick up the morning newspaper.

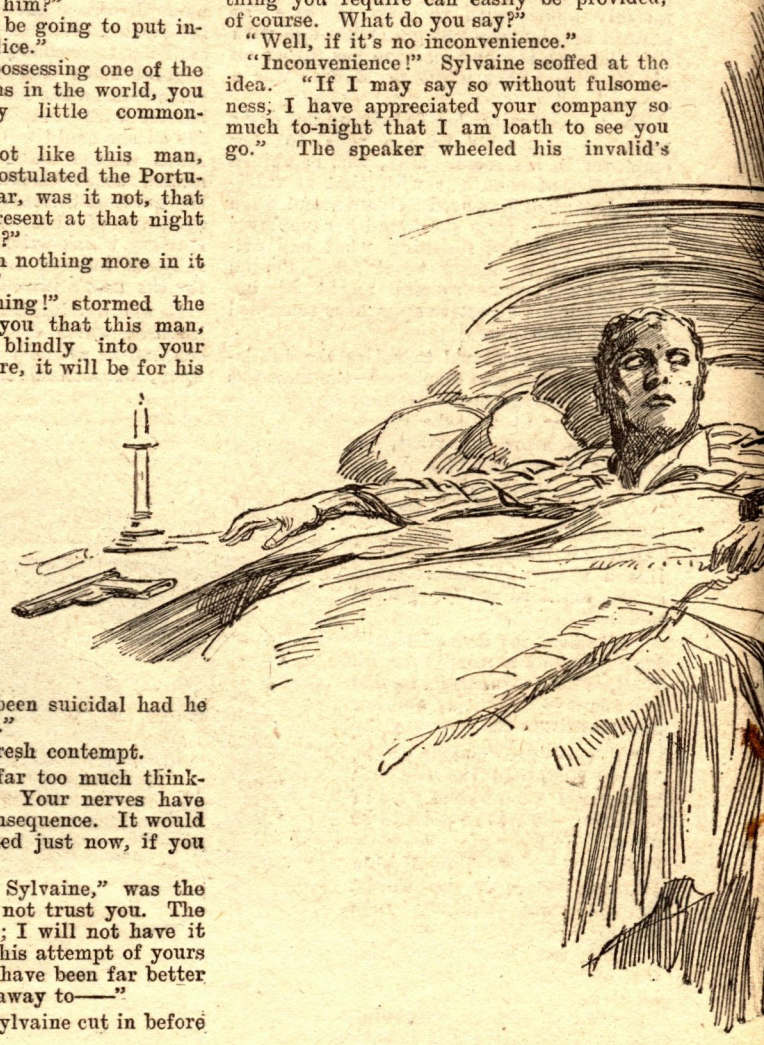
As he read the principal news item, blazoned on the front page, his face became convulsed. Any unprejudiced observer would have been prepared at that moment to have supported the Portuguese's accusation that the man was mad.

NIGHTMARE.

"I must make you a thousand apologies, my dear Mr. Blake," said his host. "It is inconceivably stupid of my chauffeur to allow the one car I happen to possess to break down at such an awkward moment. Had I not been foolishly old-fashioned, I should have had the telephone installed. As it is, I am afraid there is only one alternative—I propose that you grant me the privilege of staying the night. Anything you require can easily be provided, of course. What do you say?"

"Well, if it's no inconvenience."

"Inconvenience!" Sylvaine scoffed at the idea. "If I may say so without fulsomeness, I have appreciated your company so much to-night that I am loath to see you go." The speaker wheeled his invalid's



chair nearer the blazing fire and smiled upon his guest.

"It's very kind of you to say so." Lorne looked across at the girl who made up the small party. "If Mr. Sylvaine goes on displaying such agreeable hospitality, Miss Milburn, you will soon be turning people away in shoals from the Beacon.

His attempt to draw her into conversation was not successful. All through the evening—ever since his arrival, in fact—she had looked ill and worried. Was this because he had so deliberately disregarded her warning of the day before?

He endeavoured to get a minute's private talk, but this had proved impossible. Sylvaine's eyes had never left him from the moment of his arrival; and, although the man went out of his way to insist that the girl should remain after dinner, instead of going to her own room, as she had requested, he had allowed them no opportunity of talking together.

The girl now rose. Turning to her employer, she said: "My headache is worse. If you will excuse me, Mr. Sylvaine, I will go to bed."

Lorne felt his temper rising as he noticed the way the invalid regarded her. Sylvaine looked like an ogre.

Her employer gave his consent.

"Of course, we will excuse you, my dear; I have a great many things I should like to talk over with Mr. Blake, and we may be up late. Good-night, and very pleasant dreams." The man's lips twitched in a manner that Martin found peculiarly repulsive.

Standing by the door, which he had sprang up to open, he tried to give the girl a reassuring look as she passed through. If he could have had the least glimpse into her mind he would have known how to treat her; as it was, she remained an enigma. The only clue he had was that all through the evening she had shown herself to be in deadly fear of her employer, that sinister-looking invalid. Was the terror on her own account—or on his? If only she had given him a clue——

Shutting the door, he returned to his seat by the fire. By consenting to stay the night—that story about the broken-down Rolls had obviously been an invention, and a somewhat clumsy one at that—he had definitely committed himself. As it happened, however, this proposal of his host's had fitted in with his plans—the secret which this house contained (he was positive there was a secret, and that Sylvaine controlled it

Martin Lorne awoke with a start. Instinctively he reached for his gun as he turned to see the armed figure clambering over the sill.

for some nefarious purpose of his own) had to be learned, and at the earliest possible opportunity Otherwise, his visit would have been fruitless.

"I must apologise for the disability which prevents me from performing my duties as a host as well as I should like," said Sylvaine; "but I do beg of you, Mr. Blake, to make yourself absolutely at home. You will find cigars——"

"I prefer a pipe, if you don't mind!" Lorne, putting a hand into his pocket, was reassured by the cold touch of the tiny automatic which nestled against his tobacco-pouch. The two things probably made a decent-sized bulge, but he could not help that. It was just as well, perhaps, that Sylvaine should know he wasn't such a consummate ass as to venture into his lair totally unprepared.

"Do help yourself to some whisky—the Tantalus is behind you, my dear fellow."

The "dear fellow" caused Martin to feel that someone had thrust a handful of spiders down his back, but he controlled his reply.

"I'm quite happy, thanks."

Sylvaine smiled.

"I daresay you were somewhat surprised to receive my invitation, Mr. Blake? Your name is Blake, is it not?"

"Blake is correct." Where was the fellow leading? Had he any suspicion?

"Of course—Blake. Oh, yes—of course. Sometimes I am afraid my memory isn't what it was. I have been an invalid for so many years. But I do not intend to bore you with my infirmities. I was remarking that, no doubt, you were surprised to receive my invitation. As a matter of fact, if I may say so, I was very much struck by your kindness in speaking to a lonely old man yesterday at the meet. Also, your personality happened to appeal to me—and there you are!" The speaker wound up with a kind of verbal flourish.

"It was most kind of you, sir; and I have had a very delightful evening." Lorne kept the words pleasant enough, but he was very much on his guard. The man was watching him with feverish interest; but, although he had ventured of his own free will into the spider's parlour, he was fully aware of the danger.

"You are a stranger to these parts, Mr. Blake?"

"Yes. That is to say, I've never stayed here before. But I was a little run-down after an illness, and I was recommended to try the Exmoor air. Jolly good it is, too! Bucked me up no end, although I've been here only two days."

Sylvaine nodded in agreement

"Comfortable where you are staying?"

"Very. Do you happen to know Mr. and Mrs. Warriner?"

"No. You see, like yourself, I am practically a stranger to this district. I was recommended to live here by a London specialist. As you are a visitor, perhaps you do not know the legend attached to this house—you're not nervous by any chance I hope?"

"Good heavens, no!" declared the visitor. Once again Lorne asked himself what the other could have in his mind.

"I only asked you that because this is supposed to be a house with a somewhat terrible history. It is known in the neighbourhood—indeed, throughout Somerset, I believe—as 'The House of the Screaming Skull.'"

"Rather weird," commented Lorne, studying the other from behind the smoke-screen made by his pipe.

"Of course, it's all a lot of nonsense—but I merely warn you in case, if you do hear a devil of a rumpus during the night, you will know that it's the Skull having one of its periodical screams. Ha—ha!"

"Seems a curious habit for a skull." He must not let Sylvaine think he was aware of the story. That would betray the fact that the invalid had been under discussion by the Warriners. Sylvaine could form his own conclusions about that, if he liked.

"Oh, it's just another of these stupid superstitions, I expect, that's been handed down from one generation to another This house, according to the house-agent from whom I am renting it (and he only told me after I had signed the contract!) was built several hundreds of years ago by a man who was supposed to have made a fortune out of the African slave trade. He is believed to have murdered a negro servant here, and it is this nigger's skull which is supposed to do the screaming A lot of darned nonsense, I should say Who ever heard such a story?"

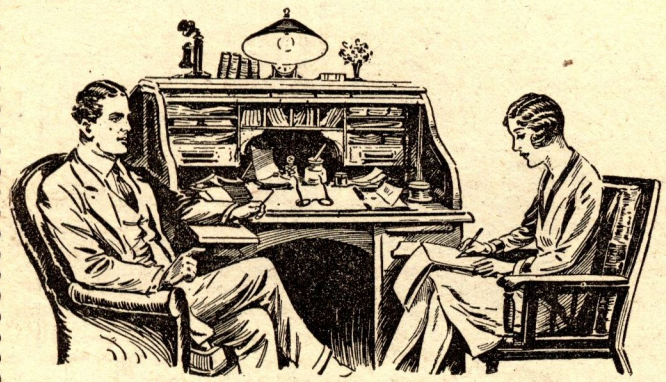
"Why does it scream?"

"Heaven knows."

"Is the skull still in the house?"

"Oh, yes. I'll show it to you to-morrow, if you like. I've had a very good mind to pitch the thing into the sea, but, according to the local tradition, it's very unlucky even to touch it. As I've already hinted, I'm not exactly a firm believer in superstition of this sort, but at the same time I don't know that I want deliberately to flout the gods. They have already dealt pretty badly with me"—glancing down at the legs which were covered by a rug.

"I can quite understand your point of view. If I were you, Mr. Sylvaine, I should certainly allow the skull to remain where it is—so long as you find it doesn't do any harm."



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

SUCCESS UPON SUCCESS! THE EDITOR GREETS YOU

IN last week's story, "The Man From Ashanti," we added yet another success to the nine issues of The THRILLER preceding it. At least, that is the only conclusion I feel I can come to if the letters of congratulation are any criterion. The majority of readers ask for another novel by the same author, and I have much pleasure in informing them that I have already approached Mr. Stacey Blake, who has promised to set to work without delay. Your enthusiasm was more than Mr. Blake could resist. He is already preparing a story which I hope to place before you at an early date.

The number of The THRILLER you now have in your hands, I feel certain will meet with general approval. The author of "The Screaming Skull" is one of the most popular writers of thriller stories of the day, and his work is presented to you in this issue as something special. It will be realised, therefore, that no obstacle will be allowed to prevent us from maintaining the high standard of fiction appearing in The THRILLER. There is hardly need to ask what you think of it; I know exactly what your opinion will be.

Every reader of this paper will remember the story that appeared in the fifth issue, "The Man Who Quit," by Anthony Skene. This story was specially commented upon, consequently, I have hastened Mr. Skene's next story along in order that it will appear in next week's issue. You will like this latest thriller, "The Wrecker," even better than Anthony Skene's last; you can rest assured that it will be something particularly good. In this story, the villain of the piece lives right up to the title, causing no end of a wreck and leading to countless thrilling episodes that will hold you spell-bound. I urge you not to miss "The Wrecker"—you will be sorry if you do.

It is a great satisfaction to know that The THRILLER has been the means of introducing the "Baffler" craze into this country. This new detective story game has caught on, and all over the country people are making efforts to unravel the fascinating crime problems appearing in this paper week by week. Many are now so enthusiastic that in their impatience for the publication of the next problem they have adopted the idea of inventing mysteries for their friends to solve. Introduce your friends to this special feature of The THRILLER and make them "bafflerites," too.

Last week I intimated that the serial, "The Trapper," now drawing near conclusion, would be replaced by a story written by a popular author. It is with a feeling of pleasure that I am able to announce that the contributor of the serial to follow will be John G. Brandon, whose name will be familiar to you all and will need no further introduction by me. You will at least know that there is yet another good thing positively on its way, and further details will be given in coming issues of The THRILLER.

Yours sincerely,

The Editor

"It hasn't up till now; in fact "—with a silent spasm of laughter rather revolting to watch—"I have come to regard the relic as my mascot. I have been better in health since I came here, for instance, than I have been for very many years. Of course, it is lonely—but, then, I like loneliness. I have been a lonely man, if it comes to that, all my life."

Lorne pressed down the tobacco in his pipe.

"And your secretary, Miss Milburn. Doesn't she complain?" he asked. "This is rather a bleak spot for a girl."

His host wagged his head reassuringly.

"Miss Milburn is devoted to me," he replied; "such loyalty is very rare in these days. Wherever I am, there she is content to be. And, of course, Minehead is a very short distance away—a matter of a mile or so. Tell me, Mr. Blake, you are, I should say, a judge of character—what is your opinion of my secretary?"

"For what it is worth, I should think that she is a girl distinctly above the average." Since he was obviously expected to say something, he might just as well say what he conscientiously thought.

"Yes, she is. Sometimes I feel very selfish in keeping her tied to the side of an invalid like myself, but she is very loyal—oh, extremely loyal! I doubt very much if she would consent to leave me, even if I gave her notice. She is quite devoted to me."

But for the spasm of laughter which again seemed to convulse him, the speaker might have been indulging in a fit of maudlin rhetoric. As it was, Martin was now able to make a pretty shrewd guess at the reason of the girl's restrained terror that night. Sylvaine had recently discovered something which he was probably holding over her as a threat. And now he was making a mockery of the fact.

"Well, it's getting late—dear me, it's gone twelve o'clock. I hope I haven't been boring you, Mr. Blake?"

"You certainly haven't been guilty of that, Mr. Sylvaine."

"Sleeping so badly as I do, I am a very late person myself, but I mustn't break in upon your night's rest. I will ring for my man to show you to your room."

Lorne rose. He would have given a great deal more money than he carried on him to have known all that was passing in this man's mind—but he imagined he knew a certain amount. Sylvaine was looking at him in the same way as, earlier in the evening, he had seen him look at Jessie Milburn. The man was feasting his horrible eyes on him—gloating over him. There was the lust of an inconceivable cruelty in his invalid's face.

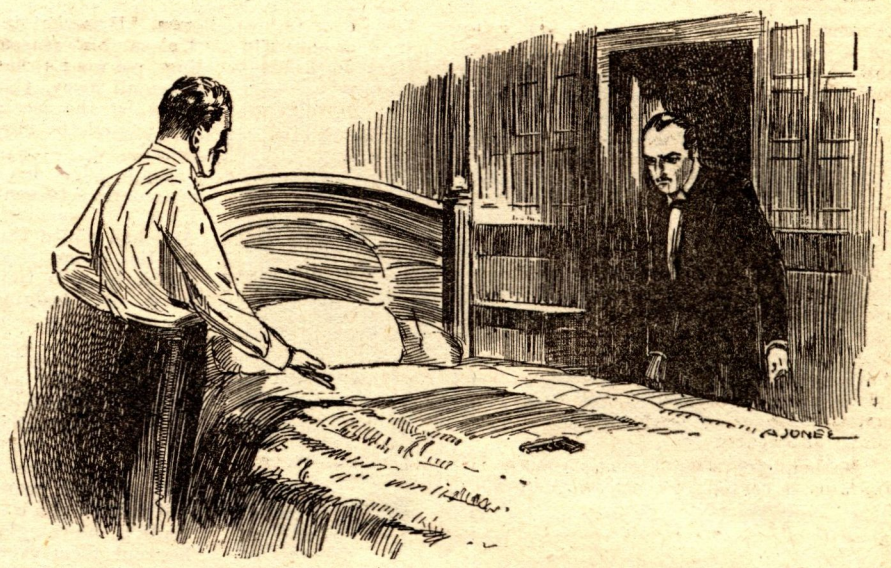
Physical weakling though the other was, Lorne was sorely tempted. He wanted to take him by the neck and shake him until he was dead. For Fenton Sylvaine was one of those creatures, he felt sure, who actually deserved death. But this man was not so cunning as he himself imagined; he had already exposed his weakness, and, to beat him, he must continue to act the part of the simpleton he had pretended to be.

In answer to the bell which Sylvaine had pressed, the man Martin had seen acting as chauffeur the day before appeared.

"I am not able to keep up a large establishment, Mr. Blake, but you will find that Max will be quite competent to see to your comfort. Max, take Mr. Blake along to his room."

"Yes, sir."

Following the man, after wishing his host good-night, Lorne was shown into a large and comfortably-furnished bed-room. A suit of pyjamas was laid out on the bed, a box of cigarettes was on the small table by the side; the appointments of the room generally were such as a welcome guest might hope to find.



Martin drew his revolver from his pocket and flung it on the bed. "I am well prepared for trouble," he drawled carelessly.

"Can I get you anything, sir, before you retire?" asked the man.

Martin looked at him keenly. How much did this servant know? Was he wholly in Sylvaine's confidence? That he held some position of trust, apart from his motor-driving and flunkeying, seemed fairly certain.

"No, thank you. Tell Mr. Sylvaine I shall be able to look after myself quite well." As though ignoring the other's presence, he took from his coat-pocket the small automatic and flung it on the bed.

"Take a tip from one who knows—never sleep in a strange house without a loaded gun. What chance is there, do you think, of my seeing this ghost, or whatever it is that hangs around here at night?"

The man shrugged his shoulders, pursed his lips, raised his eyebrows in Gallic fashion—but said nothing. Perhaps he was too astonished to make any reply.

"Well, you can clear off now," said Lorne sharply; and the man, making a short bow, departed.

"A trifle showy, perhaps; but I did want to see that fellow jump!" Martin told himself. "Now for a look round."

The first objects of his examination were the door and the window. The former was of stout wood, capable, if necessary, of withstanding any ordinary siege, providing—but, when he looked, he found there was no key on either the inside or the outside lock.

Turning away, he walked across the room to the window. This proved to be of the lattice variety, easily opened, and large enough for a man's body to pass through in an emergency.

Opening the window, Lorne whistled. There was a drop of at least thirty feet to the ground below. Not so good!

So much for that. He now turned to the few objects in the room. The solid mahogany wardrobe looked harmless enough, and proved to be practically empty. A chest of drawers likewise yielded nothing suspicious—not that he expected it to do so—but he made the examination as a matter of routine and principle.

Nothing now remained, apart from the bed itself, but a cupboard built into the wall. This was quite empty.

Placing a heavy chair against the door, Martin prepared himself for a vigil. When the time was ripe—say in about another hour—he intended to make a tour of the house. There were many things he expected to see. Unless luck was extraordinarily kind, he would not be able to see all that he would have liked, but he trusted he would find sufficient for his purpose.

In the meantime, he must be patient. And because, no doubt, for a time, at least, he would be watched, he must be tactful. Being tactful meant switching off the light after a reasonable period. The switch was in the most awkward place, of course, being right away from the bed, and he did not exactly relish the darkness in the present circumstances, but there seemed nothing else for it.

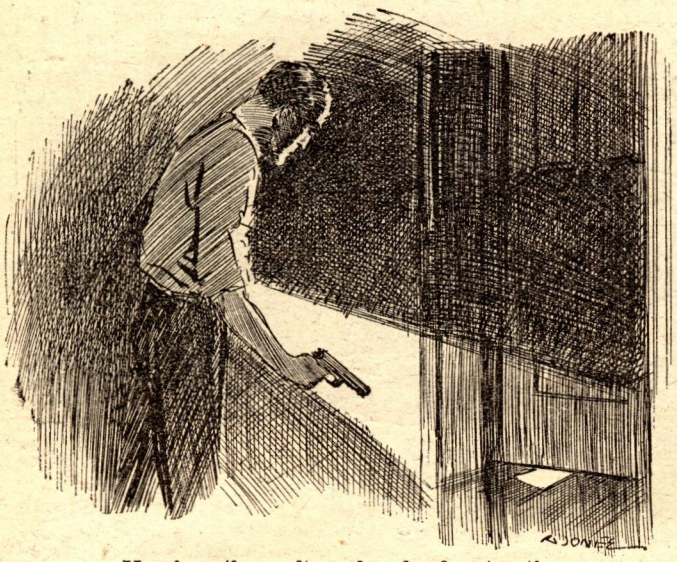
After waiting another ten minutes, he strolled over to the switch, turned the light off, and seated himself in a chair to resume the vigil which he had imposed upon himself.

There is an uncanny element in waiting for something which is both definite and yet indefinite—something which one feels certain is sure to come, although the form it will take is unknown. It is the latter fact that taxes a man's nerve, and Martin felt the strain of this before many minutes had passed.

In the deep, brooding silence of the night every noise was exaggerated—the creaking of some old wood in the roof seemed to fill his ears with sound. Outside the wind rustling the leaves of the creeper took on a deafening clamour.

"Don't be a fool!" Lorne told himself. "It's merely nerves, you ass!"

How easy to talk, how difficult to act upon the advice! In that fever of unrest—



Hearing the soft pad-pad of retreating footsteps, he flashed his torch and found a note had been thrust beneath the door.

of anxiety and impatience for that indefinite something to happen—he found it exceedingly difficult to remain still after the first half an hour. Half an hour!—it seemed a separate lifetime!

He was like a dog straining at an invisible leash—cocking his already super-sensitive ears to catch the slightest sound. Once he rose and tip-toed to the door. He could have sworn that he had heard first footsteps, slithering and softly-malignant, and after that whisperings. Whisperings too disturbing to be borne—"He'll be asleep—asleep! It will be easy!" And then a laugh—such a laugh as could only have come from the throat of Sylvaine!

His revolver ready, he had waited. Silence. Feeling that action of any sort was better than this suspense, he moved the chair away and flung the door open. There was nothing before him but a well of blackness. No one had been there.

Then, the door closed again and the chair replaced—should he be attacked, that chair would give him a valuable warning—the light from his electric-torch fell on a sheet of white paper lying just inside the room. Someone *had* been outside the door, but had gone again, leaving—what?

Directly he stooped, he knew the message came from the girl. His heart took on a yet quicker beat at the realisation. Girls—most of them—left him cold. They wanted so much and gave so little. He had no use for them. But this one was different—she carried the whole world of difference in her face, her manner. Her dress alone would have marked her out, kept her apart.

A very faint waft of some wholesome perfume—was it lavender?—came to him as he unfolded the sheet of paper.

"You know already that you are in danger—that is why I am taking the risk of you still being awake. For Heaven's sake, be on your guard. Sylvaine means to kill you. Why did you come? I could have managed on my own.—J. M."

"Managed on her own." He didn't quite get that. What did she mean? What—— Then, with a flash, he thought he understood—this girl was herself playing a part; she was bent on exposing Sylvaine on her own. Was that it? Unless his reasoning powers had gone all awry, this must be the meaning behind the message.

But she had spared time to send him a warning! And had added this to the other risks which by this time must be hedging her in on every side. The plucky kid! But, then, from the beginning, he had always considered her remarkable. Martin was quite pleased with himself at being able to recall this fact. Hadn't he singled her out from every other woman in the room that night at the Lotus? By George, he had!

But what the devil was he doing there? He had to be out and about—this girl. (By Jingo! She really was a wonder—so unforgettably attractive.) Might have been seen walking along that passage to his door. Sylvaine already suspected her—that much had been apparent by the fellow's attitude to her during the evening—and possibly by this time he had decided to come out in the open. Off with the masks, and all that sort of thing. Unless he was miles wide of the mark, friend Sylvaine was suffering from a bad—a very bad—case of megalomania; something must have happened recently to have excited the poor fish.

Martin mentally gave this disparaging classification to the man, because reading that note had wrought such a really remarkable change in him. Those few lines had acted as a wonderful stimulant; they stirred his being, caused nerves and muscle, and what not, to tighten, and made him long for action. In any case, he told himself, it was time he started that promised trip of exploration.

First, he must endeavour to find the girl. She had risked so much for him that he felt obliged to ascertain before anything else if she were safe. Besides, they were now allies—the note she had sent him made them so—and the information she could give might be extremely valuable.

"Steady does it!" he murmured, as for the second time he pulled back the chair propped against the door. The impression, distinctly disturbing before, that a particularly ugly kind of meandering death might spring out at him at any moment had now become almost pleasurable. It's a poor heart that doesn't rejoice at the chance of going to a lady's rescue even in these unromantic days. And this particular lady—delightful kid!—had just lowered her banner in salute. Good enough!

Lorne opened the door and looked out. Nothing but the blackness of the pit again. Oh, well, it had to be done. He had just switched on his torch when, from behind, there came a sound that did its level best to convince him he was actually looking into Hades. It was as though a hundred fiends had been let loose from the lower regions on condition that they made the most ghastly row of which they were capable.

Placing his back against the door, Lorne faced about. He had to meet this horror, whatever it might be—meet it and fight it. His self-respect demanded no less.

A fierce, swiftly-rising and falling howling sound, weird beyond description, filled the room. It beat about him in waves; it seemed to leap at him, strike a ghostly blow and then retreat, making mock with snarling laughter that curdled the blood.

Martin waited. This demoniac row, he felt fairly certain, was just the curtain-raiser of the night's entertainment, merely the devil's orchestra playing the overture.

Still, nothing could be seen. But eyes were raking the darkness for him, no doubt. Somewhere in that room Sylvaine, or one of his men—perhaps the beige gentleman he had biffed the previous evening—had a secret peep-hole. That was why he decided to stay where he was, showing no light to guide the enemy. Or, perhaps, it was unwise to remain by the door? He moved away, keeping his back to the wall.

Up till this time he had been disturbed, but not definitely perturbed. The sound was hellish, but he preferred to wait a little longer before deciding to become actually afraid.

Yet, when the drama proper started, he had really begun to feel his nerve was giving way. There was a banging noise to add to the general unearthly clamour, and before him he saw, gleaming in the darkness, a skull.

The Thing was illumined—by what means he could not determine—but it had eyes which gleamed and moved.

The house of the Screaming Skull!

The legend with all its horrific circumstances flashed a message to his stunned brain. The story, then, was true—the weirdly screaming noise still filling the room must come from the skull. And—what was it Mrs. Warriner had said?—the screaming was merely a prelude to Death. The skull never screamed unless to foretell someone's violent end.

He felt himself shaking. Yes, he was really afraid—terribly afraid. So afraid that if he stayed still he feared he would lose his manhood.

He started to rush across the room, and as he tore ahead he raised his revolver and fired at the Abomination!

There came a sudden quiet. The noise died down in a kind of whimpering moan. And the Skull vanished.

"Exit the ghost; enter the human!" Martin muttered, and fired again. A wave of confidence returning, he hated himself for having been such a mutt. Kid's play—and he had fallen for it.

Then the silence—so intense after the previous racket as to induce a sense of being stifled—was disturbed by a faint hissing sound. Something brushed Lorne's head, settled so softly on his neck as to be almost a caress, but a second later tightened, so that he choked in sudden, inexplicable agony. He was jerked violently forwards, his feet went from beneath him, and he fell full-length upon the floor.

Then came a stunning blow on the head

VALDEZ THREATENS.

At that moment Jessie Milburn, in another room of this house of ill-omen, was wishing that she might die. All the plans that she had made, all the hopes for the realisation of which she had suffered so much had, in one harrowing minute, been ruthlessly shattered.

She was lying on a couch in a room she had not seen before. Her wrists and ankles were tied by a rope, and a vile rag had been stuffed between her teeth so that she could not speak. She was cold, for her clothing consisted only of her silk nightdress and gown.

The Portuguese, Valdez, was standing over her.

"I told Sylvaine to-day that you were a spy. He would not believe me—but now I can give him proof." The words were hissed so melodramatically that in any ordinary circumstances she might have been inclined to smile; but, bound as she was, with that rage-distorted, saffron-coloured face glaring down at her, she was afraid—so afraid that the perspiration stood out on her forehead in thick beads. And this was not merely fear for herself—there was the man who by her action she had betrayed. He, too, would suffer.

The Portuguese was speaking again.

"Sylvaine promised me to-day that if I brought him proof I could deal with you as I liked. *As I liked!*" His lips drew back at the repetition of the words; then the nicotine-stained teeth, pointed like an animal's, snapped.

"When we were in London together I had my first suspicion of you—until then you were merely the beautiful English girl who was so cold when I poured out the adoration that possessed my soul. But in London, when, by Sylvaine's orders, you met me, your manner had changed. You were prepared to smile, to tolerate me—yes? I asked myself why this was so. Was it that London, with its gaiety, its music, and its dancing, had intoxicated you? No; you had previously proved yourself too much mistress of yourself for that to have happened. Then why? It didn't take me long to discover the reason. As I said this morning to the employer, you have been able to deceive, you asked me too many questions. Since you are so curious, I promise that you shall have a complete answer very soon. You shall know everything. But it will not serve your purpose, whatever that may be. No; I can safely promise you that."

The captive shivered. Would this ordeal never come to an end? With a convulsion of shame she realised that her clothing had become torn in the struggle five minutes before.

"You were clever, but not clever enough," resumed the hateful voice; "you pretended in the Lotus Club not to know the man Lorne. But I saw the look which passed between you. Somehow you must have communicated—no doubt you wrote—how easy that would have been considering you were both working in unison and for the same employer!—for then we find—and no later than the next day, too—Mr. Lorne arrives in this district! What was the message slipped between his bed-room door just now?" the man cried in a crescendo of rage. "Answer!" he demanded, tearing the gag from her mouth. "Those beautiful lips!" he said in bitter mockery, and bent and kissed them.

"Beast!" she said. "You can kill me, but I shall tell you nothing!"

"We shall see. You have proved that the way I intended at least promises good results."

She fought down that sickening nausea of fear, and replied in a level tone: "Except this, you are wrong about Mr. Lorne. I know nothing except what you have told me. He did not come here at my request. He is a stranger to me—I never met him before. I was the spy—and I am proud of it. I became Sylvaine's secretary with the express purpose of obtaining sufficient evidence to hand him over to the police."

Instead of indulging in another and fiercer outburst, Valdez took a cigarette from a case and lit it.

"I must control myself, or I shall go mad," he said, in a tone that was more terrifying to her than his previous insensate rage.

"For what you now have said you will have to die. You know enough to ruin me—and, what is worse, you would be the means of my being robbed of a tremendous fortune. But before you die I promise you I shall have my revenge!"

She turned her face to look into his blazing eyes.

"You will have to deal with Mr. Lorne first." She did not know why she spoke; the words had formed themselves automatically in her brain, and she had uttered them. Perhaps it was because the thought of Lorne, lithe-limbed, a typical Englishman, afforded such a vivid contrast to this olive-skinned beast.

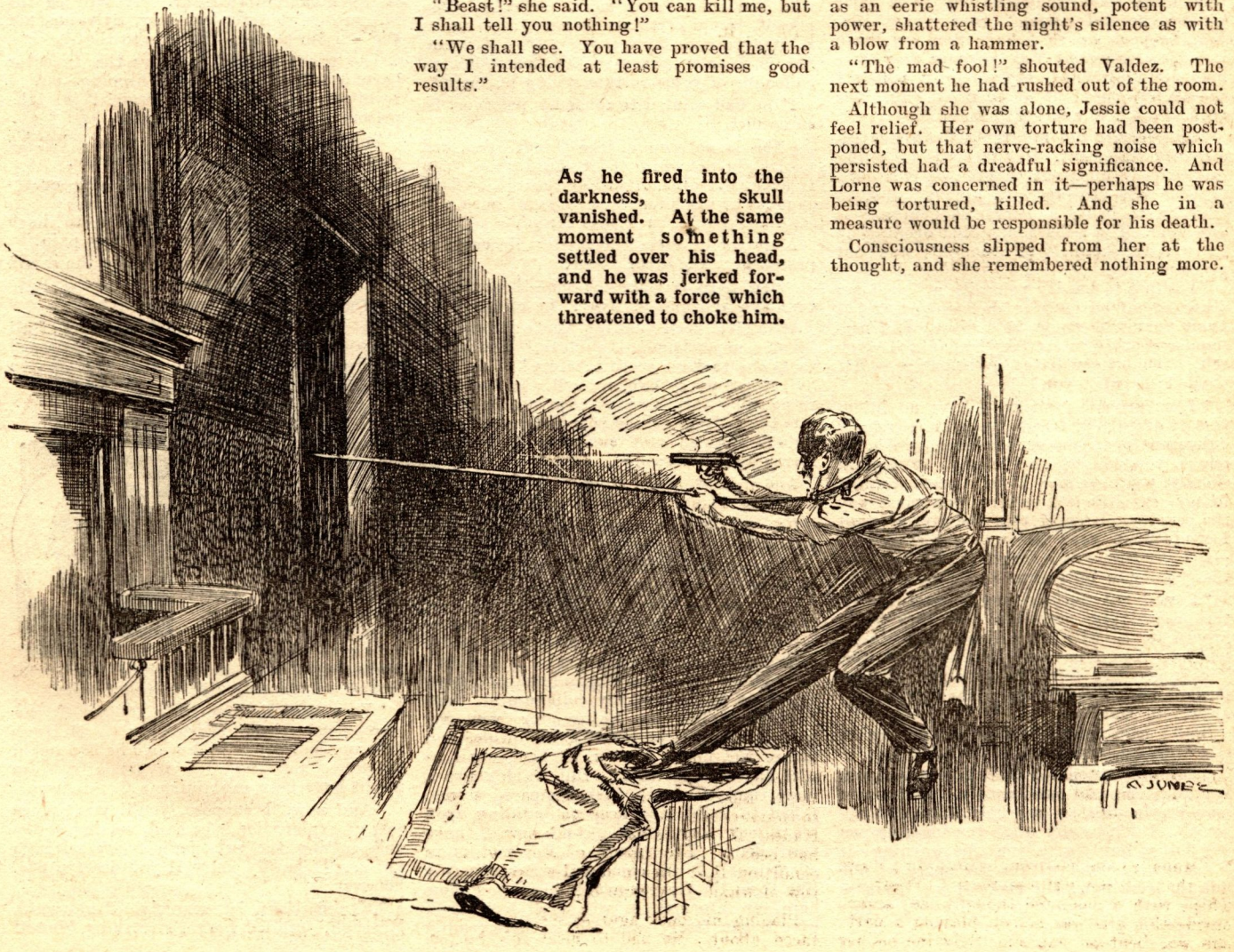
Her challenge was answered immediately.

"So, you are counting on Lorne! He may have received your message, but that won't help him. Sylvaine has——" He stopped, as an eerie whistling sound, potent with power, shattered the night's silence as with a blow from a hammer.

"The mad fool!" shouted Valdez. The next moment he had rushed out of the room.

Although she was alone, Jessie could not feel relief. Her own torture had been postponed, but that nerve-racking noise which persisted had a dreadful significance. And Lorne was concerned in it—perhaps he was being tortured, killed. And she in a measure would be responsible for his death.

Consciousness slipped from her at the thought, and she remembered nothing more.



As he fired into the darkness, the skull vanished. At the same moment something settled over his head, and he was jerked forward with a force which threatened to choke him.

THE MEGALOMANIAC.

He had been moved into another room. That was the first thought Lorne had when he recovered consciousness sufficiently to realise he was still alive.

The air was dank in this room and smelt of the earth. Then he looked at the walls. They were running with wet. This must be a cellar—a cellar? Why a cellar? His wits recovered themselves quickly, then. Of course, they were going to kill him—and this cellar was to be his burial-ground. Simple enough to understand.

The thought of being put to final rest in such a place brought back the desire to live. He started to try to move his arms and legs, only to find, however, that he was quite helpless. Both sets of limbs were securely bound. Sylvaine had taken no chances.

This was pretty damnable; but worse was to come; regarding him fixedly, as he lay stretched on a bench, was the man he knew as Fenton Sylvaine. But something had changed in the fellow—he was different.

"You miss my invalid's chair?" inquired Sylvaine. "Yes, as you can see, I have dispensed with it One of my whims since I came to this district was to induce people to think I was a hopeless invalid. It would take me too long to explain to you why I carried out this plan, but I will throw out this hint—when you wish to give your brain abnormal exercise, save your body. For the past month I have used my brain to a greater extent than perhaps any other man living to-day; the strength which I should have used up in physical effort has been devoted to another purpose."

The prisoner did not reply to this extraordinary statement. One fact was becoming increasingly apparent to him. This was that he was dealing with a man who, in addition to being a perverted genius, was also mad. The reflection, whilst opening up speculative channels of thought, was not pleasant.

"I refuse to burden you with a list of my other eccentricities, Mr. Lorne—you see, I know your real name, as I am also in possession of other interesting facts about yourself. The immediate question is—what shall I do with you?

"Your present position, I have no intention of disguising from you, is an extremely dangerous one. By some means, which, no doubt, you will be kind enough to explain shortly, you have seen fit to interest yourself in my activities; therefore, you must pay the penalty. I regret that the first attempt I made upon your life was not successful—but the man was a bungler. He has paid the penalty of his failure to rid me of you.

"I will not quibble—my present activities, amazingly successful as they have proved to be, will not tolerate any interference. And I have no possible doubt that you came here to-night with the express purpose of interfering. Have you any answer to that?"

Lorne endeavoured to raise himself on an elbow, failed, and swore at his futility.

"The only answer I intend to give you, Sylvaine," he said passionately, "is that you seem to be talking a whole heap of gibberish. I don't know what you imagine you are doing, but I give you this warning—if I am not released within the space of one minute from now, I'll make it my business to see that you suffer pretty badly for this outrage."

It was the purest bluff, of course; and by the contemptuous laugh with which the other greeted the words, he knew that Sylvaine recognised it as such.

"It would be entirely erroneous for you to imagine that you would be allowed to leave this house alive," said Sylvaine. "I have far too much at stake. If I did not kill you myself, Valdez, my Portuguese colleague, who has even fewer moral scruples than myself, would certainly do so. Just now he is engaged with my secretary, Miss Milburn. She is, I have been given to understand, a colleague of yours in this spying business."

If he had wanted to rouse his prisoner, he succeeded.

"She is nothing of the kind," declared Lorne, in a white heat of fury. "My Heaven, Sylvaine, if you or that filthy dago as much as put a finger on Miss Milburn, I'll see that you rot in Hades for it!"

A quiver of some undecipherable emotion passed over the other's face.

"You dare to threaten me—the ruler of countless millions of lives!" he cried.

What had been puzzling Lorne for so long became now abundantly clear. Benighted fool, not to have seen it before! This man Sylvaine was the human devil who had been responsible for those wireless deaths! He was the twisted genius who had caused such untold anguish and suffering throughout Devon and Cornwall.

And if he were not stopped, he would soon have the whole of England at his mercy!

No wonder Bellamy had wanted him watched!

"I repeat—I control the lives of countless millions!" continued the megalomaniac. "I have but to turn a switch in my wireless laboratory next door, and England cowers before my genius!" The man was rapidly working himself into a frenzy. "I confess," he went on, "that the original research work was done by Valdez, my collaborator. The Portuguese has no liking for you, my friend. You have insulted his pride, and before the night is over he has sworn he will have his revenge. But Valdez was a mere fumbler in the dark compared to me. I had to build, and keep on building upon his flimsy foundation. And now I have succeeded! The future of England is in my power; I can command what money I like from the Government! Since you came here for information, you shall have it—I give it you freely—and all the more readily because you will never be able to make use of it. For within a few minutes you will be dead."

Because this hound thought he had all the trumps, Lorne made answer.

"You can't commit murder as simply as all that, Sylvaine. Success has turned your brain; otherwise, you would realise the risk. You have been so bursting with news that you haven't given me a chance to impart a little useful information myself. Listen a moment; you think you have done wonders in your own beastly, lunatic way, but all you have done, you fool, is to draw the net closer about you. Ever since you came to Minehead—and probably before—you have been suspect. That was why I was sent down by my chief, Sir Harker Bellamy. Do you happen to know the name?—to keep an eye on you. It was by his telegraphed instructions that I am here to-night. If anything happens to me, Sylvaine—*he will know where to look!* The only safe thing for you to do is to throw your hand in; then they will probably send you to a lunatic asylum where you rightly belong."

The answer was snarled.

"They may look, but what will they find? Just a small pile of dust. In my laboratory, only a few feet away, I have an electrical appliance which will shrivel your flesh, dry up your blood, and burn your bones until all that remains is merely a handful of fine dust. Will Sir Harker Bellamy be able to identify his trusted, but not very intelligent, agent by that?"

"He will be able to identify *you*—which is much more important. It will be the hangman's rope for you now, Sylvaine, not the lunatic asylum—I'll see to that."

The words seemed to drive the inventor beyond all endurance. Whipping out a revolver, he pointed it straight at the prisoner.

Lorne knew his time had come. But he would die game—facing the creature.

Suddenly blackness blotted out everything. This, he felt, must be death, although he could not remember to have heard a report or to have felt any pain.

From out of the darkness came the sound of a scuffle. Then a voice:

"Just in time, you young ass!"

This was the most astonishing thing of all the astonishing things that had happened that night, for the man who had spoken was Robert McHugh.

SATURDAY IS "THRILLER" DAY!

EXPERT EVIDENCE.

The light came on again, and Martin saw a curious spectacle. Fenton Sylvaine was on the floor, apparently insensible. Over the body leaned the man who had come in such a miraculous way to rescue him. The archæologist held in his right hand what looked suspiciously like a loaded stick.

"Very useful, these little fellows—I can recommend them thoroughly." McHugh held up the weapon with which he had outed Sylvaine, and regarded it tenderly. He might have been examining a Gothic arch.

"And now, I suppose, you'll want some sort of explanation," he said, coming across and cutting the prisoner's bonds with a knife. "I hardly know if you deserve one, however."

"Explanation is scarcely the word, McHugh," replied Lorne, stretching himself

in luxury; "call it a 'miracle,' and have done with it."

"'Miracle,' be hanged—there's nothing very miraculous about it. When you didn't return at a reasonable time, I said nothing to Warriner, but slipped out the back way and borrowed his Morris—the thing's outside now, waiting to take us back. But to proceed: Having tried the two doors, and what windows I could reach, and found them all impossible, I pulled up something that looked like a grating and fell into the local coal-cellar—which may account for my present sightly dishevelled appearance."

Dishevelled was more or less correct. One trouser-leg had a rip in it at least seven inches long; streaks of coal dust on the face gave the speaker the look of a dissipated nigger-minstrel, and there were other casualties. Yet with it all McHugh was tremendously happy.

"But, as I remarked before, I got here only just in time, my boy. That hound was going to shoot you when I tapped him one with Percy the Persuader here," regarding the loaded stick with fresh affectionate regard.

"Hang, I forgot—the girl" exclaimed Martin. "There's a dago here, and he——"

"I strongly dislike dagoes!" concurred the archæologist heartily.

Cursing himself for the lapse, Lorne led the way out of the cellar. Outside was a stone passage with a circular stairway leading upwards. They had no light, but the electric torch which McHugh carried, but this proved sufficient.

The living rooms were all deserted; and, in a fever of anxiety by now, Martin commenced to take the main staircase four steps at a time. He had reached the room in which he had seen the skull when, from somewhere above, he heard a stifled scream. It was a woman's voice—and he knew then that the girl was still alive. He knew something else—that every nerve in his body, every drop of his blood ached to rescue her.

Up another short staircase he rushed, shouting: "Miss Milburn! Coming—coming!"

The sound of a beastly laugh told him which was the room.

"Locked!" he said to McHugh, who was labouring on behind.

"Both shoulders to it, my boy!" was the immediate reply.

Youth and age, united in the same purpose, rush at the door, which crashed open.

Several things happened very quickly after that; there was the whine of a revolver bullet, which missed its mark, and a low Rugger tackle which didn't. Grabbed by the legs, Valdez went to earth with a crash which caused the revolver to drop from his hand, and rendered him almost immediately, and in a very literal sense, *hors de combat.*

Martin was not running any risks; the memory of that beastly laugh made him seethe afresh. He hit the beige gentleman for the last time—but he hit him as hard as he could.

"Better treat this fellow as I have his mentor downstairs," remarked that very astonishing person, Robert McHugh. Before Martin could voice his surprise, the archæologist had nipped a pair of light-weight handcuffs on the dago's wrists.

"They make a very good combination with Percy the Persuader," he commented.

Lorne took another look at the speaker, and then shook his head.

"I give you up," he confessed.

McHugh laughed.

Lorne by this time was across the room. Jessie Milburn was lying motionless on a sort of couch.

A greater fear than any he had known throughout that night caused him to turn to the older man.

"Gosh! I believe she's dead!"

"Nonsense! Let me have a look!" The speaker proceeded to examine the girl, and then, taking a flask from the pockets, which seemed to contain everything necessary for an emergency, held it to her lips.

"Mr. Lorne——" were the first words that came from her lips.

McHugh beckoned to Martin, who sprang forward.

Suddenly the light went up, and the detective saw a girl standing in the doorway, covering him with a revolver.

(*A dramatic incident from "The Wrecker," a thrilling mystery story appearing in next week's issue of "The THRILLER."*)

"My dear!" he said. The words and the action which accompanied them—the putting of an arm round her shoulders and holding her tight—came so spontaneously as to seem perfectly natural.

"If you will excuse me, I think I'll have a quiet look round," remarked Robert McHugh.

When he returned he felt it necessary to cough. Otherwise, his presence would probably have passed unnoticed. The pleasure which these two young people were evidently finding in each other was interesting, but scarcely surprising. He had long since ceased to be surprised at anything.

"Let me introduce Miss Jessie Milburn to you, McHugh," said Martin Lorne, springing up. "Mr. McHugh," he proceeded to explain, "has been staying at Yew Tree Farm with me, and is an archæologist."

"Amongst other things," remarked McHugh drily, "years ago I used to be in the Secret Police of India. That was where I first saw Sylvaine, and explains my suspicions of the man. He called himself by the more unromantic name of Bilstead, then."

The girl caught the speaker's arm.

"You must have known my father—Greville Stevens. He was an inventor, and this man Bilstead robbed him. On the night daddy died—killed by Bilstead because the theft broke his heart—I swore I would avenge his death. I knew that the man was a scoundrel, but I followed him to England, and then, as luck would have it, he advertised for a secretary, and I called instead of sending a letter."

"A secretary," mused McHugh.

"Sylvaine was a man of tremendous intellect—he was an authority on many subjects."

"Yes, he was undoubtedly a genius. I've just been looking round the wireless laboratory he has downstairs. Of course"—turning to Lorne—"he was the man responsible for those wireless deaths. You remember, I suggested that the fiend was possibly not far away from Cleveley?"

Lorne nodded.

"Yes, Sylvaine was responsible. He admitted everything to me in a fit of megalomania just before you turned up so marvellously. Apparently, he improved upon an idea of Valdez's to utilise wireless as a means of mass-murder. Valdez wanted to sell it to an unmentioned nation, presumably, as a war-weapon, but Sylvaine, who was certainly on the brink of lunacy, if not actually mad, was determined, so far as I could gather, to blackmail the British Government. Why, he didn't say."

"His madness took that form, apparently. Well, he won't have the opportunity—I'm going into Minehead to bring out the local police. You won't mind waiting here until I return? Sylvaine and Valdez won't give you any further trouble: I've locked them both in the coal-cellar."

Lorne looked at the girl, and Jessie flushed.

"After I have dressed myself properly, I'll see if I can't have some breakfast ready by the time you come back, Mr. McHugh."

"Heaven bless you!" said that remarkable man.

The three servants, when roused, took the news calmly. "I always did dislike staying here with those two foreigners—and as for the master he always did give me the creeps, to say nothin' of the noises at night that kept a decent body from their rightful rest." It was the cook speaking, and the two maids nodded in violent agreement.

Max could not be found—neither, upon investigation, could the Rolls.

"After helping to lay me out, he may have developed a sudden funk and bolted," said Lorne. "In any case, we have the two principal birds."

"Thanks to you," replied Jessie. "When I think what a conceited fool I was to try to handle this alone——"

"It was the pluckiest thing I've ever heard of," exclaimed her listener; "and I'm not going to listen to another blessed word!"

"Not even why I 'spied' upon you at Cleveley the night you arrived? The explanation was very simple: I was going on to Minehead, but Max appeared on the platform unexpectedly, and, as I was curious to see where you were staying, I got out of the train?"

"Then you knew I was in the train?"

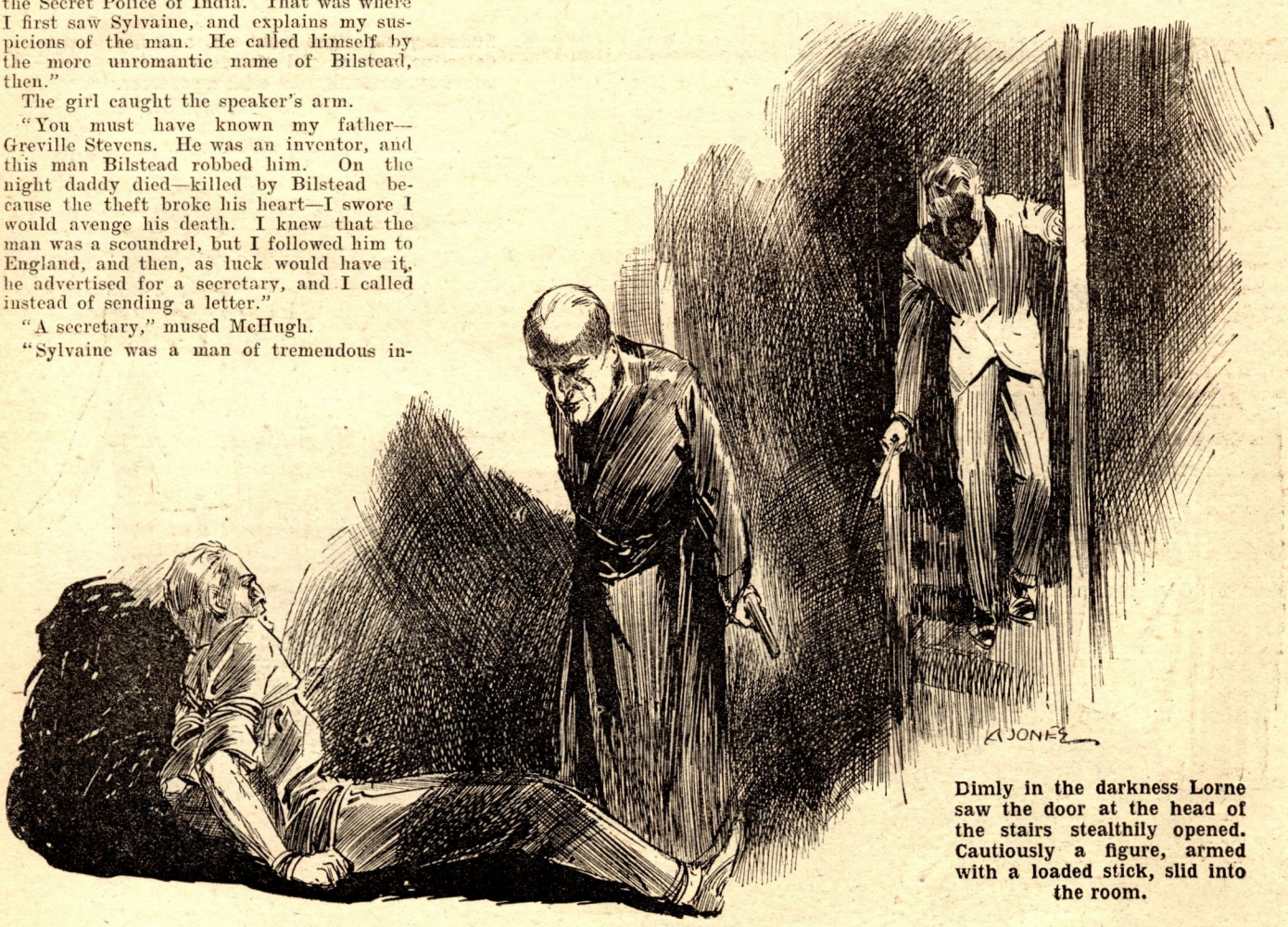
"Yes; I saw you change at Taunton. As a matter of fact, I was only two carriages behind."

"Then, why——" he demanded.

But she turned her head and walked out of the room. That is the way of a girl.

* * * * *

Robert McHugh produced yet one more surprise upon his return.



Dimly in the darkness Lorne saw the door at the head of the stairs stealthily opened. Cautiously a figure, armed with a loaded stick, slid into the room.

"I have brought with me Professor Alastair McGabe, one of the foremost scientists in Scotland, and, therefore, in the world," he announced. "It was he to whom I sent a telegram yesterday morning. I knew McGabe was in London, and he arrived in Minehead in time to eat his supper last night. One of his hobbies is wireless research, and he is particularly anxious to look over this fellow Sylvaine's laboratory. Meanwhile, the local police will cart that pair of precious scoundrels back to Minehead. I have warned the inspector that if he loses either on the way, I shall take him myself to Scotland Yard."

"All you poor people will surely want

something to eat," said Jessie. "I have persuaded the cook to get you breakfast. Cooks, as you know, are proverbially fond of policemen"—with a laughing glance at Martin Lorne.

It was not until the meal was practically over, however, that Professor McGabe, a tall, typical Scot, with an habitual smile lighting up his rugged features, made his reappearance.

"I have seen it all, and it is very interesting," he announced. "McHugh, I would not have missed this for worlds: I am much indebted to you."

"What this man Sylvaine succeeded in doing has been the aim of a good many research wireless workers, scrupulous and unscrupulous, ever since this wonderful invention was placed within the use of the public. I will not go into technical details, but the nation—and, indeed, the whole world—owes you two men a very great debt. If Sylvaine had not been stopped, he would have done incalculable mischief; thousands—indeed, millions—of deaths might have been placed at his door—assuming, of course, that the general panic had not become such that no one would have gone on using wireless.

"What this man did last night was to transmit from the laboratory downstairs a ray—to avoid being technical I use this term—on the wave-length of one of the broadcasting stations—which contained properties dangerous to human life under certain conditions."

"Why were not more people killed?" asked Lorne.

"Because, thank Heaven, this must have been more or less in the nature of an experiment. It is safe to say that Sylvaine could not have known at the time what a terribly potential weapon he possessed. The fact that the ray was only half matured (again I refuse to become technical), that it operated, probably, only up to a certain number of miles, and that—although here I am straying out of my own country and into the province of medical knowledge—only a percentage of the listeners-in became affected, due to medical causes of which I cannot speak—that is why, my friend."

"In any case," the enthusiast overcoming the moralist for the moment, "it was a marvellous discovery that these two men made—although a terrible one. No doubt, the Portuguese hit upon it by an accident. All these discoveries are found 'in the blue,' in a way of speaking—but the greater genius of the other man was needed for its development. Hasn't this house a curious legend attached to it, McHugh?"

"Let me tell the story," pleaded Lorne, and he narrated the appearance of the screaming skull.

McGabe laughed.

"That was nothing more than a practical joke, Mr. Lorne. Sylvaine wanted to make you feel nervous because, no doubt, he wished to attack you later on—he did attack you, didn't he?—and so he decided to give the ghost story a run. Intense oscillation on a high-powered valve receiving set proceeding from the mouth of a loud speaker placed at the back of the skull, but hidden from view (wasn't the skull in some sort of cupboard, you say?) would have accounted for that terrible row."

"But the damned—I beg your pardon, Miss Milburn!—thing was lit up!"

"Phosphorus," replied McGabe shortly. "After breakfast we'll hunt it up, and you see if I'm not right."

* * * * *

Professor McGabe proved right in every instance, including the remark he made to his crony, Robert McHugh.

"Those two young people don't seem to be worrying very much. Hoots, mon, Providence moves in a mysterious way—but doesna' it do your heart good to see them?"

THE END.

(Do not forget that a star author is the writer of next week's long complete novel. "The Wrecker" is the best thriller that Mr. Skene has yet achieved. Order next Saturday's issue of The THRILLER to-day.)

THE GREAT MUSEUM MYSTERY

Problem No. 11 of **BAFFLERS!** The Popular Detective Story Game.

ONE Sunday morning, soon after the great Pensington Museum had opened its doors for the day, an attendant on the second floor was startled by a ponderous clank from a corridor in the Egyptian wing. Thinking that a statue had fallen, he rushed in the direction of the sound. Instead he saw a man, who was struggling to replace the heavy lid of a sarcophagus, suddenly let go of the lid and dart away. The guard seized his coat-collar, but the fugitive squirmed from his coat, dodged behind an exhibit-case, and vanished. When the breathless guard arrived downstairs at the front door, he found that the intruder had walked out quietly and was lost from sight. The doorman had supposed him a workman of the museum, and had thought nothing of his departure.

This event brought to the attention of the authorities the singular incident of the museum robbery which resulted in a great scandal. Detective Wagner, who was assigned to the case, later summarised the affair as follows:

"I arrived at the museum Monday morning, and was ushered into the office of Director Oddie, who had the captured coat on a chair beside him. The doctor told me of the coat incident, and then said:

"'I am sorry to say that this means a clever attempt at a serious robbery. This fellow to whom the coat belongs had undoubtedly managed to stay in the museum overnight. Investigation revealed that our case No 12 had been robbed of its contents in a most ingenious manner. But fortunately the thief has been badly fooled. What he was after, of course, was the Rurik gem collection, which the museum purchased only last year. What he got was the set of paste replicas which we always keep in the exhibit-case, except upon occasions when distinguished persons visit us. The real gems are then taken from a safe and temporarily installed in the case. Now, this fellow had cunningly prepared a dummy set of the gems, in their distinctive settings, and had managed to insert them in the case when he extracted what he thought were the real jewels.

"'In short, we have played a £25,000 joke on the robber At the same time, I shudder at the ease with which the fellow did his work. It is of the utmost importance, of course, that we track the man down.

"'This may not be so hard as you think,' Dr Oddie continued, 'for I learn this morning from Curator Waltham, of the Section of Antique Jewels, that the owner of the coat has probably been in the museum frequently in the last few weeks. Three weeks ago to-morrow, a man representing himself as Antonio Diaz, a designer of jewellery, applied for permission to make drawings of the Rurik pieces. The copying of designs by the public, you know, is a regular thing with us. We encourage it to aid all the industrial arts and handicrafts. Persons have frequently copied the Rurik designs. They have to do this through the glass of the case, using a magnifying-glass.

"'Our attendant is always near the case in the day-time. The thief could not have taken the screws out of the case except by night. This he did, removing the paste replicas and substituting the fake pieces which he had made. As you will see, the dummy set is cleverly made. The fellow had not spent his days of copying for nothing. He hoped, of course, to make his way out of the museum in the morning with what he thought was the real set, leaving his dummy set to lull us into continued security.

"'Indeed, had he not replaced several of the screws crookedly, I doubt if we would have noticed which case had been tampered with. Our night watchman makes the rounds every half-hour; the thief must have been hurried as he was finishing his task of screwing up the side of the case. The culprit, I take it, must have hidden in the sarcophagus during the early hours of light on Sunday morning, while waiting for the doors to open. He would have escaped without leaving any clue whatever if the guard in the Egyptian wing had not seen him. Probably while climbing out of the sarcophagus the lid slipped from his grasp. Now the question is, what does this coat tell you?'

"And Dr. Oddie handed it to me.

"I examined the coat and the contents of its pockets, but had to confess to Dr. Oddie that I could make nothing of it. It was an ordinary brown coat of cheviot, well worn. There was no label or identifying mark of any kind. The right-hand pocket yielded a cheap screwdriver and a piece of white string. In the left-hand pocket we found a small gimlet, some rubber bands, and a box of matches. In the upper left-hand pocket (outside breast) I found two halves of tickets to a large Birmingham picture theatre—very much frayed—and a bit of white paper about three inches by one. This was not soiled or frayed, as were the tickets. I judged that it was a portion of a roll from an adding machine, for it had printed on it a column of numbers, as if someone had started to add a series of checks or amount

THE RULES.

The rules are simplicity itself. On this page you are given details of Baffler Problem No. 11—there will be another next week. Briefly, you are told the story of a crime and given ALL the clues necessary for its solution. Be your own detective. Read the problem through very carefully, giving consideration to every detail, then try to answer the questions at the end.

Award yourself marks as indicated after comparing your answers with those given on the next page. 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.

of money. No total, however, was given. It ran thus:

12.09
23.22
9.22
23.25
21.14
7.18
15.15
76.22
8.23
26.28
79.18
16.22
8.12
12.13

"I was about to request Dr. Oddie to take me to case No. 12 for a search for fingerprints, when the door of the office burst open, and a tall, elderly man rushed in on us in the greatest excitement.

"'Doctor,' he cried, 'we have been robbed! It is terrible! The pieces in the safe are *not* the originals! A terrible mistake must have been made, and the thief has taken the *real* gems.'

"It was Curator Waltham, who had just come from the safe where the real jewels supposedly were resting. Dr. Oddie and I were staggered at this turn of events.

"Three weeks ago to the day, Curator Waltham said, he personally had removed the real gems from the safe and examined them carefully, in anticipation of their exhibit to the Prince of Wales, who was to visit the museum that noon. To make way for them, he had directed Assistant Curator Raymond to remove the replicas from the case (No. 12) and keep them in his desk.

"The curator testified in the most absolute way that he personally had carried the real gems to the case, and had himself installed them there. He remained while the cases were locked before his eyes, and stood directly by the case awaiting the reception committee and the Prince.

"Only the curator had the key to the lock. He was prepared, if the Prince expressed a desire to handle the famous pieces, to remove them himself and hand them to the Prince. However, the Prince did not make the request.

"Of the subsequent events Curator Waltham said:

"'I remember distinctly that, after the Prince left, I left Assistant Curator Raymond in charge to remove the true pieces and put them securely away in the safe, for I was compelled to join the committee accompanying his Highness for the rest of the tour through the museum. I cannot say that I saw Raymond do it, but I am as certain of his honour and integrity as I am of my own. He reported to me only an hour later that he *had* done so, and that the paste replicas had been restored to case No. 12.

"'Yet Raymond is so careful, it seems impossible that he could have made any mistake about this. I confess that I am inclined to the belief that this thief whose coat was captured in some way must have obtained the combination of the safe and stolen the real pieces from *it*, also robbing the case of the replicas and putting them in the safe. Thus he hoped that a long time would elapse before the fraud would be discovered in either safe or exhibit-case, since our replicas would be in the safe and his dummy set in the case.

"Dr. Oddie affirmed in the most positive manner his complete trust in both the curator and the assistant curator. He added that he agreed with Curator Waltham's theory. However, they placed the investigation entirely in my hands, and were good enough to express the fullest confidence in me.

"Our first step was to telegraph Mr. Raymond, the assistant curator, recalling him immediately from an emergency mission to the Birmingham Metropolitan Museum of Art, on which he had been sent the Friday before.

"In the meantime I made a searching investigation among this Raymond's friends, and found that he bore a reputation for good character and devotion to the museum. He arrived the next day.

"I would describe him as a scholarly-appearing young man in his early thirties, with a frank, open countenance, though highly nervous in his manner. He appeared to be greatly shocked at what had taken place, and immediately offered to resign.

"He told us convincingly that he personally had removed the jewels from the case. Then, he said, he had put them into the safe and locked it, after which he had carried the replicas from his desk back to case No. 12 and inserted them in their proper places. He had personally supervised the locking of the case and examined it to see if it was secured.

"I confess that I was persuaded as to his sincerity and the truth of his story, as were Dr. Oddie and Curator Waltham. I was completely baffled. I had been unable to get any trace of Antonio Diaz (no doubt an alias) and after several days' searching my investigation left me just as mystified.

"There were no fingerprints on the case or on the museum safe. None of the attendants could shed light on the mystery. I was certain that it was an inside job, but I couldn't lay finger on a person. Only Dr. Oddie, Curator Waltham and Assistant Curator Raymond possessed the combination of the safe which had held the jewels."

Such was Detective Wagner's summary of the case up to the evening of March 3rd. On that evening, as he was sitting in his office at Scotland Yard, re-examining the captured coat and its contents, an idea occurred to him. By dawn he had reached a solution of the mystery.

Before noon that day a man had been arrested on the charge of robbing the Pensington Museum. Who was that man? How did the detective know it? What would you have deduced?

The questions to be answered are:

1. *How many were guilty in the robbery?* (Marks, 2.)
2. *Who?* (Marks, 3.)
3. *How was the robbery carried out?* (Marks, 2.)
4. *How was the guilt proved?* (Marks, 3.)

THE SOLUTION of the PROBLEM!

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

1. *Two men were guilty in the Pensington Museum robbery. There is no evidence that more than two were guilty. (Marks 2).*

2. *Assistant Curator Raymond was the directing genius of the robbery; Antonio Diaz, whose coat was captured, was his confederate who did the actual taking of the real gems. (Marks 3)*

3. *The robbery was carried out in the following manner:*

On the day of the Prince of Wales' visit, the assistant curator deceived Curator Waltham. He did not remove the real jewels to the safe, but LEFT THEM IN THE CASE. He put the paste replicas in the safe and falsely reported to the curator that orders had been carried out as given.

Diaz, the confederate, made his appearance the following day, and began copying the design of the Hurik jewels in order to make a dummy set. Diaz was also studying the case and the "lay of the land" on the second floor of the museum.

Diaz was not yet ready for the robbery when the Assistant Curator was suddenly ordered to Birmingham by Curator Waltham on an emergency errand. This fitted in splendidly with the Assistant Curator's desire to avoid any tangible suspicion of complicity: the robbery should be done in his UNEXPECTED and INVOLUNTARY absence, and then he believed that he would scarcely be suspected of having a hand in it. But he must let Diaz know.

Therefore, as soon as the Assistant Curator received orders to go to Birmingham immediately, to be gone from Friday until Tuesday, he dispatched instructions to his confederate in their prearranged code, to hurry and take advantage of the situation. (Marks 2).

4. Guilt was proved by Raymond's code message, ingeniously contrived to appear as an innocent column of figures. It was probably tapped off on an adding machine available in the museum executive offices. The code was a numerical one, and the message read:

ORDERED BHM TILL TUESDAY STRIKE SOON.

The letters of the alphabet were numbered 1 to 26, starting at Z, and printed two letters to a line with a decimal point between, except where two numbers lower than 10 came together and would make a number larger than 26 when they were written as one number: for instance, 7 (T), and 6 (U), were written as 76. Detective Wagner deciphered the message as follows:

12- 9-23-22-9-22-23 25-19-14 7-18-15-15 7- 6-22-8-23-26- 2 8- 7- 9- 18-16-22 8- 12-12-13

O R D E R E D B H M T I L L T U E S D A Y S T R I K E S O O N .

(Marks 3).

Assistant Curator Raymond hanged himself in his cell the day following his arrest, and "Antonio Diaz" was never found. His identity, however, was learned, and this threw some light on the strange affair. "Diaz" was none other than Porfirio Butler, escapegrace son of Dr. Simeon Butler, the English-Argentinian gem expert and one-time Director of the Buenos Aires Public Museum. Together the foreigner and Raymond had probably planned the sale of the celebrated pieces under some ingenious guise—possibly to some South American museum or to a wealthy private collector.

It was the essence of Raymond's scheme to have the robbery appear to have been done by an outsider. Trading on his reputation, which up to that time had been good, the Assistant Curator would say that he had not missed the real—and false gems—and what could be done about it? At the worst his superiors could accuse him of carelessness. This he would deny vigorously, and leave in any detective's mind the implication that any one of the three men who had the combination of the safe might have been accomplice. But his confederate's carelessness in keeping the coded note in his coat pocket proved their downfall.

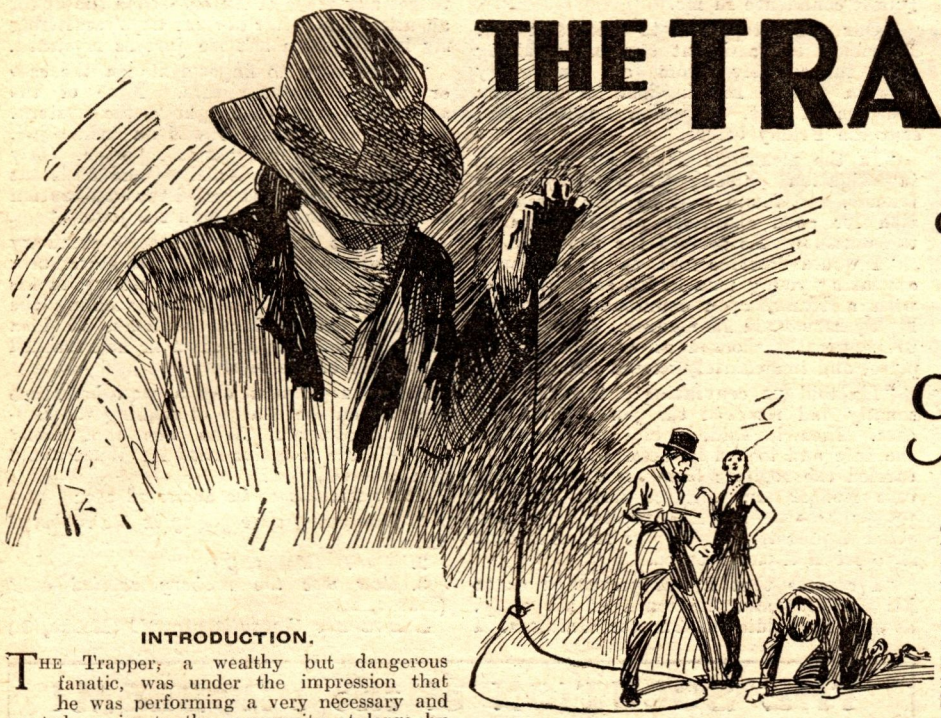
The Hurik pieces were never entirely recovered. Three of the smaller amethyst rings were found in a London pawnshop some years later, and two of the large gold bracelets turned up in a private collection in St. Louis.

They are now kept in the museum safe ALL the time.

SCOTLAND YARD DISCOVER THEY HAVE ARRESTED AN INNOCENT MAN in this week's instalment of

THE TRAPPER!

A DRAMA OF THE NIGHT-HAUNTS OF LONDON



By GEORGE DILNOT

Author of "Scotland Yard," &c.

INTRODUCTION.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stella Cliffe again meets Dick Estrehan, but after falling foul of the Trapper, they are arrested by the police. Stella is wounded by a man she identifies as Thorold, but this is impossible, as Wilde, in the meanwhile, has arrested the American. Later Patricia Langton is interviewed by Wilde at the "Yard," where in her anxiety she threatens the detective. She leaves, however, and Wilde returns to his lodgings.

Upon arrival there, he finds that his room has been ransacked. Pinned to his pillow is a note from the Trapper informing him that he has got the wrong man. Attached to the note is a wire noose.

Wilde is pondering over this when he receives a 'phone call from the Yard saying that Thorold's house has been burnt down.

(*Now continue the story.*)

THE FIRE AT CLARGES STREET.

AS he hung up the receiver Wilde cursed himself for a dilatory fool. If there had been any evidence in that house it had now vanished for ever. He had believed that he could hold Thorold without alarming his confederates. That was why he had delayed the obvious step of immediately searching Thorold's house. To have done so would have been to disclose his hand.

But why had it not occurred to him, after his encounter with Miss Langton, that he was courting trouble in sticking to his original plan, when it was clear that she knew all reason for secrecy had gone? There had been all night to work in, and he had not thought of it. Well, it was no good crying over spilt milk.

Dressing hastily, he was ready by the time a car had arrived, and drove straight to Clarges Street. The usual curious crowd, held back by a police cordon, was watching the still-smouldering ruins Wilde descended from the car and picked his way through. A few minutes conversation with the fire-brigade superintendent, and some of his own officers who had been watching the place, put him in possession of the facts.

The fire had broken out in the early morning, so suddenly that within five minutes of the alarm, the place had been a roaring mass of flames. From the first there had been no hope of saving the house. Two servants had been roused and rescued in the nick of time, but it was unfortunately beyond doubt that the butler, Watkins, and his wife had perished in the flames. In fact, said the fire-brigade superintendent, some charred bones had already been retrieved, and no doubt others would be found as soon as it was possible thoroughly to explore the ruins.

"Incendiary, of course," commented Wilde.

The fire-brigade officer gave a curt laugh.

"Not a doubt of it. Substantial houses like these don't go up like a sheet of tissue paper unless someone has prepared them pretty thoroughly. The place reeked of petrol fumes when we got here. They must have used enough to float a ship. Pretty bad luck on that butler and his wife. This will bring it into your province, Mr. Wilde. It amounts to murder."

The detective nodded, and walked nearer to the smoking ruins, among which the firemen were still busy. For a while he watched in meditative thought. A twitch at his elbow made him turn, and he confronted the Vine Street divisional detective-inspector.

"Nasty mess they've made of the place, sir," he observed. "A funny business."

"Funny, isn't exactly the word I should use," declared Wilde, a little irritably. He was not in the mood for casual conversation. "Have you found out anything about it? It hits me. This house was under observation by my orders."

"I gathered you'd an interest in it," returned the other. "I've got a divisional surgeon over here. He's been looking at those bones. There's a rather queer thing. I wish you'd have a word with him."

Wilde followed his colleague to where a little red-headed man stood with head a little on one side while he turned over and over a charred shinbone.

"Good-morning, doctor!" he said. "I'm Wilde from the Yard. What's this about these bones. They're human, aren't they?"

The medical man glanced slowly round to make sure that his reply would not be overheard.

"Oh, yes, they're human all right! But they are not the bones of anyone who was burnt to death in that house. The fact is that these bones are medical specimens, which have probably been used at some medical college for demonstration purposes. See here!" He went into technicalities.

Wilde lit a pipe and listened closely. Subconsciously he was turning this new complication over in his mind, striving to fit it into a place where it should logically belong. Dimly his ideas began to readjust themselves. He smiled grimly.

"That's very interesting, doctor. Let's keep this to ourselves for a while." He turned to the divisional man. "The newspaper fellows will be looking for a story out of this. When they approach you, you'd better give 'em one as a favour. We are satisfied that this was an incendiary fire, and that two people have been killed as a result. We have clues as to the author—make this vague—and when he is arrested he will be charged with murder. Something on those lines."

The divisional inspector's right eyelid dropped.

"I understand, sir. Leave it to me."

THOROLD IS RELEASED.

QUENTON THOROLD had accepted his confinement with easy philosophy. He had commented favourably upon the unexpected comfort of the British police cell until he learned that he was privileged to occupy not an ordinary cell, but a detention room, reserved for the use of those better behaved

persons who have to be held for a time by the police. Beyond the fact that the window was barred, and that the heavy door contained a "Judas hole," through which the gaoler might observe him from without, he might have been in a small, cheap and plainly furnished room of some second-class hotel.

Into this place he had been ushered by a uniformed inspector, who told him that he could have his meals sent in from any place he wished, so long as he was prepared to pay. Promptly he took advantage of this concession by outlining a dinner to be ordered from the best restaurant in London, and genially suggesting that the inspector should join him at the meal.

The other shook his head.

"Invite me to a dinner like that when you're outside, and I'll come quick enough," he said. "But here it's against the regulations."

"I'll give you the best dinner London affords within a week," declared the millionaire. "And, what's more, you shall have what you like to drink, and I won't pick your pocket of any smokes."

The inspector laughed.

"Sorry about that," he murmured. "Intoxicating liquors are not allowed to persons detained, and if we permitted smoking——"

"Don't apologise," urged Thorold. "You've made me a whole heap more comfortable than I expected."

"I might go so far," observed the inspector, "as to try one of your cigarettes. In fact, I've one here that I stole from your case." He lit up, and after a couple of puffs threw the burning cigarette into a corner. "Make yourself comfortable. There's magazines and newspapers on the table, and if you want anything just ring."

The door fell noiselessly to behind him, and the faintest click indicated that it was locked.

"Good scout, that!" meditated Thorold, as he picked up the cigarette and began a close scrutiny of his quarters. It needed no lengthy inspection to show that there was no possible exit from the place, short of dynamite, except through the door. The millionaire flung himself on a couch, his arms behind his head, and finished his smoke.

"Funny bird! Takes it pretty easily," observed the inspector, as he made his way back to his desk.

Thorold found that time passed quicker than he had anticipated. He lingered over dinner, and occasionally during the evening the inspector and a burly, red-faced, plain-clothes man, whom he he did not recognise, dropped in for a casual chat. He did not imagine that this sort of friendliness towards a prisoner was usual, and, although they might have been actuated by curiosity, he more than half suspected that they had received their instructions from Wilde.

But they did nothing more than make themselves pleasant. They made no reference to the circumstances that had brought him there, and allowed him to direct the talk into whatsoever channels he chose. He hinted at his suspicions to the plain-clothes man, who shrugged his shoulders.

"No, there's nothing of that sort. Fact is, that in the ordinary way I or someone else would have been in here with you all the time. Mr. Wilde thought that you wouldn't like that, but he asked us just to drop in and keep you company once in a while. Some people are apt to go queer when they're brought in first off on a heavy charge. Say the word, and you won't see any more of us."

"That's very considerate," returned Thorold dryly. "But don't worry on my account. I'm glad to have you. I guess if by chance I slipped something that might be twisted against me, you'd forget it, eh?"

"No, we wouldn't," said the other bluntly. "If you're foolish enough to give anything away, we shouldn't be foolish enough to stop you. But don't you believe that we're going to make any attempt to trap you into doing it. I know you're here because you're suspected of murder, and perhaps I can make guesses about what case it is, seeing that Wilde sent you here. But I'm not supposed to know anything. If you want to talk about that business I'd have to send for Mr. Wilde."

"I get you. You're to amuse me—or I'm to amuse you. Now we understand one another. Tell me how they run this joint. Have you ever had a prisoner escape?"

The heavy brows of the plain-clothes man came together, and he eyed the nonchalant questioner up and down.

"Not once he's been inside," he answered. "If you've got any ideas that way, you're welcome to try. Unless you propose to gnaw through the walls with your teeth, about your only chance would be to wait for the gaoler to open the door for me when I go out. Then if you knocked me out, as well as the gaoler—and he was once the amateur heavy-weight champion—you could go through a passage to the charge-room, where there'd likely be three or four men, and then through the main inspectors' office, where there'd be several more, and then get by the reserve man at the door. If any of them screamed for help, we might find another dozen about the place."

"I'll be good," answered Thorold.

In fact his restless spirit had dallied with the speculation that it might be possible to frame some scheme for gaining his freedom without waiting upon events. He would have taken an impish delight in the feeling that he had thus outwitted Wilde. Without any real regret he abandoned the idea.

In spite of the unaccustomed nature of his surroundings, he slept that night with the easy soundness of a child. It was in the morning that he began to feel the tedium of confinement. Wilde, striding in unannounced, found his prisoner with bent brows engaged in a game of patience. Thorold swept the cards into a heap as the detective entered, and nodded in curt greeting.

"I believe I could have worked that out if you hadn't interrupted," he grumbled. "You're an inopportune man, Wilde. To what do I owe the honour of this visit? Have you got a few more murders up against me? Tell me the worst."

The chief inspector seated himself heavily.

"You look none the worse for your night here," he said. "I hope they've made you comfortable?"

"Finest rest cure I ever had," the millionaire reassured him. "Got all this retirement to a monastery stuff beaten to a frazzle. Thank you for asking."

"Don't feel any more communicative now, I suppose?" ventured Wilde.

"An oyster is a garrulous animal compared to me."

A weary smile passed over the detective's face.

"When you were a boy," he said, "somebody must have neglected their duty. They ought to have whaled the hide off you." His face grew serious. "Let's cut this out. I came in to tell you that your house has been burnt out. Only the walls are left standing. The fire was deliberate."

Thorold elevated his eyebrows, but beyond that he betrayed no symptom of surprise.

"Well, it isn't my house. I merely rented it. My personal effects are insured. Guess I'll have to put up at an hotel unless you continue to provide me with free board and room here." A thought struck him. "Was anyone hurt?"

"The butler and his wife are missing," explained Wilde, cautious lest he should say too much. "The other servants escaped safely. We'll know more about it after the ruins have been examined."

"Too bad!" observed the millionaire indifferently, and a half smile lurked about the corners of his lips. "They were good servants. I'll find it hard to get a butler like Watkins. He had qualities that you don't often find nowadays. He could mix a cocktail, or tie a dress-tie or handle my correspondence better than any man I ever had. He was butler, valet and secretary all rolled into one. I suppose"—he yawned and stretched himself—"that if I hadn't been your guest here you'd have lumped this on to me?"

Wilde made no attempt at denial.

"Perhaps I would," he agreed. "I reckon that whoever set that house alight must have had good reasons. If there was something there—something in the nature of evidence that could not have easily been got away, in view of the fact that the place was watched—a fire was very handy. I'd certainly have suspected you, in other circumstances. But there are things which make me waver in my opinion about you. I have thought you a clever and unscrupulous scoundrel, but I think now I may have jumped a little too quickly. Don't misunderstand me. I feel I've been justified in everything I've done. If I've made

After the fire they found grim remains among the smouldering ruins.

a mistake I apologise. Whether you're guilty or innocent, you're holding something back on me. You know something. I ask you, Mr. Thorold, to put this thing straight. You can have no real object in playing with me."

The other absently hummed a snatch of a song while his eyes became thoughtful.

"Mr. Man," he said at last, "you're beginning to have glimmerings that you've been monkeying with bad medicine. You can't say I didn't warn you. You're in one dickens of a mess, and you come whining to me to get you out of it."

"Not such a mess!" retorted Wilde mildly. "I'll get there sooner or later. But I'm looking for a short cut, and it may be that you can point it out to me. Will you?"

"If I was a vindictive man," declared Thorold, "I'd say I'll see you burn before I'd lift a finger to get you out of trouble. I am a vindictive man. You've got me here, and here I suppose I'll stay for a while. You carry on, son. I'm quite comfortable. But I'd hate to be in your shoes when I really get out."

The strain of many days of unrelenting physical and mental effort was telling on the detective.

"If you take it like that I've got no more to say," he declared, pressing the bell to summon the gaoler. "I've apologised. You can take any complaint you've got against me to the Commissioner or to the Home Secretary, or whom you please. I can do no more, except to tell you that I don't propose to hold you any longer. You're free, Mr. Thorold. And now let me say"—he spoke with a passion strange in a man usually so self-restrained—"that I'll darn well get to the bottom of this without any help from you! Sneer if you like, you self-sufficient, arrogant fool!" The door swung open. "You can go!"

For once he had succeeded in astonishing the millionaire, who stood with a smile frozen on his lips regarding the other like some strange animal.

"Tut, tut, Wilde!" he said. "Pull yourself together, man! I didn't think you had that amount of red blood in you. Do I understand that you are letting me go—without conditions?"

"Without conditions," repeated Wilde. "Go!"

The millionaire passed through the doorway. Outside he paused for an instant.

"There are some elements of sportsmanship about you, Wilde. You'll hear from me again."

AT THE REGAL HOTEL.

DURING the day a special messenger brought an envelope to Scotland Yard. This, which was addressed to Wilde, contained a sheet of paper neatly typed in the form of an invitation card.

At Home, 4 p.m.

Miss Patricia Langton,
The Regal Hotel.

Mr. Wilde and friends.

Winter, loitering in the chief inspector's room when the message arrived, fingered the paper with curiosity when the other tossed it over to him.

"What's this lady typewriter who lives at Balham giving an 'at home' at the Regal Hotel for?" he demanded.

Wilde withdrew the cartridges from a revolver, and squinted through the weapon before slowly replacing them one by one.

"Social ambition, perhaps," he ventured solemnly. "Wish to goodness I was, what they call in the Wild West stories, quick on the draw. This gun's an infernal nuisance, but I don't like to be without it just now. She says 'and friends.' I'm taking six. There's four more I've had plastered about the hotel for the last hour or two. That makes ten. It should be enough. Will you come, sir?"

The chief constable shook his head.

"Thank you all the same, but I'll have my cup of tea here. I'm getting too old for the kind of tea-party to which one takes pistols. But I'll certainly be around here waiting to grab a telephone."

Wilde pushed the weapon back into his pocket and looked sideways at his chief.

"You don't seem very curious about it," he said.

"What I don't know can't hurt me," observed Winter, dropping a heavy hand on the other's shoulder. "You've sweated on this case, and I'm not going to jump in at the last moment. You've got to hold the baby. If things go wrong you'll probably get the kicks, and you might as well have the glory if there is any. Good luck to you! But be careful."

"Oh, I'll be careful all right," agreed Wilde. "I've had some."

At half-past three that afternoon a tradesman's covered van drew up at a back entrance of the Regal Hotel. A tall, gaunt man emerged from its depths, and, shouldering a crate of mineral waters, disappeared within the hotel. In the storeroom, where he deposited his burden, no less a person than the manager was waiting.

"I got your message, you see, Mr. Wilde," he said. "Always happy to do what we can to assist gentlemen of your profession. Your bag has arrived, and I have a quiet room where you can change."

"Very good of you, I'm sure," murmured the detective, mopping his brow. "I have an idea that, if I had come in at the front entrance, I might have been noticed, and that would have spoiled a little scheme of mine. Some of my men are about?"

"Oh, yes! We've enlisted them temporarily among the staff as commissionaires, porters, waiters and barmen, besides one or two who appear as guests." The manager hesitated, and went on: "Of course, I've no notion why you've asked us to help you in this way, except that it's apparent you believe some big criminals to be in the hotel. But I hope—that is, we are anxious that you will do your best to prevent any undesirable notoriety focussing on us."

"Thank you," said Wilde. "We'll keep the hotel out of it if it is at all possible."

There were a few matters to be attended to, but punctually at the hour named in the invitation, Wilde, scrupulously clad in morning dress, was bowing to Miss Langton. He was surprised to find her alone in a private sitting-room on the first floor. She received him with smiling formality.

"So glad you've come! Are you all alone? I will ring for tea."

No one would have supposed that less than twenty-four hours before she had enforced her will on him at the point of a pistol.

He grinned as he took his seat.

"I did not know this was to be tete-a-tete. Your invitation suggested a larger party."

"Oh, I expect some other people later on," she explained. "I thought it would be nice if we had a little chat together first. Last night our conversation was rather strained. Oh, here is the tea! Do you take sugar? One lump or two?"

She poised the sugar tongs.

"One, please."

He balanced the cup and saucer, while his eyes followed the waiter to the door and roved to a second door that apparently led to a communicating apartment.

"Mr. Thorold and some others will be here shortly," she chattered on. "Terrible thing about his house, wasn't it? And those two poor people burnt to death. I used to think I should fall in love with Watkins. The newspapers are making a lot of fuss about incendiarism and murder. Do you think it was as bad as that, Mr. Wilde?"

Thoughtfully he bit a small iced cake in half.

"The newspapers will say anything, Miss Langton. Luckily they did not know that I had Mr. Thorold under detention for suspected murder when the fire broke out. What a gaudy touch that would have given to the story!"

She spluttered with laughter.

"We're doing a lot of polite side-stepping. Let's get to business. What have you discovered that made you determined to release Mr. Thorold? I'm sure that you had no such intention when we parted last night."

Wilde finished the remainder of the iced cake.

"Why did you tell me you would be home at four o'clock, and induce me to look like a lost bridegroom in this tail-coat, when all you intended to give me was a cup of tea?"

"You forget," she retorted. "I have been on parole. This I felt would be a pleasanter place for explanations than Scotland Yard. And if you want it straight from the shoulder, Mr. Wilde, here you are. Now that you have got rid of your obsession that Mr. Thorold is the Trapper, have you any idea who is?"

He glanced at her over his raised cup.

"Did I say that I'd got over that obsession? I don't know. Perhaps we have come to think a little along similar lines. All the same," he added gravely, "I suspect that the pair of you propose to put some plant over on me." He raised his voice slightly. "Why don't you come in, Mr. Thorold? Your tea is getting cold."

The inner door swung, and the tall figure of the millionaire appeared framed in the opening. He bowed to Miss Langton and carefully closed the door behind him. "Here we are again, Wilde," he announced. "Still putting the Sherlock stuff across, I see. How did you know I was here?"

The detective brushed a few crumbs from his knees with a handkerchief.

"Oh, I didn't know," he admitted. "I heard that you were about the hotel, and I couldn't understand why Miss Langton should need two rooms for her little party. So I surmised you were waiting within reach."

"Give me a cup of tea, Pat," said Thorold. "You're quite human this afternoon," he added to the other man. "You should have heard him this morning, Pat, when he turned me loose. I thought he was going to bite me." He stirred his tea thoughtfully. "Like some ferocious wild beast."

The woman wagged a threatening finger.

"That's enough, Quenton! I'm not going to have you disturb the harmony of this gathering. Mr. Wilde and I have buried the hatchet."

"All right with me," agreed Thorold. "I take back all I've said, Wilde. I'm here to prove it. I'm here, with the help of Miss Langton, to heap coals of fire on that shaggy head. Can't say more than that. You don't expect me to kiss him?"

"You see"—she spread her hands to the detective—"he will behave like a natural-born, congenital idiot."

"Please, lady, don't expose me," pleaded the millionaire. "'The time has come,' the walrus said, to talk of many things.' You're a bold man to come here alone to confront two such desperate characters."

"Mr. Wilde," interposed Miss Langton, with a meaning smile, "was invited to bring friends. I haven't had the privilege of entertaining them, but I've no doubt that they are near at hand."

"I didn't wish to abuse your hospitality," said Wilde, "but, in fact, I did ask a few people to be about."

"Then we're all set," observed Thorold.

"All except the villain of the piece," remarked Wilde.

"That's so," agreed the millionaire. He put down his cup, and crossing to the inner door, threw it open. "Oh, Watkins," he went on, in nonchalant command, "here's a gentleman wishes to have a word with you."

(What is the startling result of Inspector Wilde's interview with Quenton Thorold and Patricia Langton, and does he discover who the Trapper is? Do not miss next week's instalment of this gripping serial.)

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