

# *THE* THRILLER

THE PAPER WITH A THOUSAND THRILLS

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## The WRECKER

A SENSATIONAL BOOK-  
LENGTH MYSTERY

BY  
**ANTHONY SKENE**



Even as the heavy safe crashed through the crumbling ceiling, Detective-Inspector Forde flung his arms about the girl and hurled her from certain death.



# by Anthony Skene

## A NOVEL-LENGTH STORY OF THRILLING MYSTERY.

### Chapter I. THE NAME— WAS PROTHERO.

CHIEF CONSTABLE SIMS, of the C.I.D., had his "bad mornings," and it was just ill luck that Detective - Inspector Forde happened to be the victim of that officer's ill-humour.

"No doubt," said Chief Constable

stable Sims, "you have got the whole thing taped and ready for a show-down; in view of the fact that the case was referred to you one calendar month ago that was only to be expected; and yet—"

He pretended to hunt among his papers. "And yet I do not seem to remember your report. Perhaps I have overlooked it?"

Young Forde—Rikky Forde—who, with a mathematical tripos and a Rugger Blue to his credit, had elected to become a police constable, and had worked his way into plain clothes, and thence to a detective-inspectorship, fixed his blue-grey eyes

reflectively upon the prospect of Scotland Yard beyond the windows.

He had not done those things which he ought to have done—not all of them, anyway—and did not see that explanations were going to help him out.

The chief constable looked with appreciation at his slim, deep-chested assistant who thus stood at attention and, without batting an eyelid, took what was coming to him. His good looks, his modish clothes, his carefully tended fingers—and, more than these things, his reputation for grit and grey matter—all scored in his favour; otherwise his medicine had been of another kind. When a man has become a chief constable of the Metropolitan Police it may be assumed that he knows his onions. Sims would never waste time in spurring a dead horse.

"Where were you last night?" he snapped out with unexpected suddenness.

Rikky Forde looked unhappy. "Flaxmans."

"Flaxmans," repeated Sims, with distaste. "And what were you doing there?"

"Dancing, and—er—the usual thing."

"Whisky,"

"Some."

"Dashed bad whisky, it is," said Chief Constable Sims, "at Flaxmans."

Detective-Inspector Forde brightened.

"Do you know, sir, that's exactly what I think."

"You do think, then, at times."

"Oh, I say—"

Sims lighted a gasper. He had learned the trick under shell-fire.

"Only one thing can be said in your favour. You dance, you smoke Turkish cigarettes, you drink whisky—any sort of whisky, any amount of whisky—you consort with the brainless; but the glad eye leaves you cold."

For the first time during that trying interview, Forde looked uncomfortable.

"I don't know, sir," he said. "Something wrong with me, I suppose. Don't seem to fall for it somehow."

The chief constable snorted.

"Huh, you can't say the same of whisky, anyway. What time did you come home from Flaxman's last night?"

Rikky Forde's discomfort increased.

"About two," he said, "or three."

"About two, eh, or three? And how did you get home? Do you remember that?"

"Of course," said Forde, pained. "In a taxicab."

"H'm! And who put you to bed?"

"Put me to bed, sir! Do you suggest that I—"

"Of course you were! Quite as usual!" Rikky Forde's eyes came round until

they met those of the chief constable. His frown was interrogatory.

"That's right," nodded Sims, after a long moment, answering Forde's unspoken question. "You've hit it! I've sure had you tailed."

The colour drained out of Rikky's face. The masticatory muscles on his jaw stood out. He took an involuntary pace towards his chief.

"You've had a man on me?" he snapped. "May I ask why?"

"No," said the other, "you may not ask. But," he added, "I will tell you. I wanted to see whether you were doing your job."

"Then," said Rikky Forde, whiter than ever, "you will accept my papers."

Chief Constable Sims lighted another cigarette from the butt of the first.

"I will not accept your papers. I like you. You're a darned good man. If you were not I should hardly be wasting my time talking to you. When I want your resignation I'll ask for it. I may as well admit here and now that the purpose of having you tailed was not exactly as I—er—indicated."

"You realise, I suppose," he went on, "that you may be up against a dangerous proposition. You think I don't know what you have been doing during this last month, but I do know; and I am not as dissatisfied as I may have led you to believe. You have been getting to know people; and, my lad, so far as I can guess, they are in the social stratum which contains the Racketeer. It may even be that your dissipation has assisted you in this."

"Never knew you to drink before," added Sims reflectively, "and now you drink like a fish."

He checked himself to look searchingly at his assistant.

"And yet, confound it, you don't look like a man who drinks."

His eyes wrinkled in humorous perplexity.

"Perhaps I don't know all that there is to know."

Forde's tensility had relaxed. The colour had returned to his face, and the careless expression to his eyes.

Sims noted with amusement that when Rikky Forde was angry his eyes were steel grey, but when he was at peace with his environment they contained a trace of blue. All phenomena concerning men were of interest to Chief Constable Sims.

Now, with his bluish eyes once more directed at the window, Rikky murmured: "Perhaps, sir, that is the case."

"Ah! I thought as much!" The chief constable grinned. "Well, I don't want to butt in on your show. It's just a habit of mine to drag my assistants up here and insult them every now and then."

He offered the yellow packet which he had taken from his pocket.

"Have a cigarette?" he said; and then: "Oh, no! I forgot. You smoke those filthy Turkish."

He stood up and placed a friendly hand on the detective's shoulder.

"All the same, I admit that I should like results as soon as you can produce them. The newspapers are getting down to the thing. Very soon some enterprising reporter will collar the facts, and then there will be a public outcry. A public outcry, laddie, is the one thing which the commissioner can't abide."

"It only shows," he went on, "how deep this fellow is—this Racketeer chap whom

we are after. Fifteen years, I reckon, he has been working his stunt in this country, and, so far, only one man has had the brains to divine his existence. That one man is myself."

Rikky Forde became tremendously interested.

A defect of Chief Constable Sims' technique was that he did not put his operatives in possession of extraneous facts.

"Fifteen years!" said Forde. "I had no idea the thing had been going on as long as that."



The chief constable nodded.

"No? But it has. And always—so far as one can make out—the *modus operandi* has been the same. This fellow, who follows a trade for which our American friends have coined the name Racketeer, buys an interest in a failing business, cripples his competitors in that business, makes a pot of money, and clears out before questions become inconvenient. There is a big pile of wreckage left behind."

"A wrecker! That description fits in well," suggested Forde.

Sims went back to his table and turned over a file of news cuttings and sprawling manuscript notes, written with the quill pen which he affected.

"Here," he said, "is a case in point. In 1916 he was behind some biggish building business in Birmingham. One can only deduce that fact by the string of accidents which happened to building firms of importance in that city. Within that year there were two local strikes, three fires, two serious accidents—the collapse of a crane in one case and the caving in of excavations in the other—and, in all probability, there were half a dozen more mishaps which were not reported. By the end of 1916 these calamities had ceased. In other words, the Racketeer had shifted his ground. In 1917 we reckoned he was in light castings. The old story. Explosions, labour difficulties, fires, and general obstruction. In 1919 he was at it again."

"Of course," suggested Rikky Forde, "you have in each case picked out the firms who appeared to be immune and tried to discover some person who was interested in two or more of these firms."

"Naturally. But we never succeeded in learning the identity of our man. Necessarily, there were always more than one immunity. Further, there is no doubt that this Racketeer, being a very smart fellow, would arrange to have a calamity of some sort on his own premises. No, Rikky, he is an under-cover man who takes no avoidable risks. He can only be pulled down by one who can bring to the battle of wits an intelligence as great as his own. That's why I picked upon you."

The young man nodded.

"Thanks!" he said shortly.

"I picked upon you," the chief constable repeated, "and somehow or other, I don't know why, I've got a hunch that I picked upon the right man."

"Strangely enough," murmured Rikky, "that, sir, was exactly what had occurred to me."

The chief constable roared with laughter. "Oh! It was, was it? Well, you get out and go on finding out things about this fellow whom nobody knows."

He pushed the young man towards the door.

"Forget the objectionable things which I have said, and—be careful!"

Detective-Inspector Forde lounged out

of the fortress-like building, with its granite courses and brickwork of dingy crimson, strolled into Whitehall, and beckoned a taxicab. A few minutes later he descended in Shaftesbury Avenue, and climbed a flight of wooden stairs to a famous, though discreet, American bar. Two young men who were already supporting themselves against the counter, behind which Horace Jones, the expert, was operating with his mixer, turned as Forde entered, and greeted him with loud cheers.

"Hallo, Rikky, you're so late this morning that we thought you had missed the usual bracer!"

"Never," declared Rikky—"never in this world! Horace," he said, addressing the cocktail king, "one of the usual, with—I think; yes, I am perfectly certain—a dash of absinthe."

Within the telephone box downstairs a quietly dressed man of impeccable appearance, who went by the name of Blarney Jim, or Jim Blarney, whichever way you liked to put it, was talking over the telephone to someone whom he addressed with great respect.

"Can't you let up on this sap?" he was saying. "My constitution won't stand it. He's just come from the Yard, where, as I should say by the look of him, he has received the frozen mitt, and at this moment he is proceeding to get the usual skin full of hooch. The trouble is, guv'nor, I've got to go his pace. Places where he goes you can't drink soft drinks; they won't stand for it. It's whisky, whisky, whisky, and it's a bit rough on me. I like whisky all right, as a drink, but I'm beginning to see things. Anyway, this lad is nothing to worry you. When he's not asleep he's drunk, and when he's not drunk he's asleep!"

After these picturesque remarks, Blarney Jim listened for a long time to a hard, incisive voice—a strong voice with a queer break—which told him exactly who he was and what he was, what his orders were, and the restrictions which he was to observe in using the telephone.

"All right," he expostulated at length—"all right. Let up, guv'nor! What you say goes. I was only telling you."

He put back the receiver and lounged out of the building, to take up a position across the road.

He had hardly gone when Rikky Forde entered the box.

"Exchange," he called, and gave a code word which ensured the instant attention of the supervisor.

"I want to know," he said, "the number of the subscriber who was last called on this line."

He waited a minute, and then received from the supervisor the information which he required.

"The number was Walham 0795, and the name of the subscriber was Prothero—Mr. Abel Prothero."

"Thanks. His address is—"

"9, Marshalsea Mansions, Putney Hill."

Rikky rejoined his friends.

"No," he said, in explanation of his absence, "I had not forgotten to pay off my taxi. Just as well to make sure."

He pushed his now empty glass across the counter.

"You men will join me?"

Neither of his friends could have perceived his triumph at the discovery which he had just made.

He had spotted the elusive Blarney Jim, and had been certain that the man was not a police officer.

Except for Sims' man, no one on earth had a reason to shadow Rikky Forde, unless—and this was the basis of the young

detective's triumph—unless the Racketeer was wise to his mission, and feared him enough to have him tailed.

If this were so, he had been nearer to the big thing than he knew of. And now he had got a name—Prothero. Suppose this Abel Prothero was the Racketeer himself.

Rikky's thoughts were interrupted by his observation of a significant fact.

Horace—the cocktail king—was rearranging his bottles.

#### RIKKY PLAYS A HUNCH.

It is sad to record that Horace, the celebrated Horace, king of all cocktail mixers, entertained a penchant for intrigue. He was—not to put too fine a point upon it—a “nose,” a police informer.

Directly Rikky perceived that Horace was rearranging his bottles, he knew that he was about to receive a communication. Horace was one of the three or four men who had official knowledge of Rikky's commission.

Whisky—French vermouth—maraschino.

The order of the bottles informed Rikky Forde that there was an urgent message for him. He reacted instantly.

“Look here, Horace, you promised me a stone-inger for the four o'clock. What about it?”

Horace understood.

“Oh, yes, sir. So I did. Wait a minute; I'll write it down for you.”

Forde glanced indifferently at the pencilled slip before thrusting it into his waistcoat pocket.

“Thanks!” he said. “The animal's an outsider; but it's worth a small bet. Your tips are usually O.K.”

He picked up the racing edition of an evening paper, and withdrew for the ostensible reason of considering the matter of the bet.

“Watch pianos,” that had been the message which he had received via the cocktail king; and Rikky's business with the paper was to refresh his memory as to a news item which the message brought into his mind.

#### “Disastrous Fire at a Piano Factory!”

Yes, that was the headline which he had remembered. Chief Constable Sims was evidently on to something, and Rikky Forde reckoned that it looked good.

Piano manufacture was exactly the kind of industry to attract the Racketeer. The number of actual manufacturers is not great, and their output would be restricted without great difficulty. He half remembered a recent disaster at a piano factory. And here was another.

The news item went on to describe a sudden and calamitous fire which had broken out in the assembly shop behind the Clissold Galleries in New Bond Street, where the pianos of Messrs. Webster & Prothero were made. The article terminated with a short eulogy of the instruments manufactured by this well-known firm, a eulogy which may, or may not,

have been represented by a charge at advertising rates. Rikky wasn't worrying about that. The thing which interested him was the coincidence of the name, Prothero. He was being, or had been, shadowed during that morning by a man who had put through a call to a subscriber having that unusual name; and the possibility which was exciting his imagination was that the two Protheros, the one who had received the 'phone message, and the one who was partner in the piano business, were identical.

Fortunately, it was quite easy to settle this question.

Explaining to Horace Jones that he was going to place his bet before the price shortened, he went back to the telephone in the entrance lobby and put through a call to the number which he had already noted, asking for Mr. Prothero.

A girl's voice answered him.

“No, Mr. Prothero is not at home. He has just left for the works accompanied by his foreman. This is Miss Prothero, his daughter, speaking. Can I take a message?”

Forde demurred.

“It's a personal matter. Do you know where I could find Mr. Prothero?”

“I should think,” replied the girl, “that you would find him at the works any time to-day. The Clissold Galleries, it is. The Clissold Galleries, New Bond Street.”

Rikky thanked her and rang off. He had got what he wanted. At last, after these weeks of research, he had obtained the first fact which looked like leading him to the personality of that ultra-modern criminal whom Sims had called the Racketeer.

Returning to imbibe the third example of Horace's genius, Detective-Inspector Forde received remarks about

secrecy which were both pointed and pained.

“To think that Rikky could take a stone-inger and hug it to his bosom without a word to his friends! It seems almost impossible, doesn't it?”

“Rikky, my lad, despite your appearance, which is against you and your bearing, which is flamboyant, I used to like you; but now, unless you forthwith choke up the name of that animal upon which you have just put your shirt, I shall never love you any more.”

By now several other customers had drifted into that popular bar, and one or two joined in the laughter at the young detective's appearance of contrition.

“Awfully sorry,” he apologised, putting the onus of invention upon the man behind the bar; “but, since you were witnesses to this transaction, you may as well lose your money, as I shall probably lose mine. Tell 'em the worst, Horace. Make no secret of it.”

The result was that several other small squares of paper with pencilled messages were passed across the mahogany counter.

Exactly what specious information Horace had imparted upon the spur of the

moment, Rikky neither knew nor cared. Horace was a knowing card, and it was quite possible that his tip was genuine. If not, well, it wouldn't be the first racing tip which had gone wrong. For himself, he had work to do; and although his capacity for alcoholic drink was supposed to be unlimited, it was noticeable that he lost all interest in the bar and became at once anxious to take his luncheon.

Before leaving the telephone-box, he had put through a call to his official superior; and, before his luncheon was over, the result of that call became manifest in a bulky envelope brought to him by the waiter.

The first enclosure was a copy of a letter addressed to Messrs. Webster & Prothero, and subscribed by a well-known firm of insurance agents. It was headed “By hand. Urgent!” and informed the piano makers that Mr. K. S. Laxton, agent for the company, would call upon them that afternoon in connection with the fire which had already been notified. The second enclosed was an example of Chief-Constable Sims' almost illegible manuscript:

“Begins. Good idea. I have got the thing fixed, as you see. You will drop back upon your old rôle of the prying K. S. Laxton. The insurance company will accept your say-so as to the damage. Think you are on to something. Watch your step. Ends.”

Rikky Forde thrust the envelope into his breast pocket and rose from the table.

“Awfully sorry, you men, but I've got a job of work to do.”

He turned to one of his companions with whom he was really friendly—a man named Ainsdale—poor old George Ainsdale, to give him his full title—one who had loved and lost, and was engaged in the pursuit of forgetfulness which absorbed an income of several thousands and crammed the dissipation of ten years into every twelve months that he lived—poor old George, with the sad eyes and the smiling mouth.

“You'll pay for the lunch, George. I'm in a hurry. Cheerio!” And Rikky disappeared in the direction of the vestiaire.

George Ainsdale turned, with his invariable smile, to the third man of the party:

“Rikky Forde. Impetuous lad, isn't he, Nutmeg? Never knew him to work before. Whatever it is, he'll do it well. He's that sort of chap.”

Nutmeg disagreed.

“What! Rikky?” he laughed. “There's only one job, George, at which Rikky is really good, and that is at emptying a whisky bottle. I remember his father. Before your time, I think. Sudden Death Dick, they used to call him. Same name, you see; only this one is called Rikky. Same penchant for strong drink and big-boned Irish horses. Same ineffable contempt for women. Rode hell for leather; and, most miraculous, contrived to die in his bed. Wonder if Rikky will do likewise.”

Strangely enough, Rikky at that moment was wondering just the same thing. He had not discovered very much about the strange individual called the Racketeer, not about the criminal machinery which the Racketeer, for his own devious purposes, had set up; but he had touched upon the fringe of a criminal intrigue, wherein, if he guessed aright, like a spider in a web, waited the Racketeer, and he had sensed rather than perceived the malevolent intelligence. Now at long last he had found a breach in the defences of the enemy, and through that breach it was his purpose to enter; and, if



Suspecting incendiarism, Forde searched among the charred debris.

possible, to smash first the defences of the Racketeer and then the Racketeer himself. To that end he had obtained the letter of introduction to Webster & Prothero, and to that end he now hurried to the small flat which he rented in Jermyn Street, for the purpose of effecting a disguise.

This matter of disguise was a difficulty. He wished that it had been unnecessary; but then he had already received proof that he was known to the Racketeer's people, and he did not dare to start anything under his own identity.

If it had been possible to resort to crêpe hair and grease paint, then, of course, he could have got away with the deception very easily indeed; but grease paint and crêpe hair, if they are used at all for purposes of practical disguise, are possible only after dark, and then in circumstances when suspicious scrutiny is not probable.

During his training as a police officer, Rikky had learnt the differences in appearance which it is possible to make by a different dressing of the hair, different clothes, different bearing, and the alterations by means of internal fixtures which can be made upon the shape of the mouth. During the short trip to Jermyn Street he had one glimpse of the man whom he had followed into the telephone-box during the morning, but of Sims' man he could find no trace.

"Good work," he applauded. "If that fellow from the Yard is getting my smoke he is doing it to perfection. The Racketeer's fellow is good enough, but the man from the Yard is a wonder."

He let himself into the flat with his latch-key and met his servant in the narrow hall.

"Say, Jim, I'm going out on a stunt right now, and I want you to do the usual. Give you ten minutes to make the change."

The servant, Jim Lansbury, was an ex-crook whom Forde had befriended. There is a saying that the leopard cannot change his spots; that a man who has once run crooked will never run straight. Lansbury was a living proof that this assertion is false. His honesty was the most unquestionable thing in the world; it was hardly exceeded by his devotion to the man who had saved him. He was not unlike Rikky, this one-time lag. The two men were of the same age and of the same physique. Except that Lansbury suffered from a slight limp, their bearing was very similar. It was, therefore, easy to effect a change of identity which would deceive when the possibilities of inspection were not too good.

While Rikky Forde set about altering himself into a personage as different from his own as he dared to attempt, Lansbury, who had done the job several times before, set to work with grease-paint, nose-paste, and a suit of his master's clothes, to make himself into a passable duplicate of his master.

"Now then," Rikky told him, when they were through, "go and show yourself at the window of the sitting-room. There

will be a man, or possibly two men, in the street outside who are interested in my movements. I want them to feel assured that I am still in the flat. For myself, I am going to do a fade-out via the back entrance."

"Trouble?" questioned Lansbury. Forde shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe."

Lansbury nodded.

"You'll find your Browning in the right-hand drawer of your dressing-table."

Rikky Forde tapped his hip-pocket.

"Thanks, laddie, I have already found it. Be good!"

He disappeared, and Lansbury moved over to the window to begin his job as a decoy.



The 'phone bell shrilled, and, hoping he would pick up further incriminating information, Forde answered the call.

mind, which proves that Rikky was possessed of histrionic skill.

When the detective sloughed off his own personality and took on that of K. S. Laxton, he did so with a thoroughness which few of his official superiors would have expected. Although it was unlikely that the matter would ever be put to the test, or that by virtue of such minutiae he would ever betray himself, a search of his person would have revealed letters addressed to Laxton, visiting-cards made out in the name of Laxton, everything that the imaginary Laxton ought to have in his pockets, and nothing that he should not have.

This was ordinary craftsmanship. Where the impersonation became a matter of high art was that Forde answered to the name of Laxton, and to no other. He thought the thoughts of Laxton, looked and walked like Laxton. And Laxton was a very different man to Rikky Forde.

While, half an hour after his introduction to Mr. Prothero at the Clissold Galleries in New Bond Street, he found himself poking about among the debris which the fire had left behind, the fact that he was alone did not prevent his carrying on the impersonation to perfection—indeed, the prying inquisitiveness of the expert in fire risks suited his purpose very well. The insurance company wanted to know what was behind this sudden disastrous fire, and so did the police. Rikky was, therefore, able to act for both parties at the same time.

The ground floor on which he stood was covered with concrete, and upon the concrete, except for a narrow track which had been cleared to give access to the rear part of the premises, was heaped a considerable depth of wet charcoal, the combined product of the fire and of the engines which had checked it.

In the floor above, a huge ragged and charred hole had been burnt away, and, looking through this hole, he could see objects of furniture which had belonged to

the offices above and which had escaped the ravages of the flames.

The fire itself had been astonishingly local. Where it had touched it had destroyed with extraordinary completeness. Outside its limited radius the premises were undamaged.

On the table in the corner of the lower room, soaked and blackened, but otherwise none the worse for the fire, was standing the black office telephone, and Forde was amused to notice that the thing was still in commission.

The ashes among which he stood appeared to be composed very largely of parts belonging to pianoforte instruments, substantiating the story which Prothero had already told him, that seven valuable pianos had been destroyed upon the ground floor alone. He was investigating this statement, as it was his duty in the rôle of insurance agent to do, when he heard a strange sing-song voice in the room above. He had heard the voice before, but then it had been distant, and had not particularly attracted his attention. Now the speaker must have been nearer the hole in the floor, for every word was so audible as to force itself upon Forde's attention.

"No," said the voice, apparently answering a question which Forde did not hear; "no, Gabriel Fish, you are wrong. I have been helping Mr. Prothero with his accounts. I don't know, Gabriel, what he would do without me."

There was a silence.

"What's that you say?" continued the voice. "Ah, Gabriel Fish, you always would have your joke. I assure you that my assistance is essential. I have the whole business—the whole business, mind you—at my finger ends."

Again a silence, and again the sing-song voice of the unseen speaker, continuing his remarks to the inaudible Gabriel Fish.

It was not Forde's business to listen, and, except for the fact that one of the speakers was strangely inaudible, the matter did not interest him.

He was interested just then in counting the iron frames which necessarily had escaped destruction. Every frame represented, one would suppose, a piano, and Rikky Forde knew enough about pianos to deduce the type of piano from the shape of the frame.

He had disinterred from the caked ashes the last of seven frames, when the telephone upon the table beside him—an instrument which, considering its recent harsh treatment, might have been supposed to be out of action—began a loud ringing.

Without hesitation the young detective picked it up and put the receiver to his ear. Not his business, of course, but then, again, it might be.

"Is that," asked the voice at the other end, "the Clissold Galleries?"

Forde was able to answer truthfully that it was.

"Is that the workshops?"

Again he answered in the affirmative.

"You were inquiring a little while ago for some spare frames and parts. You gave us to understand that you did not care about their condition, so long as the price was satisfactory."

Rikky Forde replied instantly that such was the case. Already he had begun to smell a rat, and the discovery was one of the most disappointing in his whole career.

"Well," said the other, "we have found some frames, and if you can meet us with regard to the price—"

"Excuse me."

Forde turned to find Mr. Prothero at his

elbow—the military Mr. Prothero, with his flat face and drooping moustache—Mr. Prothero of the expressionless voice.

"Excuse me. Is that call by any chance for ourselves?"

Forde was compelled to admit that it was. "Ah, yes," he said, "there was no one else to answer the 'phone, and I was just about to call you."

He watched while Prothero, with transmitter in one hand and receiver in the other, caused the message to be repeated.

Mr. Prothero's face was as expressionless as his voice. His mental attitude was perhaps as unbending as his square figure. But Forde saw a quick flicker of apprehension in his lifeless eyes. That symptom of disquiet confirmed the worst of Rikky's fears.

He had come there in pursuit of the Racketeer and he had stumbled upon a case of fraud.

It was not impossible that even the Clissold Galleries, with their world-wide reputation, and their Bond Street address, were in low water. One elementary and clumsy device for replenishing the banking account would be a fire. Assuming that the fire was thorough in its effects, and that the necessary number of metal parts was left behind to substantiate the firm's story as to their loss; assuming, also, that they got away with it, then, by the sacrifice of a little old stock, the Clissold Galleries would be in a position to rope in a useful sum.

The limited locale of the conflagration had already aroused Forde's suspicions. This telephone call about an inquiry for old frames intensified them.

From the point of view of Rikky Forde, criminal investigator, the fire lost all interest. As the representative of an insurance company he proceeded to verify his suspicions before Prothero could think out an explanation.

"An order for frames," he said, "that was the matter under discussion."

He turned and pointed to the frames which now lay upon the heaps of ashes.

"Tell me. From whom did you buy those?"

Prothero had replaced the receiver, and now turned, without any further evidence of discomposure, to look Rikky in the face.

"I should be glad to know, Mr. Laxton, what that question implies."

Rikky laughed. "So should I, Mr. Prothero. That is why I am asking it."

Prothero pulled at the ends of his long moustache.

"To tell you the truth, Mr. Laxton—to tell you a rather unpalatable truth—the Clissold Galleries, besides manufacturing their own superb instrument, the one which bears their name and is seen on every concert platform in Europe, have found it necessary to market a cheaper product. Needless to say, it is impossible for us to put into this cheaper product the frame which is our own patent, and which is manufactured by us at great expense. Consequently, we do occasionally buy a lot of second-rate frames which go into these cheaper instruments. They are

easy, you will understand, of adaptation to our own purposes, and are very cheap to obtain. That, my dear sir, is the explanation of the telephone call which you accidentally received. I hope—I do sincerely hope—that the knowledge will go no further."

"And these pianos," questioned Forde. "The ones which were destroyed by the fire. Am I to assume that they were your Number 1 product, or these inferior constructions to which you have just referred?"

Prothero appeared to be much impressed by this searching question.

"Dear me, Mr. Laxton, you insurance fellows are certainly thorough. I am afraid you have found me out in a—what shall we say—a peccadillo. A quite unintentional mistake, I assure you. I have not yet formulated my claim, as it happens—not officially, that is—but if I had done so I fear I should have claimed that all were what you call our Number 1 product. I am, however, much obliged to you for reminding me that such is not the case. Five of the instruments were of the inferior kind. They are not listed in our catalogues, nor exhibited in our show-rooms, but I shall have no objection to acquainting you with the terms upon which they are sold."

Mr. Laxton nodded indifferently.

The lie was adroit. The explanation had been well done, but it did not deceive him; and possibly Mr. Prothero had known that it was futile even while he was evolving it.

"Just another question," said Forde. "Who is Gabriel Fish?"

He had been worrying himself about that name ever since he had heard the conversation of which it formed a part. Gabriel Fish. A queer name. One to remain in the mind, and which, nevertheless, Rikky could not place. He felt sure that somewhere, a long time ago, he had been familiar with the name. He wondered where and when.

"Gabriel Fish," repeated Prothero, with

what seemed to be consternation. "Where have you heard the name of Gabriel Fish?"

Forde laughed.

"That's what I want to know. I heard it this morning mentioned in a conversation between two of your people which took place on the floor up above there. I did not see the speakers, but one of them, at least, I am anxious to meet—the one, I mean, who is called Gabriel Fish."

"I don't think," said Prothero strangely, "that you are likely to meet Mr. Fish just yet. Indeed, Mr. Laxton, for your sake I hope that you will not. That Gabriel Fish ever existed I have no proof, but there is no question that, if he did once exist, he is now dead."

"Dead!" repeated Forde. "You surprise me, Mr. Prothero. It was only a few minutes ago that I heard someone speaking to him."

"That is quite possible," said Mr. Prothero stiffly.

The other waited. There was surely some explanation to follow these conflicting statements.

The soldierly Mr. Prothero looked embarrassed.

"Perhaps," he said, "offering his cigarette-case, 'you will smoke. No? Then I will light a cigarette myself. Against my principles in business hours; but then the fire has disorganised everything.'"

"Mr. Fish," he went on; "Mr. Fish is a—er—spirit. He is dead, Mr. Laxton, and he is, as you would put it, in the spirit world. Some of us in this place, myself, for instance, and my foreman—a man Snooper—believe in the—er—spirit world. The fact that this person, Fish, has passed over, does not in our eyes obviate the possibility of a spirit, or even of an ecto-plasmic—that is, a material existence. To my foreman, Snooper, this Gabriel Fish, who was, as I understand, a friend of his, has such a real and objective existence—I trust I make myself clear—that, as you are a witness, conversations do actually take place



The moment Roxter's eyes were turned, Rikky Forde snatched the opportunity of pitching away the doped wine.

between the two. Some of the other men, who are of a low order of intelligence, laugh at Snooper behind his back for this supernatural association, but you, I think, will not do that. I am treating you, Mr. Laxton, as a man of delicate sensibilities. Whether you share in our beliefs, or otherwise, you will, I am sure, accord to them a certain respect."

Rikky Forde inclined his head.

"You may count upon that, Mr. Prothero."

"Thank you," said the piano maker.

"That then," he went on, "is the explanation of the dialogue which you have overheard. You will be seeing my foreman, no doubt, in your researches, and I hope that, as far as possible, you will spare him. He is an eccentric fellow—very sensitive, but at the same time an excellent workman. He brings more than brains to the construction of a Clissold instrument; he brings soul; Mr. Laxton—soul!"

For some time after Mr. Prothero had gone, Forde continued rather aimlessly to retrieve such incombustible stuff as had been left among the ashes. He was bending to extract some object which appeared interesting, when a tiny brownish fragment of plaster fell from somewhere above his head on to the debris just in front of his eyes. He looked up. The edge of the blackened ceiling around the hole in the upper floor was cracking, crashing inwards. He stepped quickly backwards, and glanced up at the spot which had been immediately above his head. A small office safe, which was being moved by someone above, had begun to topple over and to break its way through the charred and splintered floor.

At that instant, when the heavy mass of the safe was toppling over, to crash down upon the narrow track which had been left between the cinders, the door of the rear workshop swung open and a girl cried towards him. There was no time to shout a warning. Rikky Forde hurled himself forward, seized the girl in his arms, and carried her bodily across the floor, to fall in a heap upon the wet cinders out of the zone of danger. A fraction of a second later the safe crashed down into cinders and concrete alike.

But for the falling fragment of plaster he would have been a dead man, crushed, dismembered, and this horrible fate would have been shared by the girl whom he held in his arms.

#### CLARICE PROTHERO.

It is almost true to say that Rikky Forde had not seen the girl until he found himself looking into her face from a distance of a few inches.

His tackle had necessarily been fierce; and the two of them had fallen heavily. This rapid exertion was followed instantly by the crash and squelch of the falling safe. These things, or perhaps the fact, newer and stranger to Rikky Forde than it would have been to most men, that he held a young woman in his arms, had the effect of prolonging seconds into periods of almost infinite duration.

It seemed to him afterwards that he must have lain there for several minutes looking into the girl's eyes before either of them spoke. Then she said, with a queer, humorous catch in her breath: "Do you mind moving? You're hurting me!"

The young man sprang up with a shamefaced apology. Something had happened to him, something so transcendental that for a moment, indifferent to the fate of his body, his mind had been occupied by an absurd beatitude.

The girl's mundane remark called him back with a rude shock to earth. Nevertheless, even when he had given her his hand and assisted her to rise to her feet, he remained looking into her eyes as abjectly under the spell of her attractiveness as any schoolboy could have been.

She was not beautiful, this girl whom he had saved from the falling safe. Her mouth was too large, her eyes too far apart. Her hair was yellow, not gold, but plain yellow; and her sunburnt skin was freckled across her nose and over the laughter-wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. Historical truth compels the statement that she was not beautiful; but, looking out of these deep blue eyes, and eloquent in the whimsical turn of her lower lip, was a soul intrepid and loving of laughter. Beauty! What is beauty, anyway? She was very beautiful indeed.

The falling of the safe had been followed by a confusion of sounds. A choking dust filled the air; and, when Forde had pulled the girl back away from the dust, and away from any danger of a further fall from above, it was to find himself surrounded by men.

Prothero was there, and in the background Prothero's foreman—a small man in a green baize apron. Three other well-dressed men, who Rikky subsequently found to be members of the firm, were joining in Prothero's excited questions; and, in the doorway, a Press photographer, who had miraculously appeared from nowhere, was

waiting until the dust subsided for an opportunity to secure a picture of the fallen safe.

"Narrow shave!" ejaculated Prothero. "Nearest thing I ever saw. When you deliberately crossed over to push Clarice out of the way, the safe was actually falling. It is almost true to say that it was in the air. I don't know how you escaped. I really do not know how you escaped."

With that trace of a country accent which belonged, as Forde thought, so appropriately to her bonny face, the girl said: "You appear to have saved my life."

"I'm glad," said Forde.

Mr. Prothero performed a rather belated and unnecessary introduction.

"This, my dear, is Mr. Laxton. He is from the—er—insurance company. He has called in connection with the fire. This, Mr. Laxton, is my daughter."

The girl made an attempt to look over her own shoulder.

"I'm in a horrible mess," she said. "That wet charcoal stuff is all over me."

"You will have to get home," boomed Mr. Prothero. "You will have to get home, my dear, immediately."

Clarice Prothero shook her head.

"Can't. Not until I've got that dance music. The seance is to-night; and at present we've only got the old stuff."

One of the partners, a man named Benthoven, saw Forde's look of astonishment, and condescended to explain.

"The dance music, Mr. Laxton, isn't actually used at the seance. The more serious minds are occupied with the seance, while the less serious are occupied with the dance music. Is that right, Miss Prothero?"

The girl gurgled.

"Yes, that's right, Mr. Benthoven. And dance music, you know, has a very brief vogue. The fashion in dance music changes more quickly than the fashion in dress. My trouble is that I can't find anybody to play the stuff. There isn't anybody in this place who can't play the piano; but they play dance music as if it were offertory music. I'm sure you understand what I mean, Mr. Laxton."

Mr. Laxton did understand, and said so.

"Absolutely," he said. "They play the tune with all the pep left out."

The girl laughed again. Indeed, she was always laughing.

"That is exactly right."

She put her hand impulsively on Forde's sleeve.

"And can you play dance music?"

"I'll have a shot," said the young man. "But what about you? Aren't you going to change those clothes? They must be wet."

Clarice Prothero wriggled herself speculatively.

"Yes, they are a bit; but it doesn't matter. Come along; come this way. You are the very man I've been looking for."

It was Rikky Forde's duty to carry on with the investigation which he had already begun as to the cause of the fire. It was an urgent duty to find out exactly why that safe should have turned over at the very moment when he was standing beneath it; but, instead of these things, he found himself crashing out dance tunes upon a Webster and Prothero grand, while a yellow-haired girl humped her shoulders to the rhythm.

"Fine," she said, again and again. "You don't always hit the right notes; but you do hit 'em hard. I like your playing."

As has been said, there was something intentionally weedy about K. S. Laxton; and, although unconsciously Rikky had been allowing his own personality to obtrude, he remained K. S. Laxton to outward seeming; and the girl found herself perplexed by this discrepancy.

When she did not look at Forde, she liked him. There was something inconsistent. He looked like one man and spoke like another. It was the ability to play dance music on the piano which decided her in his favour.

"We've got a dance to-night," she said impulsively. "I think you heard them talking about it. Would you like to come? You sort of saved my life, you know; and that excuses my being informal now, doesn't it? I'll ask my father to invite you, if you like."

Rikky Forde said: "There is nothing that I should like better," and he spoke from the bottom of his heart. It did not strike him until afterwards that this invitation served also the purpose of furthering his researches into the affair of the Racketeer; nor even did it occur to him that the invitation extended to K. S. Laxton, the insurance agent, would not necessarily be extended to Rikky Forde, the Scotland Yard detective.

Before the girl had returned with her father he had considered these things, and was feeling decidedly small. His discomfort was not decreased by a conversation which he had the bad luck to overhear. For no particular reason, he had suddenly stopped playing in the middle of a loud passage; and first the voice of Clarice, and then that of her father, came to him as distinctly as if the words had been intended for himself: "But father!" And then: "My dear, I tell you it's impossible. I can't explain; but it's—you don't understand—dangerous. He —"

By this time Rikky had recovered from his astonishment, and recommenced his



playing. That word which Mr. Prothero had used—the word “dangerous”—stuck in his mind and began to mean all kinds of things which he ardently desired that it should not mean.

Clarice Prothero returned; and, with her elbow upon the piano, bent to look him in the face. She was ashamed, because of what she knew he must have overheard, and yet she deliberately sought to look him in the face while she said what she had to say. She—it seemed—was that sort of girl.

“I am quite sure, Mr. Laxton, that you overheard a fragment of conversation just now.”

He nodded.

“Yes, it doesn’t matter.”

“You knew, of course, that it referred to yourself?”

Forde nodded again.

“Of course.”

The girl held out her hand.

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right,” the young man told her, and took another sheet of music down from the piano.

“What about this one?”

But the girl appeared to have lost interest in the dance music.

“I’ll take this stuff,” she said, taking up the bundle of pieces which he had already tried over. “Very kind of you, Mr. Laxton, to have played them for me. I’m afraid that I have been wasting your time.”

Forde shook his head and smiled.

The girl laughed. That lilting laugh of hers was never very far below the surface.

“I hope,” she said, hesitating on her way towards the door of the small music-room in which they were, “that we shall meet again.”

Rikky Forde rose, and, very thoughtfully, made his way back to the scene of the fire. There he rejoined the group of men whom he had already seen in the repair shop behind the place where the safe had fallen. They were discussing the method of rebuilding the premises. Two of them—partners of Prothero—had been introduced to him as Roxter and Benthoven.

The Webster, who shared with Prothero the naming of the firm, was, apparently, no longer in the business. Whether he had been bought out, or whether, departing from this life, he had exchanged his piano for a harp, did not transpire. It was the saturnine Roxter who seized upon Rikky’s attention from the moment that he reappeared.

“Ah, Mr. Laxton,” he said, “you come at an opportune moment. We were just worrying our heads about how soon your company were likely to settle for this damage. That is a matter upon which you can give us information.”

He was a pompous individual with a very long chin and black side whiskers. His face and his bearing belonged so fittingly to the creased and greasy frock coat which he wore that it was difficult to imagine him in any other kind of garment.

The other man, Benthoven, was a cheerful little cock-sparrow of a man—shallow, but undoubtedly well-meaning. In Forde’s estimation, neither of them counted for much.

“You see, Mr. Roxter,” he said, in answer to the question already propounded, “how soon we can make a statement depends upon your preparation of the claim. I understand from my people that no detailed claim has yet been put in.”

Mr. Roxter emitted a “Ha!” of infinite wisdom; and turned to his companions, as if calling them to witness that that was exactly what he had foreseen.

“And at what figure,” he continued,

“would you value the destruction caused by this fire?”

“That,” said Rikky wisely, “depends entirely upon the nature of the destruction. So far as the structure is concerned, that would depend upon a builder’s estimate. So far as stock is concerned, we should require from you a schedule of the articles partially or wholly destroyed.”

“There were,” Roxter told him, “seven grand pianos in this space—seven of our incomparable grand pianos. They are, as you perceive, totally destroyed. Their salvage value, Mr. Laxton, is literally nil.”



The doped detective slumped into a chair. “Leave him alone. He has been drinking,” explained Roxter glibly.

This was the story which Prothero himself had told, and had been obliged subsequently to correct.

“Do you speak,” asked Forde, “from personal knowledge?”

“I do,” said the other; “decidedly, I do.”

“You actually saw those seven pianos standing here in this place?”

Mr. Roxter looked surprised.

“I did.”

“You make only one grade of piano?”

“Only one grade,” boomed Roxter. “The best, the finest—”

Prothero had now joined the group, and stopped his partner by a touch upon the arm.

“I’m afraid,” he said with considerable tact, “that you have been misled by the statement which we issue for the benefit of our customers.”

Mr. Roxter would have spoken, but Prothero checked him.

“Just one moment.”

He turned to the detective.

“Mr. Roxter,” he explained, “is something of a sleeping partner, Mr. Laxton. He doesn’t understand the details of the business. In stating that we give our name to only one type of piano—and that is the finest which it is possible to manufacture—he is perfectly right; but, as I told you an hour ago, we have been compelled to place upon the market an inferior instrument. It very much resembles the famous Webster and Prothero piano; and Mr. Roxter, seeing the instruments here, would naturally conclude that they were all our own specialised production. Nevertheless, as you will find when we put in our claim, several of the instruments—five, to be exact—were of the inferior type.”

Forde nodded indifferently. It was quite clear that Prothero, at any rate, had been guilty of an attempt at defrauding the insurance company. If he, Forde, had played his cards properly, a fraudulent claim would have been put in; and it would have been possible to take action. As it was, the circumstance had been obscured by the cleverness of Abel Prothero himself.

Having failed in his attempt to trap Roxter, Rikky Forde set himself to investigate the meaning of the fire. He already had suspicions as to this matter, and was ready to suspect the veracity of any statement which was made to him.

The fire had been discovered at about ten o’clock on the previous evening. At that moment the show-rooms and the workshops alike had been empty. Neither Prothero nor his foreman, who seemed to be the only persons having executive positions in the firm, was able to offer an explanation as to how the fire had broken out.

Here, in the middle of a concrete floor, had been a stack—a kind of pyramid of grand pianos—which had been placed in readiness for removal to the show-rooms, or to the loading platform at the rear. There had been nothing of a combustible nature; and yet a sudden and fierce fire had completely destroyed the whole of these instruments.

Rikky Forde was inclined to believe that Prothero had spoken the truth—that, whatever the quality of the instruments, there had, in fact, been seven pianos destroyed by the fire. What puzzled him was the nature of the conflagration. A piano is not a combustible object. One will not infrequently pass through a fierce fire, and still be worth salvage; yet these had been positively calcined.

If he had suspected the statement as to the nature of the instruments destroyed, he suspected with a hundred times more force the nature of the fire. It could not—positively could not—have been the usual accidental flare-up caused by a cigarette-end or a flaming match.

He interviewed the foreman.

"This is Mr. Snooper," said Prothero; and Forde found himself face to face with the small man who had been hovering in the background immediately after the falling of the safe.

As he had expected from what he had already heard, Forde found this man, Snooper, to be something of a character.

On his narrow shoulders and slight frame, and supported by a neck so short as to seem a deformity, was a tremendous head with cavernous eyes, sensitive nostrils, and a long, flexible mouth. It was the face of a fanatic—a visionary—but the man was practical enough in his talk. There was no question of his business ability.

"I don't know, sir," he said. "I don't understand how the fire came about. You people can hardly make us a payment which will recompense us for the upset and the trouble we are going to have with orders.

"You see," he went on, "if you take my meaning, people do not as a rule care very much whose piano they have. It's a toss-up whether we supply the instrument, or whether they get one of the others, say a Broadwood, or a Steinway, or a Cramer, or any of the best makes; and now that we can't supply, because we're short of stock, any order that comes along will go to one of our competitors—and that's a bad setback for us."

Forde questioned him about the safe.

"I don't know," said Snooper again. "I can't understand it. Of course, the safe was very heavy; and the floor had been weakened by the fire. But what made it fall, I don't know, no more than Adam. I was up there myself at the time. So was Mr. Prothero. So was Mr. Roxter. We saw it go—I did, anyway. No time to call out, even if we had suspected that you were just underneath. It was all over, as you might say, in a moment. And I—I don't know—"

He became all of a sudden detached. From being a sharp business man, he suddenly relapsed into the capacity of a dreamer—one who was, as they say, not quite all there.

"I—" he said. "Of course, you will laugh at me. I hear voices. I was talking to a friend."

Rikky Forde gave the little man a look which was not devoid of sympathy.

"To Gabriel Fish," he suggested softly.

Little Snooper looked as if he had been accused of something shameful.

"Yes," he said defiantly. And then: "You heard me, I suppose."

Prothero had gone back to the office which he occupied behind an obscured glass screen within the show-room. Here he took from his pocket a piece of paper; and, striking a match, burnt the small slip to ashes. It had borne a short message in angular back-sloping caligraphy.

"K. S. Laxton is really Forde, the Scotland Yard Man. He is not to be invited to your home."

## AT PUTNEY HILL.

A FEW colourless crystals in the bottom of an empty claret glass, almost invisible, even if looked for.

It could hardly be said that Forde, in whose glass they reposed, had seen the ominous glittering things, and yet he knew beyond any question that they were there. Something, perhaps, in the manner of the man with whom he was taking dinner, some subtle change of atmosphere when he arose and left the table for a few moments to speak with a friend.

When he left the table, he had been conscious of a strain. The other man had had something on his mind, something to say, or something to do, which, ever so slightly, frightened him. When Forde came back to the table, he was conscious that that something had disappeared. His companion was now completely at ease. Forde was naturally

sensitive to nuances of atmosphere.

Evidently he was intended to be doped. Mr. Roxter, who had insisted upon entertaining the young detective to dinner, was evidently anxious, either to incapacitate his guest, or, if such a thing could be conceivable, to poison him.

Forde looked at Mr. Roxter with renewed interest. What did this mean? He had discovered, it is true, one or two facts which might be objectionable to Prothero and his friends, but nothing which would justify his being doped.

During the time which had elapsed after his leaving the Clissold Galleries, and before his meeting with Mr. Roxter at the Cosmos Hotel, Rikky Forde had changed into full evening gear with tails and white waistcoat.

Seeing that he could not obtain an invitation to the dance, or seance—or whatever it was—that the Protheros were giving that evening, he had determined, if the size of the function made it possible, to slip in without an invitation and see what was to be seen. Not to put too fine a point on it, Rikky Forde was inclined to have a shot at gate-crashing.

His interest in Abel Prothero had become an obsession. From the fragment of conversation which he had overheard between Prothero and his daughter he was certain that the piano-maker had strong reasons for desiring that curious persons should be absent from the seance which he was about to hold. From the additional fact that an associate of Prothero's was now making a clumsy attempt to dope him, Forde perceived that Prothero's need for secrecy upon that evening was urgent and desperate.

Thus did Prothero defeat his own object.

If Forde had received a cordial invitation to the affair, then he might have had little interest beyond bettering his acquaintance with the yellow-haired Clarice. Now, by putting desperate obstacles in his way, Prothero and his friends were shouting, as it were, from the house-tops: "We have a secret. We are desperately anxious that you should not discover that secret."

Good enough. It was already after seven;

and if Roxter, having disposed of his guest, should proceed to the seance, or whatever it was, then Forde expected to find the affair very interesting.

He had already observed that his host suffered from an insatiable curiosity; and, in order to pique that curiosity, Forde rose and bowed deeply in the direction of a distinguished-looking man with the chain of some foreign order across his shirt front. Forde knew the man by sight as a diplomat from the Near East; but, since he was quite unknown to this dignitary, Forde's bow was decidedly unjustified. It served its purpose, however.

The man was immediately behind Roxter, and Roxter's curiosity caused him to turn completely round to find out the reason for Forde's obeisance. By the time he turned back again, some of the crystals were in Rikky's waistcoat pocket, and the rest were on the floor. Almost immediately afterwards their glasses were filled, and Forde, sipping his glass, made the half-complaint which might have been expected.

"A bitter taste about this wine, don't you think?"

Roxter drank deeply, and smacked his full lips with appreciation.

"No," he said nervously, "I think it's very nice—yes, very nice indeed."

The meal proceeded. Roxter talked, and Forde listened. In order to find out what end his host had expected to achieve by the administration of the crystals, Forde was prepared to counterfeit drowsiness. His trouble was that he did not know how soon the dope might be expected to take effect. Therefore he refrained from drinking his glass until, with a second apology, he walked over to another table where sat a celebrated pathologist whom Forde had met during his official duties.

He bowed to this gentleman's companion, and ventured to place a specimen of the crystals upon the tablecloth.

"Pardon me, Sir Henry," he said, in a low voice, "but my host has just endeavoured to drop some of these crystals into my glass. Could you tell me what I am expected to do?"

"Do?" snapped the knight. "Why, call the police, I should think!"

This advice did not suit Rikky Forde at all.

"I beg of you, Sir Henry, that you will not speak so loudly. What effect, I mean, would the administration of these crystals have upon the person who assimilated them?"

Sir Henry Palace was well known for his wicked temper.

"How the devil should I know?" he choked.

"What is it—glass, or sugar, or what?"

"I was hoping," said Rikky mildly, "that you would tell me."

The knight picked up a crystal, put it into his mouth, and spat it into his napkin.

"One of the bromides," he stated. "All act in the same way. Heaviness merging into insensibility—long insensibility—slow recovery."

Rikky thanked him, and returned to his own table.

He knew now exactly the line to take.

"That," he explained to the suspicious Mr. Roxter, "is Sir Henry Palace. Civil Servant of some kind. Peppery old blighter; but I had to pass the time of day with him."

"Oh, just so—just so!"

Roxter stole a glance at Forde's full glass; and Rikky wondered whether a second lot of crystals had been dumped in. He took the risk with both eyes open, finishing half of the glass of wine at a draught.

Nevertheless, his host was not satisfied.

# YOUR FAVOURITE AUTHOR

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## "THE FIVE KINGS"

BY

LESLIE CHARTERIS

"You're not drinking your wine," said Roxter reproachfully, after a space.

Forde hastened to repair the omission.

"Didn't seem to care about the flavour," he said thickly.

Roxter's satisfaction was so evident that he might as well have expressed it in words. In a way, this is what he did; for, immediately Forde had finished that glass of wine, the man began to talk with his invariable pomposity upon matters concerning himself and his world. He was well-informed, and his heavy pleasantries were not devoid of humour. Forde listened with appreciation, but did not omit to carry on with the appearance of increasing languor.

At length, when Roxter was in the middle of a sentence, he rose to his feet and pushed his chair back so clumsily that it almost fell.

"Awfully sorry," he said, "but I think, if you don't mind, I'll get out into the air for a moment. I feel—queer."

Roxter, the old hypocrite, was immediately filled with tenderness and concern.

"My dear young friend, I'm so sorry. It's all right, waiter, this gentleman is not feeling very well; but I don't think we need your assistance."

He slipped his arm through the detective's, and helped the young man to leave the restaurant.

They had actually reached the foyer, when Forde declared that he positively could not walk any further. Seeing that, Roxter piloted him to a chair almost hidden behind a bank of palms, and allowed him to relapse into it. To one of the hotel servants, who had become interested in the case, Roxter explained Forde's condition in the way which suited him best.

"I fancy," he said confidentially, "that this gentleman is a little bit—you understand—under the weather. I must leave him, because, unfortunately, I have an appointment which it is impossible to avoid; but I would be glad if you would keep an eye on him. Here is my card. If, when he awakens, you would give me a ring at that number, I will come back and pick him up; but just at present I think that an hour's sleep would do him good."

Despite the bank-note which Roxter pressed into his hand, the man looked uncomfortable.

"You're sure," he said, "that this gentleman will be all right?"

"Of course, I am," said Roxter heartily. "Perfectly sure. If there is any trouble, you can ring me, and I will come along at once. Just let him alone—that's all you need to do."

Mr. Roxter walked along to the cloak-room, assumed hat and overcoat, and disappeared. He had not even left the hotel, when Rikky Forde, catching the eye of the servant who had been asked to look after him, achieved an expressive wink.

"Tried to dope me," he said in explanation.

He pulled a cloak-room ticket from his waistcoat pocket, and handed it to the man.

"Go and get my things," he said, "and be as quick as you can."

Quick as the man was, Forde met him on his way back. In the meantime he had visited the lavatory and sloughed off the personality of Laxton. A different dressing of the hair, a touch of nose paste, and pencilling gone from the eyebrows, lumps of soft wax removed from the upper denture, and K. S. Laxton was Rikky Forde. Not recognisably the same man. He struggled into his silk-lined overcoat and crammed his silk hat on to the back of his head.

"Now," he said briefly, "I want that visiting-card."

The man hesitated.

"You received one pound for accepting the visiting-card," Rikky told him. "You will receive another pound for parting with it."

That was good enough. Forde was just in time to see Roxter's taxicab rolling out of the courtyard.

The address, as he had half expected, turned out to be the address of Abel Prothero, and the telephone number was his also.

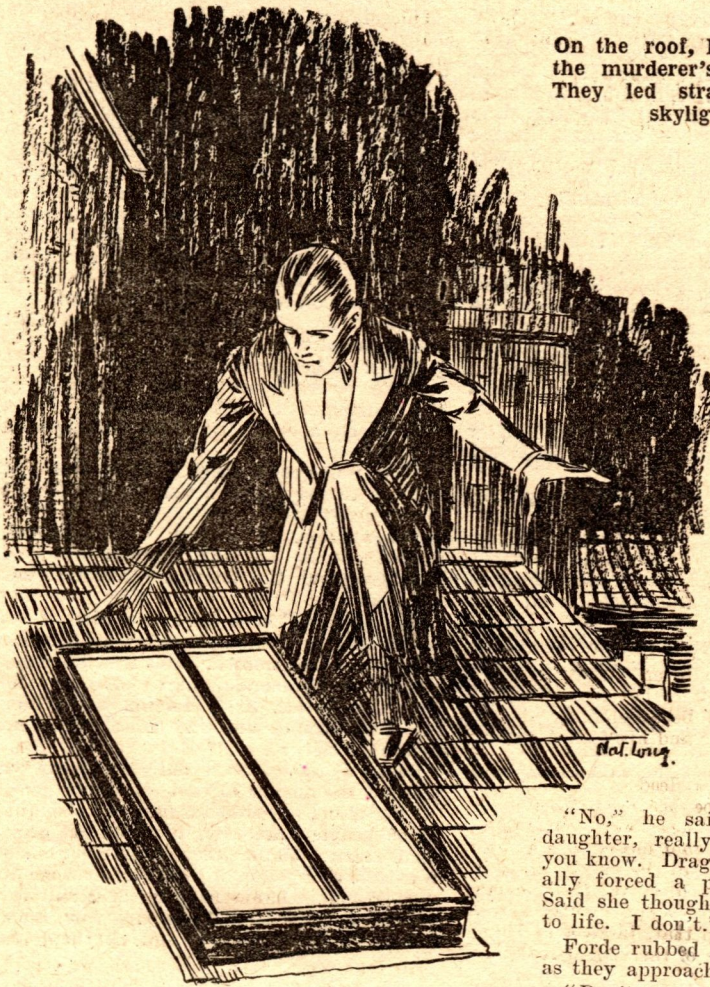
"It appears," said Rikky to himself, as he sat back in his taxi, which was following Roxter's, "that some of these men have got a date at Prothero's place to-night, and were afraid that K. S. Laxton would butt in. But why should they be afraid of an insurance clerk?"

Rikky Forde grinned delightedly, as he realised the answer to that question.

"Because I am not so clever as I thought. These people have read me like a book. That man whom the Racketeer—the Wrecker, as I prefer to call him—has set to shadow me is one wise guy. I'll tell the world. For all that, they may not know Rikky Forde by sight; and, if there are



Seizing a gun from a drawer of the table, the girl ordered Forde to put his hands up.



On the roof, Forde found the murderer's footprints. They led straight to a skylight.

utterly devoid of any vitality, real or spurious—a dead man walking the face of the earth. Poor old George!

Forde slid his arm through that of his friend, and, with him, descended the stairs to where his sense of location told him there would be a buffet.

"Do you know these people at all, George—old Prothero?"

Bad form, of course, to criticise one's host; but Rikky could not allow himself to be squeamish.

George gave the detective a glance of pained surprise.

"No," he said. "I know the daughter, really, Clarice Prothero, you know. Dragged me here. Literally forced a promise out of me. Said she thought I needed bringing to life. I don't."

Forde rubbed his chin doubtfully, as they approached the buffet.

"Don't know that you had better have any more drink, George."

Ainsdale at once became angry. It was the only thing about which he felt deeply enough to become angry in the whole world.

"I," he said, "am going to drink, Rikky, my boy. If you won't drink with me—confound you!—drink by yourself!"

"But, George, my dear chap—"

Ainsdale reassumed his monocle for the purpose of inspecting Rikky therewith.

"Hades' delight!" he murmured, without passion. It was his only oath, but it was always a danger-signal.

They drank together. After all, one reflected, poor old George had suffered enough already without having to suffer sobriety. There, as they sat, with the kaleidoscopic pageant of youth laughing and bubbling past and around, someone of their own world—the world of the deeps, of the submerged, of the ultra-mundane—gravitated to them naturally, and inevitably; joined them in the centre of the whirlpool.

A greengrocer's daughter, a Society beauty, a Court favourite, a figure of intrigue, a woman of mystery. Lalla Poltriska was all these. Common as dirt, yet clever as the devil. She laid claim as her inalienable right to the friendship of any man who pleased her, be he dustman or duke; and it was on record that her claim was seldom disputed.

She may, or may not, have nodded a greeting. Taking up George's glass from the table, she sniffed it with distended nostrils.

"What's this—brandy?"

She turned to the younger man.

"Get me some, Rikky—a lot."

She knew instinctively that George Ainsdale, receiving the same order, would have ignored it. George Ainsdale was one of the few men who were impervious to her influence; and that was why, above all, Lalla Poltriska admired and desired him.

"Thanks," she said, as the soda bubbled into her glass. "Don't want much soda. Just a long drink and a strong drink; and then I must get away upstairs."

"I suppose you know," she added, addressing Rikky, "that I am a medium of sorts. They say, anyhow, that my presence is favourable to manifestations. The real professional medium is Mrs. Paxton-Hall. She does the rough stuff. I only adorn the meeting with my presence."

"I like the way," said Forde artfully, "the way in which you have *not* done your hair. Really, Lalla, I like it very much."

The woman laughed with real pleasure. She had never lost her taste for masculine flattery.

"Yes," she said reminiscently, "that careless effect costs more trouble than perfection; but I like it myself. Glad it pleases you. You always were a good critic, Rikky."

Rikky patted his cheek.

"Still hate women as much as ever?"

Rikky Forde laughed.

"All except you, Lalla. You know how

She pushed him away.

"No time for that now. And I know, you young rascal, that you don't mean a word of it."

She drained her glass.

"Well, now for spirits of another sort."

She looked at Ainsdale, sitting morosely in front of his empty tumbler.

"I know you're not interested in spirits, George—not in the sort of spirits that I refer to, anyway."

She turned to Forde.

"What about you, Rikky? Would you care to escort me?"

Rikky agreed with enthusiasm. He could hardly believe his luck.

Somewhat to his surprise, he found that George Ainsdale was following them up the stairs.

#### THE SEANCE.

A room at the top of Prothero's house, low-ceilinged and sombre, so wide and so long—between its black-curtained walls—that it betrayed the fact of its special construction for the purpose to which it was being put. Within this room, chairs—perhaps a dozen, perhaps more—were arranged in a rough circle around a small table; and, as it seemed to Forde, all his newest acquaintances assembled together.

There was Abel Prothero, a courteous host, betraying just a flicker of interrogation when his eyes lighted upon Rikky. His man Snooper—the half-witted Snooper—dressed as became his subordinate position, not in evening clothes, but in black jacket and striped trousers, showing the company to their seats. Roxter, of course, pompous and saturnine as ever, in the old-fashioned evening gear which he had worn at the dinner-table. Benthoven, bird-like and optimistic. A small group of men, who appeared not to belong—very definitely not to belong—to that social stratum; but, Rikky thought, to another stratum, which is not social; and with which he was, alas, too familiar. It was this preponderance of men which struck Rikky Forde as a curious feature of the gathering.

Varied as his experience had been, it was the first time that he had ever attended a seance; and he had anticipated that women

many people at their place this evening, I may get away with it."

His smile was succeeded by a particularly glum expression. He had just remembered that, whereas K. S. Laxton had a certain amount of friendship with Yellow Hair—as, in his thoughts, he called Clarice Prothero—Rikky Forde had none.

Rikky reconnoitred the house before he dared to enter. It was a large house; and, judging by the number of cars parked around a square in the vicinity, the guests were sufficiently numerous to make gate-crashing possible. Roxter had already gone in; and Rikky was rather worried to reflect that something very important might be taking place which he was not in a position to witness.

He obtained admission by the elementary device of striking up an acquaintance with a party who were obviously friends of the Protheros.

Directly he had parted with his coat and hat, he found it convenient to forget this friendship and set off on a tour of discovery.

Almost at once he came face to face with George Ainsdale—Ainsdale the misanthrope, Ainsdale who went nowhere.

Forde could not conceal his surprise.

"Hallo, George! This is unexpected!"

Ainsdale dropped his monocle from his eye, and slowly revolved until he could look Rikky in the face.

"My word, yes. Don't know what brought me here, all the same. Had a half-bottle of brandy after dinner."

He appeared to believe that this half-bottle was a sufficient excuse for his presence. He was, of course, utterly sober,

would form a considerable majority. As it happened, by the time that the meeting was complete, there were only four women in the place.

In addition to Lalla Poltriska, who, by the side of George Ainsdale, was seated in the neighbourhood of the medium's chair, and almost facing himself, there were the medium, Mrs. Paxton-Hall, a heavy-eyed brunette; another—a washed-out matron of doubtful age, whose name he did not know—and a girl who had seated herself at the grand piano in one corner of the room. She, he decided, was probably a professional pianist engaged for the occasion.

The remainder were all men.

He had been placed on the right horn of the crescent formed by the chairs. On his right were two seats not yet filled. On his left was a man whom he did not know. Next to this individual came the matron, and next to her again the group of doubtful individuals whom he had noticed earlier.

Mrs. Paxton-Hall, after a murmured word or two with Prothero, seated herself in the armchair which had been provided for her use; and, at a signal, the pianist began very softly to play one of Chopin's nocturnes.

There was an atmosphere of nervous apprehension. Few words were spoken, and those in subdued tones. There was no smoking. Curious and speculative glances were cast at a small table in the middle of the floor whereon had been placed a banjo, a tambourine, a camera, with flashlight

apparatus, and a metal trumpet. These were, no doubt, the apparatus of manifestations.

Prothero dropped into a chair beside the medium. Snooper—Prothero's foreman—disappeared, joining the circle somewhere to Forde's left.

Forde had hardly fixed upon the position of Snooper, when every light was extinguished.

The light on the landing outside still showed as a golden pencil beneath the bottom rail of the door. Presently, when one's eyes became accustomed to the darkness, it would be possible to pick out figures. At present the obscurity was complete.

Forde, who was, perhaps, a trifle psychic, although he would have been the first to deny the imputation, felt somewhat uncomfortable.

Two of the men whom he, in his thoughts, had christened "the gang"—although, perhaps, they did not deserve such an appellation—had whispered together and looked fixedly at himself. Suppose Roxter, or whatever influence was behind Roxter, had recognised in him the K. S. Laxton of the afternoon? Roxter had been willing to drug him to make completely sure that he did not attend this gathering. That such was the reason for the crystals in his wine-glass, he had no doubt whatever. Well, he had attended, was attending, the seance; and, if his masquerade had been detected, it was probable that Roxter and his friends would go even further now.

The door opened, a flood of yellow light showed the horseshoe of chairs filled with expectant people. There were murmured apologies, then the door closed again, and two men moved over to the empty seats in Forde's neighbourhood. As they came, Rikky moved himself very silently across the empty chairs, so that, instead of being on the left-hand side of the vacant seats, he was to the right.

As the "Yard" man crept across the room, a figure loomed up in the darkness and something heavy whizzed viciously past his head.



This significant fact—that the number of chairs was exactly sufficient for the persons taking part in the seance—convinced Forde that his suspicions were justified. His gate-crashing had been observed. Possibly, even, it was to be exploited.

Rikky Forde felt like an actor who is cast for a part which he has not been allowed to read, and whose destiny is in the hands of a very capable stage-manager.

The nocturne ended, and a prelude, still from the works of Chopin, was begun. The pianist was by now playing from memory. Even on the piano there was not a spot of light.

A switch clicked faintly; and the light on the landing was extinguished. The voice of Abel Prothero, expressionless and resonant, came out of the darkness.

"I think you had better take hands. Mrs. Paxton-Hall is preparing for the trance." And then, to the pianist: "Continue playing, please, miss."

The playing went on. The sensitive Rikky became conscious of an emotional atmosphere. The thin voice of Snooper was muttering interminably—in conversation, doubtless, with the ghostly Gabriel Fish. That, of itself, was sufficiently uncanny.

Forde had felt for and grasped the hands of his neighbours upon the left and the right. Someone had an irritating cough. Mrs. Paxton-Hall was breathing so heavily that each sobbing gasp was audible to every corner of the room. The darkness became filled with phantoms, the silence with occult noises. Rappings began on the floor, on the ceiling, on the chairs, even on the surface of the piano. Forde wondered what the pianist thought of that. Frightened stiff, no doubt. He wondered where Clarice Prothero was—Yellow Hair, as he called her. With whom was she laughing now, that joyous, full-throated, incomparable laugh?

He reflected that it was rough on her to have a crook for a father. That Prothero was a crook, Forde had no doubt whatever.

Whether the fire at the Clissold Galleries had been due to incendiarism, or whether it had really been an accidental fire, there was no doubt that Prothero had attempted a vulgar and commonplace fraud in connection with it.

But for the incident of the falling safe, and for the affair of the knock-out dope, he would have lost interest in the Clissold Galleries.

The Racketeer—the man whose existence was only guessed at by the genius of Sims—would not have lent himself to defrauding an insurance company out of a few hundreds. Why should he? It was tens of thousands that he played for; and tens of thousands which, until now, he had always acquired with complete security. But that safe had been deliberately overturned when Forde was underneath it. He had actually found marks left by a lever which had set it in movement. But for that falling fragment of plaster, it would most likely have destroyed him.

That Prothero was guilty of minor dishonesty really absolved him from suspicion of being the Racketeer.

Was he, Rikky Forde, on the right track? It seemed almost too good to be true; and yet—the affair of the safe—the affair of the knock-out dope. It looked as if he had stumbled on to something which might turn out to be useful.

Mrs. Paxton-Hall had ceased her heavy breathing. The rapping was more infrequent; but, when it came, so heavy that it seemed to shake the room.

"There is much power," murmured the voice of Prothero.

The piano ceased in the middle of a passage. Music of another sort emanated from a spot which appeared to be in mid-air. It was a thin, tinkling tune such as might come from a child's musical-box.

"Yes," said Prothero again, "there is much power."

Another voice—a child's voice—came from the direction of the medium's chair.

"That is my pretty tune."

"It is little Rose," said someone, in an awed whisper. And then: "You will speak to us, Rosie."

The music, now louder, now softer, seemed to float across the room. The child whom they called Rosie prattled excitedly, her words having no more consequence, no more meaning, than would the words of her living prototype.

Forde was deeply interested, but his interest had ceased to be professional. This voice of a child, where no child was, this music which floated in the air had a quality so uncanny that the things almost frightened him; but the affair was not what he had expected.

He had come there in the belief that the seance was only a pretext for some criminal intrigue. It was what it had been represented to be—a devoutly religious gathering.

Could it be possible, Rikky asked himself, that these people so resented the intrusion of a stranger—with possible interference from the police—that they would resort to violence to prevent it.

Knowing the world as he did, he had to admit that such a thing was credible.

But what of the crowd whom he had christened "the gang"?

They were not of that pathetic cult who inquire into the mysteries of survival. Their purpose in that place remained questionable. They were there for some object which he did not know. Perhaps—

Perhaps, after all, he had been wise at the last moment to change his chair. Time would show.

Forde was recalled from his thoughts by a fierce and frightened clutch at his fingers. Something was happening.

In front of him, pencilled in yellow fire upon the almost palpable darkness, had become visible the form of an ellipse.

It moved, it altered, changed from an ellipse to a circle.

The golden thread broadened. Two metal objects knocked together; and Rikky realised that the thing which he saw was the flare of the metal trumpet. Possibly it had moved against the plated side of the banjo.

Another of these occult manifestations which he had not expected. Another reason for thought, almost for fear.

From the fact that the flare of the trumpet was now visible as a circle, Forde divined that it was pointing almost directly at himself.

"Thank you, my friends!"

A powerful dominating voice, with a queer catch in it, came from the trumpet.

"Gabriel Fish!" said the reedy falsetto of Snooper.

"The control!" murmured half a dozen others.

Rikky's interest intensified. He knew that, in the parlance of spiritualists, one who has passed over, as they say, and uses a certain medium for earthly expression is called a control. But this was a voice to be reckoned with.

When the same powerful voice went on to utter inanities, Forde was astonished. It was interesting, no doubt, to be informed that everybody was happy and that everything was beautiful; but somehow the detective had expected something quite

different. Voices express character, and the character of "The Control" was ruthless. Surely there would be something more vital to be said.

And then, almost imperceptibly, came the change. The full tones and broken diction of "The Control" began to deal with matters needing emphasis.

Something about the affair of the Cyclades. Still mysterious, but capable, as Forde supposed, of explanation. The affair of the Cyclades had been satisfactory.

The next, and last, remark of "The Control" was rather terrifying.

There had been an intruder. He would be dealt with.

An intruder? Who could that mean but Forde himself? The detective became tense and watchful. The trumpet clattered to the table with startling suddenness. Its luminous flare had long since disappeared. The darkness was again complete.

But the attack which Rikky half expected did not come.



Feigning intoxication, Rikky Forde staggered to the table and tore away the Wrecker's mask. The result of his action astonished him. Revealed before him was the face of a girl.

Only, from the direction of the medium, a soft "pong!"—an inexplicable sound—and, from a spot nearer, a gasp as if one had caught his breath. Then again the ghostly musical-box began to play.

"Heavens!" said a man. "I'm as cold as ice!"

"Loss of ectoplasm," explained Prothero,

Number sixteen would be rewarded. He would find his envelope at the usual place.

"I'll swear," thought Rikky, "that there is a man at the other end of that trumpet. If I had only brought a flash I'd fix him."

The voice went on: "Number four had been foolish. He had done wrong. Despite his position he would be punished."

Some person near to the medium uttered an exclamation, but the voice of "The Control" did not hesitate.

The Took Road job, it appeared, was for to-morrow. A certain number was to go to an address in Berlin. The money awaited him at the South-Western District Post Office.

What was this? A disembodied spirit communicating with the living, or a gang leader giving orders to a gang?

and added a warning for silence. He appeared to have changed his position.

The warning for silence was ignored.

"Look!"

The word was almost a scream.

Away on Forde's left a shadowy something was forming—a luminous column about the bigness of a man.

At first it occupied a position coincident with the circle. Later it moved or drifted towards the invisible table. And all the time it was gaining definition. Already it was recognisable as a man in a dinner-jacket, every detail drawn upon the darkness in a pencil of light which smoked and dripped flame. Soon it would be possible to see the features of the ghost. Soon—

"Ere!" said a man. "This feller next to me is very cold!"

"Loss of ectoplasm," explained Prothero faintly.

"Yes; but he ain't breathing. There's something wrong!"

becoming visible as a square of glimmering blue.

The ghostly figure was now a tenuous, disappearing column of mist.

Prothero threw up the windows, and his guests shivered the more because of the cold air of the night. Forde wondered why he thought it necessary to throw open the windows. Afterwards, he understood.

Last of all Prothero came to the door. The electric light on the landing had been switched on again; and when he opened the door the eyes of the company, accustomed to the darkness, could see every detail.

Rikky remembered ever afterwards the Rembrandtesque effect of that rectangular shaft of yellow light falling on that crescent of men and women, especially on the ominous figure of one who had fallen forward, so that his forehead was almost upon his knees. Almost immediately Prothero pulled down the switches belonging to the big room, and a curious crowd gathered around the man who had lost consciousness.

"Stand back!" ordered Prothero. "Give him air. It's Mr. —"

He stopped.

"Good heavens!" he said, with a complete

Rikky took no notice, but went on stretching the man's arms above his head, squeezing them against his sides, extending them above his head with all the energy of which he was capable.

Within five minutes a doctor was making an examination. His examination did not last very long.

"The poor fellow is dead," he said.

He turned to Forde.

"Why were you attempting artificial respiration?"

"You, being a doctor," answered Forde, "should be able to answer that question yourself."

#### RIKKY TAKES CHARGE.

To the pianist, Forde said: "Go and get a policeman, and inform Miss Prothero of what has occurred."

Abel Prothero, who, with his hands stuffed in his trouser pockets, had occupied himself in watching with fierce intentness the detective's efforts to revive the dead man and his duel with the doctor, snapped down on Forde's order with a fierce question.

"By what right, young sir, are you giving orders in my house?"

Forde informed him.

"I am a police officer, and I am investigating a case of murder."

Murder! The word caused a sensation. One of the ladies screamed. It was not Lalla Poltriska. She pushed her way through the group which had formed round the dead man, and displayed, what one would have expected, vulgar and un concealed curiosity.

"Murder?" she drawled. "How thrilling!"

"And you, Rikky," she went on; "no one ever told me that you were a police officer."

Forde ignored her. He was looking at Prothero. Unwillingly Prothero said his piece.

"Are you accusing one of my guests of having deliberately killed this unfortunate man?"

Forde did not hesitate to reply in the affirmative.

"Yes, Mr. Prothero, I am. I cannot explain half of the things which we have seen within the last hour; but I think that I can explain this man's death. I must request that nobody leaves this room until I have made certain inquiries."

"I am afraid," replied Prothero, "that your request will not be granted. This is my private house; and, so far as I am aware, you have no right whatever to be here. You certainly have no authority to instruct me or my guests as to what we shall do."

Forde stepped across to the door and turned the key in the lock.

"We will argue later," he said, "upon the legal aspect of the question. Just at present I have a personal reason for wishing to find out who committed this crime."

"A personal reason?" echoed Prothero. "What do you mean by that?"

"When the light went out," said Forde, "I myself was sitting in the chair in which that man died. The death which came to him was intended for me; and you—"

He pointed with fierce suddenness at Prothero's face.

"And you know it!"

Abel Prothero did not bate an eyelid. If it had been Forde's plan to force the man into self-betrayal, then the plan had miscarried completely.

Mr. Prothero shook his head slowly, and with a smile.

"I know it?" he repeated. "Come, come, my young friend, this is very foolish and theatrical. I am no detective, but I can tell you exactly what happened to this poor fellow who lies here; and the doctor, I am convinced, will bear me out. A weak heart,



"That's true," agreed another. "There's something wrong here!"

A woman screamed.

"Keep your seats," implored Prothero. "Keep your seats. I am afraid to break the circle."

"The circle's already broken. Switch on the lights!"

"Wait. Consider the medium. I will let the light in gradually."

Prothero had moved over to the windows. Now he began to draw aside the heavy curtains which covered them, each window

change of tone. "It's Mr.—er—Hindsley!"

It was obvious that he had not expected it to be Mr. Hindsley.

Rikky was one of those who did not obey Prothero's injunction to stand back. Having lowered the insensible man full length upon the floor, he slid his hand across the man's shirt-front, and felt in vain for any beat of the heart; then, without a word of explanation to anybody, he started artificial respiration.

"Why are you doing that?" questioned Prothero.

coupled with the strain of an unaccustomed experience."

The doctor nodded. He was very pleased to agree with any statement disagreeable to Rikky Forde. Forde had been rude to him, and he took pleasure in hitting back.

"My dear Mr. Prothero," he said, "you have diagnosed the case with perfect correctness. Over-excitement—cardiac weakness. Exactly what I should have said myself."

There was a knock, and Rikky opened the door to admit both a policeman and an inconspicuous man in a trilby hat who had accompanied him.

"I am from headquarters," Rikky told the police constable. "My name's Forde—Detective-Inspector Forde. I want you to see that nobody leaves this room without my permission."

He turned to the policeman's companion, who drew himself up and saluted.

"Sergeant Grundy," said the man shortly.

"Instructed by Chief-Constable Sims to keep in touch with you."

Forde solemnly seized Grundy by the hand and shook it.

"You," he said, "are the world's smoothest worker. You have been on to me for, how long?"

"Twenty-two days."

"Twenty-two days! And I've never seen you. Congratulations!"

"Grundy," he went on, "I am going to take you into my confidence. There has been a spiritualistic seance in this place. These chairs, which you see all over the floor, were arranged in an incomplete circle. Each of them was occupied, except one; and present at the seance, with the exception of the medium and of that lady there"—he pointed to the pianist—"the lady who summoned yourself, the whole of the party were holding hands."

"Now, during the seance, when the cir-

cumstances were such as I have described, this unfortunate man whom you see, was murdered. As to how he was murdered, I have suspicions which I am going to verify; but this I must tell you, that he could not have been murdered by any person who did not have uninterrupted freedom of action. You see what I am getting at?"

"You mean," suggested Sergeant Grundy, "that more than one person in this place was a party to the crime?"

"Exactly. The probability is that three persons knew of it—the person who committed and the two persons beside him."

He raised his voice.

"I am going to ask everybody here to assist me in reconstructing the circumstances which obtained at the moment when, as I assure you, this man was killed."

He began to rearrange the chairs in the horseshoe form which they had occupied during the seance.

"Now," he said, "will you ladies and gentlemen kindly seat yourselves as you were, around the circle."

The guests obeyed reluctantly.

One or two of them glanced at Prothero, as if willing to obstruct, if he showed any desire for it. The police officers, however, gave them little time to think; and, within three minutes, the circle was again complete. Even the protesting Mrs. Paxton-Riall was compelled to enter her armchair, and the pianist again to be seated at the piano.

"You said," Sergeant Grundy pointed out, "that only one chair was empty. There are four now. One of them, of course, was empty, one was occupied by the dead man, and one by you. But what of the other? Have we brought too many chairs from the walls?"

Forde frowned in perplexity.

"There were no chairs around the walls—I particularly noticed that. There was only one chair in this room which was unoccupied at the moment when the tragedy occurred."

He went to the windows, one after the other. Beyond the windows was a kind of deep gutter, the floor of which was covered by open boarding. Beyond the deep gutter was a parapet, the side and top of which were faced by sheet lead. At the third he plainly saw where a boot had momentarily dried the lead on top of the parapet. The raindrops were already falling to wash out all trace of the fact; but it was clear that within the last few minutes a man had placed his foot there.

"Keep 'em at it," he said, referring thus impolitely to the Spiritualists; and he himself slipped from the window-board on to the top of the parapet, looking down for a depth of sixty or seventy feet on to the path of a side turning. On the roof, which was also lead-covered, he found similar traces. The footmarks of the unknown led directly to a skylight.

Forde made a mental note that the man who had just left the room of the seance had known the house very well indeed, for the skylight had been by no means obvious, and yet he had walked towards it without hesitation.

Forde opened the skylight, hung for a moment from the curb, and then dropped through on to a thick carpet. He had expected this room which he had entered to belong to one of the servants, or, perhaps, to be a box-room; but from what he could see in that half-light, it was large and extravagantly furnished. He wondered if it belonged to Yellow-Hair.

He walked towards the switch.

Something whizzed past his face and



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

## FOUNDED ON FACTS! THE EDITOR GREET'S YOU

THANKS for your appreciation of last week's story, "The Screaming Skull," by Fenton Arnold. I was confident that it would meet with wide approval, and it has. I am glad I have pleased you—that is my objective. I am eager to give you the best, and no expense will prevent my doing so. No author's name is too big to appear in *The THRILLER*. You can be assured that only the best stories will be selected, and at whatever cost to myself the price of each novel will always remain the same to you; twopence weekly.

In this week's issue we have the welcome return of Anthony Skene. His first story, "The Man Who Quit," brought so many requests for another novel by the same author that I could not ignore the demand. Hence the publication of "The Wrecker," a sensational, long complete yarn by Anthony Skene, in this number.

The running to earth of "The Wrecker"—a daring racketeer—by Inspector "Rikky" Forde, was no mean feat, which necessitated something more than the orthodox methods usually recognised by the police authorities. That he won through against such odds will gain the admiration of all those who follow his amazing efforts and unique course of bringing the villains to justice.

It must be realised that the racketeers are by no means non-existent in England. Their energies are watched with great concern because it is evident, to those in the know, that the criminals are being pushed out of the States, where their activities have led to drastic action—not only by the police, but those in higher authority. President Hoover has openly announced a drive against criminals in general, and against the racketeers in particular. The racketeer, otherwise a professional criminal,

employed to enforce employers to become members of the Employers' Association and employees to become trade unionists, do so with extreme measures. Their efforts are quite the reverse of interest in trade progression. They are out solely to swindle the public and smash genuine businesses by sheer terrorism. The price of independence is a bomb, a stick of dynamite, or a bullet.

In Chicago alone last year one hundred and forty bombs were set off, and six million pounds were extorted from people who refused to conform to the demands of the crooks. Also in that city there are known to be nearly a hundred racketeering organisations, and there is no method too dastardly so long as they gain their object—refusal to capitulate means complete ruin. In "The Wrecker," Anthony Skene has founded his novel on facts, and at the same time successfully given us a thoroughly entertaining and thrilling story.

Next week we are positively certain of adding another success to our wonderful record, because the author of "The Five Kings" is Mr. Leslie Charteris. This contributor has certainly established himself as a first-rate writer of thriller fiction, and has meritoriously won favouritism among readers of *The THRILLER*.

You are certain, therefore, of a specially good story next week, and in the same issue I shall give definite details of our new serial by John G. Brandon, which will definitely start in a fortnight's time.

Yours sincerely,

*The Editor*

arrived with a staggering impact upon his shoulder. Somebody had attempted to cosh him. Luck, and the bad light, had saved him from a knock-out, if not from a broken skull.

He saw to it that the blow was not repeated. The man with whom he closed was heavier than himself; but Rikky Forde was in perfect training, despite the whisky which he was supposed to have consumed; and the young detective's strength had always been proverbial.

He lifted his attacker by the armpits and slammed him down to the floor. At the same moment the light went up, and Clarice Prothero stopped in astonishment. She stopped only for a moment; and then, with a self-reliance which delighted Rikky, although it reacted against himself, dashed over to a small table beside the bed, snatched from a drawer a miniature plated revolver, and told Forde to put his hands up. He obeyed.

"But don't shoot me just yet," he said mildly.

"Who are you?" said the girl. "And what have you done to the servant?"

"If you mean this fellow upon the floor," said Forde, "I have prevented his whacking me over the head with a lethal instrument, known to felonious people as a 'cosh.'"

"You see it," he continued, "hanging on to your servant's wrist."

The man stood up, shaking his head to get his senses back, and clumsily attempted to thrust the weapon into his trouser pocket.

"What were you doing in my bed-room?" continued the girl, addressing the servant. "And who is this man?"

"Well, miss, said the man, with the bluff and hearty dictum which is usually supposed to indicate complete honesty, "I heard a noise as I was passing, went in, and found this man looking at your dressing-table, so, naturally, I went for him; and, if you hadn't come in, he would have killed me."

"That's right," said Forde, "I would have; and I will now, if you try any more of your tricks."

Clarice Prothero looked from one to the other. She had heard of the gentleman burglar, but somehow she could not associate Forde with such a rôle.

Well-groomed, well-dressed, good-looking—a so-called burglar might have been any or all of these things—but there was something about Rikky Forde which stood for breeding, and Clarice was literally unable to believe that much ill of him.

"I can't help thinking," she said reflectively, "that you and I have met before—recently; and yet—"

"This afternoon," Forde informed her. "This afternoon, I was K. S. Laxton, and we had a little music together."

"Mr. Laxton," pondered the girl. "I suppose my memory must be failing me."

"It is only," said Forde, "that you are paying me a compliment upon my power of disguise. I'm not K. S. Laxton now, and I am glad. K. S. Laxton is an objectionable fellow."

The girl laughed. Even this strange encounter could not subdue her gaiety. She was unaware of the tragedy which had happened under her roof.

Before Prothero could turn informer, two bullets crashed through the window, and with a cry he sank back on his pillow.



"And who may you be now?"

"Now," confessed Forde, "I am sorry to tell you that I am a policeman of sorts. Name of Forde. My friends call me Rikky. Just as much at your service, I assure you, as ever K. S. Laxton could have been."

The girl's laughter froze. She became all at once a different person—a great lady—cold, repellent.

"I am sorry," she said. "I liked Laxton. You had better go. I'll take the risk of your story being true."

Forde bowed with resignation. He had not expected anything else.

"And this man Blumenfeld?"

"His name isn't Blumenfeld," corrected the girl.

"Possibly then," said Forde politely, "it is Clavering, or it might have been Outram. He has a very nice taste in names, this servant of yours."

The man dusted the knees of his trousers. "My name is Franks," he said briefly.

"Franks," echoed Rikky with high good humour. "Well, that's a good one, Blumenfeld. Possibly you are a reformed character. Let us hope that 'Franks' is your real name. I always wondered what it was. It is my duty, as a police officer, to see you safely out of this lady's room."

He stood on one side. The man looked at his mistress.

"You had better go," said the girl. "I shall not want you any more for the present."

"And," she added, "you had better see Mr.—er—Forde out of the house."

"Very well, madam."

The order was much to the man's liking. He passed out, and Rikky Forde closed the door behind him. Once they were out of earshot upon the landing, Forde turned and placed his hand upon the servant's shoulder.

"Who ordered you there to cosh me?"

The man protested that the circumstances were exactly as he had stated.

Forde slipped his hand from the man's

shoulder and tapped him lightly upon the hip pocket.

"Have you a licence to carry firearms. Blumenfeld? Ha, I see you haven't! I could pull you for that, but I won't—not at present, anyhow. You go downstairs and forget that you have seen me."

The man gave him a look which was meant to be murderous. Forde laughed, and pushed him towards the head of the stairs.

"Down you go," he said. "I'm too busy for you."

He went back to the scene of the seance, and gave instructions to Sergeant Grundy.

"Reconstruct that crime," he said, "and if you find an appliance called a vortex-box—Do you know what a vortex-box is?"

Grundy nodded.

"Yes, sir. We used to make 'em at school out of cigar-boxes."

"That's right," nodded Rikky. "You know what I mean. I'll be back in a few minutes. I'm going downstairs to look for a fellow whose coat has been wetted by rain. I want that man to make the circle complete."

As he descended the last flight which led him to the ground floor, he heard a footstep behind him, and turned to find Clarice Prothero also descending.

"So," she said, "you are still here."

"I am still here," repeated Rikky; "and, much as I detest giving you offence, I am going to stay here for some little time."

Already the ragging had ceased, and the guests were disappearing to their waiting cars.

"I see," he said, "that you received my message."

"Then," she said, "it was your message which the pianist left for me. I have just received it. Perhaps you will tell me exactly what is taking place in this house to-night?"

Forde looked at his wrist-watch.

"I hope to tell you something in an hour's time. At present, I can tell you one thing—and one thing only."

"And what is that?"

"I am intensely unpopular."

Rikky Forde was not so cheerful as his flippant words might have led one to suppose. He was the sort of man to love only once and then deeply. It seemed that between Yellow Hair and himself had arisen an impenetrable wall. It might be his duty to arrest her father on a charge of wilful murder.

Unless, indeed, he discovered this man with rain upon his shoulders—the man whose absence had made the circle incomplete.

#### REVELATIONS.

On the morning following the seance Forde waited upon Chief-Constable Sims by special request.

"Tell me all you know," was Sims' instructions, "and then I will tell you one or two things that you don't know."

Forde laughed with a trace of embarrassment.

"That," he commented, "would be very easy. There are a whole lot of things that I don't know in connection with this case, although I have an idea that, even without your assistance—of which, sir, I am very glad—I should be likely to find out quite a lot in the near future. This seance business, for instance, which I have referred to in my report, which is before you this morning. This seance was a fishy affair. At the time it impressed me. I don't know whether you can bring yourself to believe it, but at one time I was just about as frightened as a nervous child who has been listening to tales of the bogey-man."

"There were manifestations of a sort. I will go further. I am morally certain that I have seen the disembodied spirit of a dead man, that I have seen the spirit leave the body and vanish into nothingness. Hardly anything will shake me in that belief. Mrs. Paxton-Hall is supposed to be a powerful medium. The Psychic Research Society give her the best of references. There is very little doubt that several of the persons present were sincere Spiritualists; but, with equal certainty, some of them were not. There was, as I have told you, some sort of a materialisation. A voice, alleged to belong to a dead man named Gabriel Fish, and referred to as 'The Control,' uttered a small amount of flapdoodle about aunts and uncles, and a large amount of businesslike stuff which I do not yet understand. He mentioned at different times a punishment which was to come upon somebody, the name 'Cyclades,' which I have since discovered to belong to a steamship, and the name of a place—Tooks Road."

"Tooks Road, by the way, is for 'this morning,' whatever that may mean."

"It was immediately after that materialisation business that the tragedy occurred. A man seated next but one to myself was poisoned with cyanogen, one of the most deadly of all poison gases, and, as you know, it was impossible to revive him."

"That cyanogen, chief, was intended for myself."

"If I hadn't become suspicious, and altered my position by a couple of chairs after the light went out, I should have got what he got; and I have no doubt that the effect would have been the same."

Sims consulted the report which lay upon his table.

"The dead man, I see, was Charles Hindsley, aged forty, stockbroker, unmarried. You have found nothing against him?"

"Nothing whatever."

Some people who were invited to a dance which was being held at the same time as the more serious affair upon the upper floor, had brought him with them. The party came at Miss Prothero's invitation; and it was Miss Prothero who obtained permission for this man Hindsley to attend the seance. It seems impossible that he should have been personally acquainted with anybody in the room. Impossible, consequently, that he could have been the subject of intentional foul play."

"You are sure

that there was foul play—that the doctor's diagnosis was wrong?"

Forde did not hesitate to reply in the affirmative.

"Quite sure, chief. After the crowd had cleared out, I returned to the room where the seance had been held, and where the dead man was still lying, and while there I made an interesting discovery."

"Being certain, as I was even then, that a cloud of poisonous gas had been directed at the dead man, I wanted to find out how the person who committed the crime was able to determine exactly the direction of my chair; for, as you will remember, it was the occupant of my chair whom he attacked."

"I switched out the lights and took up a position in the neighbourhood of the medium's chair."

"That gave me an immediate answer to my question. I had been shown into that chair, not by accident, but by intention. The rail in front of the seat had been painted with luminous paint."

"They must have arranged the whole thing beforehand. That settled a part of my doubts. I now knew how the position, which was supposed to be that of myself, had been ascertained, despite the complete darkness of the seance."

"I still required to discover the means by which the gas had been propelled. With the help of Grundy and of the police constable on the beat, I had already made a thorough search of the large room, and failed to find the object which I sought—a vortex-box. I had been silent for two or three minutes thinking this over in the darkness, when I became conscious that I was not alone in the room."

The young man shrugged his shoulders.

"A queer feeling that. There had been, you will bear in mind, supernatural manifestations. There was in my immediate neighbourhood a dead man; the room was locked and completely dark. I won't say that I was not frightened. By the time that I got over my initial funk and switched on the light, the man who had entered by

means of one of the windows had felt his way to the small table in the centre of the room."

"It was Prothero; and when the light went up he had got a black box camera in his hand."

"The camera—that was the explanation of the whole thing. I recognised that at once. It had lain there in the centre of the circle upon a small table—a table used to support also a banjo, a tambourine, pencil and paper—all the usual gear associated with the Spiritualist business, and also an apparatus for taking flashlight photographs. It was the association of the camera with the flashlight gear which prevented my suspecting it at first. It was so reasonable to suppose that photographic work might be contemplated that, until I saw Prothero with the camera in his hand, I had never suspected that it might have another use."

"He knew from the first instant, that he had made a mistake, but he didn't turn a hair. Tried to stall me off with the story that the camera contained exposed plates. That was a second mistake, because it contained nothing, but it smelt strongly of bitter almonds, and the lens had been removed. And that, sir, is how the thing was done. The box camera was filled with cyanogen. An indiarubber cover, such as conjurers use to cover a bowl containing goldfish, had been fitted over the rear end; and, when the time was ripe, the gas had been propelled towards the victim by a tap of the forefinger upon the tight rubber diaphragm. You have seen it done yourself, I daresay, with cigarette smoke or the like. An amusing laboratory experiment."

Sims nodded.

"So," he said reflectively, "Prothero was the murderer."

Forde refused to agree.

"I don't know about that, sir. He may have been an accessory without being the actual murderer; and, of this I am quite certain, there were several other accessories, both before and after the fact. There was the man who put me into that fatal chair—Prothero's foreman, a queer, half-witted individual, named Snooper. There were the people who sat at each side of the murderer. As I have told you, we were all holding hands, and at least two people must have suspected the reason why the chain was broken."

"H'm. Were you sitting close together?"

"Very close. There were a lot of people, and the chairs were almost wedged in."

"Then what prevented the man who intended to commit the crime allowing his right-hand and left-hand neighbours to take each other's fingers under the impression that they were taking his?"

Forde looked appreciatively at his chief.

"That's a good idea, sir."

Chief-Constable Sims threw out his chest.

"It is my business," he declared, "to have ideas. I'll give you another. If it was possible for Prothero to enter the room by means of the windows so silently as to surprise you by his presence, then it was equally possible for an unknown agent to enter by the window, climb over the vacant chair, murder Hindsley, and get away again by the same means."

Forde instantly remembered the footmarks which he had found upon the parapet and upon the roof—footmarks which led to the roof-light above Clarice Prothero's room.

He nodded.

"You are right, sir," he said. "That, also, is a possibility."

"Nevertheless," he insisted, "everything points to the complicity of Abel Prothero. The attempted fraud in the matter of the

fire, the safe which was turned over when I was immediately beneath it, the fact that the seance was held at his house, his surreptitious attempt to obtain the camera which had been used as a vortex-box; and, lastly, his determination that I should not examine the camera. All those facts are circumstantial evidence against him."

The Chief Constable nodded.

"I agree. Suspicion falls on Prothero good and plenty; but there is nothing which would justify his arrest. Now, if you have brought your story completely up to date

Forde stopped him.

"But I haven't quite. One of Prothero's partners, a guy named Roxter, who had attempted to dope me during dinner when I was masquerading as K. S. Laxton, made another attempt before I left Prothero's place last night. The medium which he used on this occasion was not bromides, but a much more insidious preparation, known as Scotch whisky. He appeared to have received the impression"—here Forde grinned broadly—"the impression that I was over-fond of the beverage; and he and I, exchanging confidences in Prothero's deserted buffet, knocked back a reasonably large quantity. It was, perhaps, unwise; but I was still curious. When I had carried poor old Roxter upstairs and put him on somebody's bed to sleep it off, I retrieved my hat and cloak from the cloak-room and gave my celebrated impersonation of the inebriated youth."

Forde passed his hand across his forehead.

"It was not a very difficult impersonation in the circumstances. Nevertheless, I wasn't quite so far gone as others may have been led to believe. The only person I met during my wanderings about the house, with the exception of the waiter in the buffet and the man who ran the cloak-room, was a—er—lady."

He flushed uncomfortably. The Chief Constable gave him a searching look.

"Miss Clarice, eh?"

"Did I say her name was Clarice? Yes, that's right. Miss Prothero. It was not, sir, a pleasant experience; but it was impossible for me to give up the impersonation; and I daresay Miss Prothero has a pretty low opinion of me. Well, I suppose that doesn't matter. I staggered out, and some stout fellows hustled me into a taxicab. I don't know where we were going to; but one of them who had volunteered to see me home took his seat beside me. Just to help the fumes of Prothero's whisky to do their job, this guy produced a pad soaked with an anæsthetic—something of the chloroform class. He was sort of careless, and—"

"The wrong man got the chloroform, eh?"

"Yes, sir, the wrong man got the chloroform. He was in evening dress like myself, this good Samaritan; but over his evening clothes he was wearing a big overcoat and a cloth cap. Fortunately, my silk hat fitted him quite well; and he got what was intended for me."

"And what was that, Forde?"

"I don't know, sir. I didn't stay to find out. They carried him into an old house backing on to the towpath at Hammersmith. I put the police on to it as soon as I possibly could. Told them to turn the place into a mousetrap and let me know what happened."

Chief-Constable Sims removed a paper-weight and pulled over a typewritten sheet which had been handed to him while Forde was speaking.

"This," he said, "is where I take up the story. The man who attempted to chloroform you in that cab was a racecourse tough and something of a 'con' man. He was known variously as Blarney Jim, or Jim Blarney."

Forde noted the use of the past tense.

"Was?" Forde repeated.

The Chief Constable nodded.

"They took him out of the river this morning. The police were too late. They found an empty house."

Forde was staggered. The desperation of his unknown enemies appeared to be limitless. Twice in a single night his life had been attempted, and the death intended for himself had come to another.

"Do you know," he questioned, "who owned or rented the house?"

Sims continued reading the typewritten report.

"I have the name and address here," he declared, "but probably the lessee is quite innocent. He is supposed to be on the Riviera. The door had been forced. We may have to give him a clean sheet."

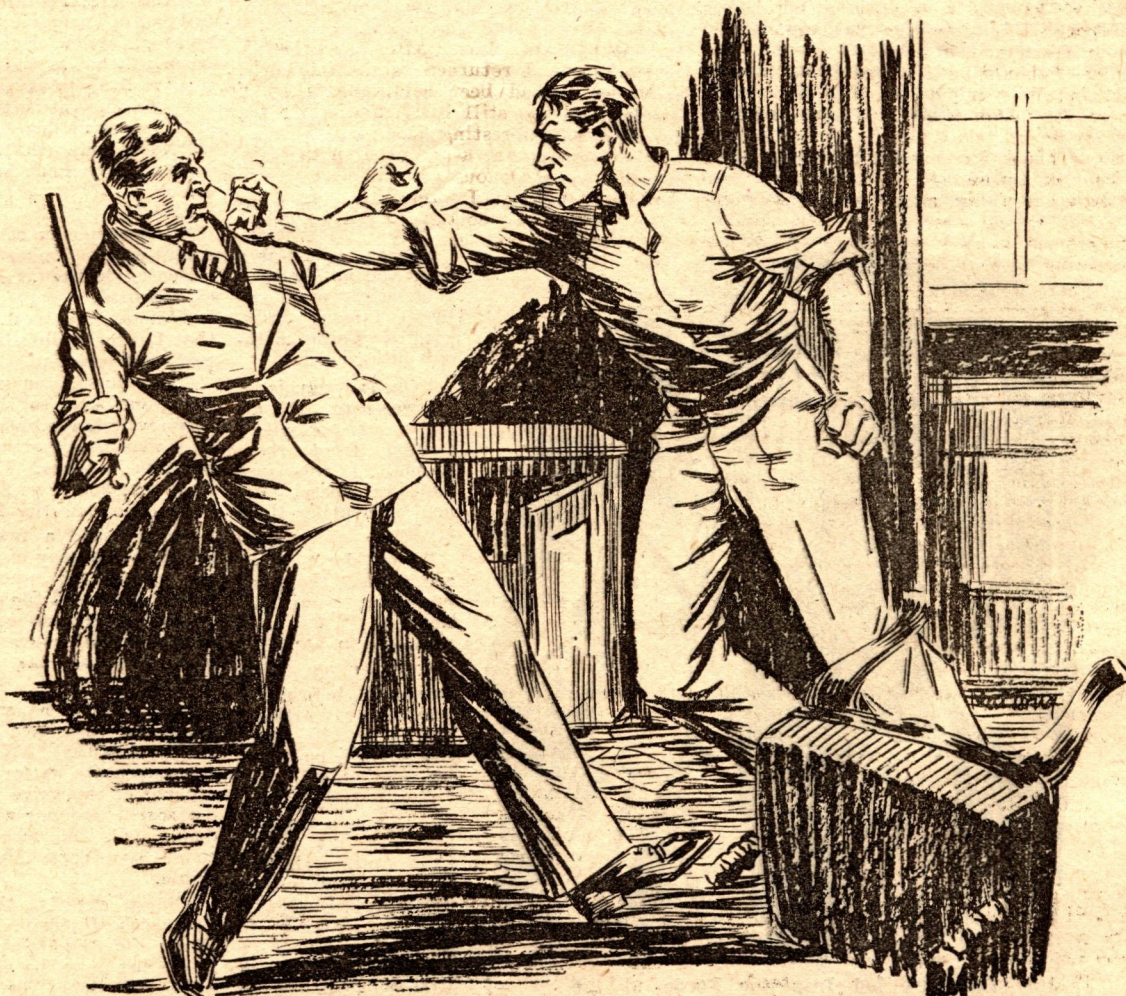
The Chief Constable lighted a cigarette, and began to pace the large square of carpet upon which his table was situated.

"And now," he said, "to give you a few further facts which may be interesting. This disembodied spirit, Gabriel Fish, or whatever his name was, mentioned three matters—a punishment which was coming to somebody, the name of Cyclades, which you have discovered to belong to a steamship, and some event which is to take place at Took's Road."

"Mr. Prothero, proceeding from his office to Clissold Galleries at nine o'clock this morning, sustained a serious accident. He was driving his own car, and he came into collision with a four-ton lorry, XY12679. His thigh was broken, and he was taken to the Camden Cottage Hospital. So far, although we know the number of the lorry, it has not yet been traced. You will, no doubt, be seeing Mr. Prothero directly you leave me. He may be the mysterious number four mentioned at the seance, or the thing may be a coincidence."

"As for the 'Cyclades,' a paragraph, which, so far as I am aware, appears in only one of the morning papers, gives us a very interesting explanation."

He passed over to Forde a Press cutting which had already been prepared for inclusion in the card-index. The news item which formed the subject of the cutting, and which was stated to be from the special



As his opponent swung back the poker, Forde dashed in, crashing his fist in the man's face.

correspondent of the paper in question, stated:

"SS. *Cyclades*, six thousand tons. Port of registry Hull. Was beached near Hornsea last evening with a serious fire in fore-hold. The cargo, which consisted of high-grade pianoforte instruments destined for the English market, was a valuable one, and the underwriters will have to face heavy losses. The cause of the fire is unknown."

"That," said Forde, as he handed the Press cutting back to his chief, "accounts for two of the cryptic utterances of the ghostly Gabriel Fish. What about the third—the one referring to Tooks Road?"

"That," said the Chief Constable, "is for this morning. I have very little doubt that it will materialise, as the other events have done. This Racketeer fellow, Forde, is very thorough. When he determines upon an event, that event takes place. I advised you at our last meeting to watch your step. I now advise you to the same effect with much more urgency. You have stumbled upon facts very inconvenient to the Racketeer; and there is no question that he will have decided upon your removal."

The Chief Constable clapped his hand upon the young man's shoulder.

"I don't want your removal to take place yet."

"There, sir," said Forde; "there, I am entirely with you."

"And now," the Chief Constable went on, "you will be getting away, first, I think, to Tooks Road; and, secondly, to the Camden Cottage Hospital. Tooks Road, as you may have discovered, is a turning off Upper Thames Street. Exactly what you will do when you get there, I don't know; but number seventeen is the warehouse belonging to a well-known firm of piano manufacturers. You might call at number seventeen."

Forde shook hands with the great man and picked up his hat.

"Just one thing more," said the Chief

Constable. "You appear to have got it into your head that Prothero has a daughter."

Forde flushed again. He did not know what was coming; and on the subject of Yellow-Hair he was very sensitive.

The Chief Constable smiled. His information was, fortunately, quite innocuous.

"So far as we are able to find out, Prothero has never married. No child bearing the name of Clarice Prothero has ever been registered. I suspect that there is a mystery here. Probably the girl isn't Prothero's daughter at all."

"Thank Heaven!" murmured Forde.

#### THE NAME OF THE RACKETEER IS—

**R**ICKY FORDE was a bit late for the affair at Tooks Road. Although, as it happened, the accident had not been reported to the police, it was the subject of a newspaper placard when he descended to the Embankment after his interview with Sims.

#### "CRANE FALLS ON CITY BUILDING."

That was the placard. The racing editions of the evening papers had got brief notices, even, in one case, an interview with a person who had witnessed the disaster.

A new building was in course of erection between Tooks Road and the river. To facilitate this building, a large crane had been erected upon the summit of a derrick. The crane was in course of demolition; and the first act of the operatives, when they arrived in the morning, was to begin the lowering of the ninety-foot steel boom. The cable had broken, the shackles had come away, while the boom itself had crashed down upon number seventeen, Tooks Road, almost cutting the building in half. Reporters had already been wasting the time of the crane-man for some hours, when Forde made his appearance. He was in time to overhear an angry altercation between the foreman, backed by the clerk of works, and a reporter named Benson, whom Forde happened to know.

"Hallo, Benson," he said, "you seem to be getting into trouble."

Benson, who was a dour and middle-aged Scotsman, employed by a famous daily, greeted Forde without enthusiasm.

"Oh, it's you, is it, ma wee man. It's all right. I got all I wanted from these people. I was just amusing masel the noo by hearing them all blair."

"You don't want any help, then, in preparing your article?"

Benson glared.

"What! You a Sassenach, help me in preparing my article? You're a bit above yourself this morning, ma wee laddie."

Seeing that Benson was just over five feet high in his boots, while Forde went five feet ten and a half inches in boxing gear, this reference to Forde as "a wee man" must have been intended to disparage his intellect.

Forde liked Benson; and, the ruder Benson was, the more Forde liked him.

"Come round the corner," he said, seizing the Scotsman around the arm. "Come along and give me all the dope on this business."

Benson took this appeal as a compliment, as, indeed, it was.

"Ha! You want help from me. That's a verra different matter, verra different indeed; and I suppose you want the thing from the viewpoint of Scotland Yard. You've come to the right man."

"At between five and ten minutes past eight this morning, the engineers got to work on that job. They had been dismantling the crane."

Here the Scotsman stopped and looked doubtfully at Forde.

"You'll know what a crane is, I suppose."

Forde laughed.

"Yes, I think so. Go on!"

"They started," resumed the Scotsman, "to continue to dismantle this crane. It was necessary for them to swivel in order to get the boom into a position from which it could be lowered without danger. The engine was out of commission; and they attempted to swivel the crane by means of crowbars. At the first movement, the whole thing came over. It's a heavenly blessing that nobody was hurt; but the piano warehouse over there in Tooks Road won't be any further use as a warehouse for some long time to come. Am I making maself clear?"

"Perfectly," Forde assured him.

"That's good."

Benson stopped to give emphasis to his next remark.

"And now, ma wee laddie, I'm going to tell you a curious and significant fact. At eight ak emma of this morning, the crane boom was not in the position which it occupied at five pip emma of yesterday."

Forde was interested.

"There is no doubt of that?"

"Not a ha'porth."

"And they don't know who swivelled the crane?"

"No."

"Any suspicion of foul play? Were the cables cut or broken?"

Benson looked at Forde with a measure of approval.

"Almost," he said, "at times I imagine that I perceive intelligence. That is a very pertinent question."

"The person, or persons, who swivelled the crane-boom so that it hung over that piano warehouse, also cut the cables until they were barely strong enough to hold the boom in its place. There is no doubt about it, an oxy-acetylene flame had been used. I have examined the fractures for myself."

Forde asked a few more questions not productive of any useful information, and went round to number seventeen, Tooks Road. He found the general manager of the company, who had been summoned by telephone several hours earlier, in a state of panic as to the damage which had occurred.

"Of course," he said, "we can recover from the insurance company; but what's the good of that? We can't recover enough to compensate us for our loss of trade. A number of expensive instruments have been destroyed, and our whole business has been dislocated. This means that business which should have come to us will go to our trade rivals."

Almost exactly the story this, which Prothero's foreman, Snooper, had told to Forde after the fire at the Clissold Galleries. Forde began to be sure that the company which the Racketeer was interested in was that of Webster and Prothero.



Jim Lansbury led Inspector Forde to the door of the underground haunt of the gang.

The purpose of Prothero's fire was, Rikky Forde felt sure, to prevent suspicion attaching to anybody associated with their firm. It had the reverse effect. It looked to the detective very like a blind—and a clumsy one at that.

Telephoning to the Yard and making arrangements for an operative to make the necessary investigations on the building site behind Took's Road, Forde re-entered his taxicab and was driven to the Camden Cottage Hospital.

Prothero was flat on his back with a long splint strapped from armpit to ankle. He had been in considerable pain, and was receiving injections of morphia. He had been placed in a private room, and the warm morning sunshine, streaming in through the open window, revealed the shadows of pain upon his hard and expressionless face. The girl, who called herself Clarice Prothero, was arranging some flowers upon the bed-table when Forde entered. She returned his "good-morning" with chilly politeness, but showed no further inclination to welcome him. This was hardly surprising. She knew him now for a Scotland Yard detective, and she must have known that her so-called father was not free from suspicion, either in connection with the fire, or with the tragedy during the seance. Forde had seldom found such a disagreeable duty to perform.

"Miss Prothero," he said, "I am aware that this gentleman—"

She stopped him.

"Do you mean my father?"

The young detective looked at her shrewdly. Did she know?

"Your father," he agreed, "has met with a serious accident, and that he is in considerable pain. Nevertheless, I am going to ask him some questions. I may tell you that we doubt the accident very much indeed. We suspect that Mr. Prothero was intentionally smashed up by that lorry; and the information which Mr. Prothero will be able to give me will help in punishing the man guilty of attempting to bring about his death."

"Not an accident?" breathed the girl. "You don't think that that is possible?"

"I don't know that it is possible," Forde told her. "Whether intentionally or otherwise, Mr. Prothero is involved in a criminal intrigue where wilful murder is almost commonplace."

The girl smiled. Plainly she thought that the Scotland Yard man was romancing.

"If I told you," said Forde, "that during the last twenty-four hours two men have been killed in mistake for myself, you will perhaps give to my statement its real seriousness."

"Good heavens!"

Clarice Prothero was really startled now.

"And do you mean that my father—"

"I mean that in some way your father is involved. I think, now that there is danger to him, I am going to ask him to help me to strike at the individual from whom this danger emanates."

"It is a shame," said the girl. "He's in such pain that he can hardly bear to open his eyes; but I suppose that you have got your duty to do. Do you wish me to go out of the room?"

To the girl's surprise, Forde agreed.

"Good-morning, Mr. Prothero," he said.

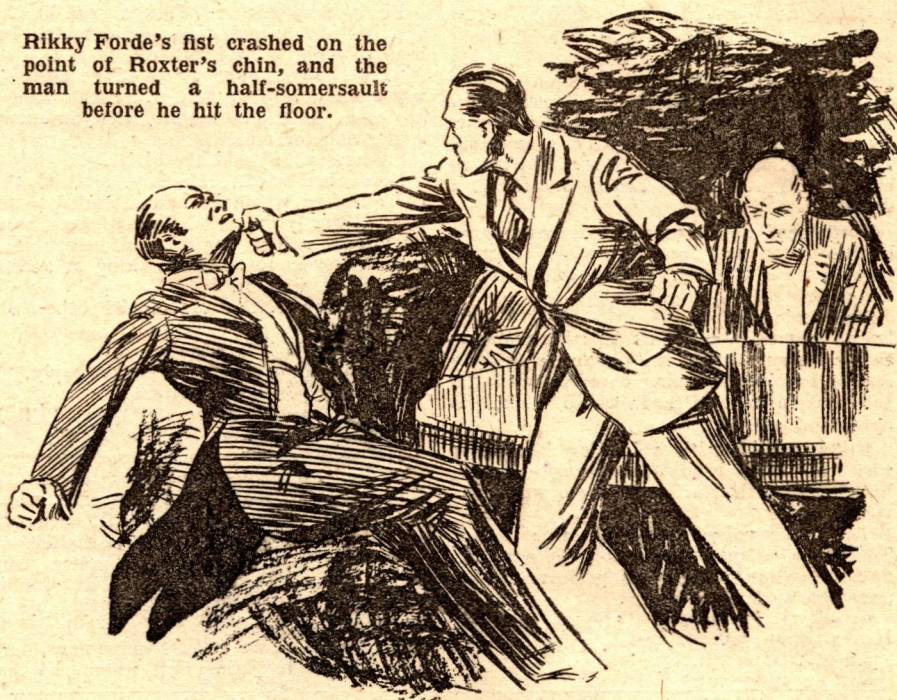
The sick man opened his eyes.

"Good-morning," he murmured.

"See here," said Forde, "I'm from Scotland Yard. You don't need to talk. I don't want you to answer a lot of questions, but I want you to tell me just one thing—and that is a name."

"Somewhere in London there is a man who uses the business methods known as

Rikky Forde's fist crashed on the point of Roxter's chin, and the man turned a half-somersault before he hit the floor.



'racketeering.' His modus operandi is to buy a small business and smash his competitors. Necessarily, he takes risks. He is a desperate man. Well, in some way or other, you have given this man offence, and he has punished you. When you are recovered from this accident, we of the Yard will want to know whether the fire at the Clissold Galleries was caused by the use of thermite. We shall want to know who it was who used the vortex-box by means of which Hindsley was murdered. We shall want to know whether you yourself were a party to the doings of Roxter, or of Blarney Jim.

"There are many things about the Racketeer, or Wrecker—whatever he is called—which you do not understand," Forde ventured to state, "but there is one thing which you do understand quite well, and that is that the Racketeer is out to get you. That you are alive now is a mistake. The driver of that lorry will be punished. The Racketeer is out to get you, and he will succeed unless—unless we get him first."

Prothero repeated those last words slowly, as if trying to comprehend their meaning.

"Unless you get him first."

"If we do get him," proceeded Forde, "and if you are the man who put us wise as to his identity, then, assuming that you are not actually guilty of murder, we at the Yard would do our best to have short memories."

Forde did not add anything to that, but waited, giving the sick man a chance to think things over.

Prothero closed his eyes again. The minutes passed.

"If I do," murmured Prothero under his breath, "if I do—"

A long crease of indecision had formed between his eyes. Heavy as he was with morphia, it was difficult for him to calculate—as he undoubtedly was endeavouring to calculate—the pros and cons of Forde's proposition.

On a lead flat above one of the houses on the other side of the road a watcher, who had rolled over to relieve the cramp in his arms, once more placed his eye to a small telescope to watch Rikky Forde and the man whom Rikky Forde was questioning. To the watcher, part of the sick bed was

hidden from view by a black disc having a small perforation in its centre. The black disc was one of the telescopic sights of an Army target rifle.

Suddenly, and with unexpected strength, Prothero raised his head.

"The Racketeer," he said, and then hesitated.

"There's a little safe in my bed-room," he went on, "a little safe behind a pilaster. It's all in there—sort of diary. Clarice knows where the safe is—but, in case anything goes wrong, I'll tell you now. The Racketeer is—"

A bullet ricocheted upon the tiled floor and embedded itself in the plaster upon the far wall. It was followed immediately by a second; but Forde had dropped to the floor and rolled away from the window. Within ten seconds he was out of the hospital and hammering at the door of the house from which the gunman had killed Abel Prothero.

A moment later he forced his way past a protesting servant and ran as hard as he could up the three flights of stairs which led to the roof.

After some difficulty he managed to open the trap which led out to the flat. There he found the rifle which the gunman had used. Also, by working his way from roof to roof, he found a second trap which gave access to the attic of a house some distance along the road.

The attic, so he learned, had been hired that very day by a young man who had represented himself as a medical student, and had assured the householder that his luggage would be brought later on. He had given a name which did not amount to anything, and mentioned several important persons whom he knew, his statements in this case being entirely fictitious.

"Three times," he reflected, with a shrug of the shoulders, "three times the Racketeer has attempted my life. Well, there's luck in odd numbers, they say. I wonder whether the fourth time will be lucky for me, or for him."

### THIRD DEGREE.

FORDE found the paper on his table at the Yard early that afternoon. It was the answer to a question which, in the ordinary routine of things at the Yard, he had dropped into a tray that morning.

Question: Who is Gabriel Fish?

Answer: Gabriel Fish, alias Gabriel Fenn, D.S.O. Captain. Sentenced five years burglary, 1912. Released 1916 on parole and immediately joined H.M. Forces. Promoted on field rank of second lieutenant, November, 1916. Subsequently promotion, June, 1917, and August, 1917. Killed in action at Ypres, 1918. Leaves one child, a daughter.

Forde read the document twice over from beginning to end, and remained concentrating upon the last period—one child, a daughter.

He wondered.

And just then, as if in telepathic response to his concentration, the constable on duty at the switchboard rang through with the information that Miss Prothero wished to speak to him.

Rikky waited with a beating heart, for which he cursed himself, knowing well that his chance with Clarice Prothero was practically nil.

The girl's voice supported this belief. There was no laughter in it now, only the flat intonation of one who performs a disagreeable task.

"I am Miss Prothero. I think, perhaps, that I ought to inform you I have found some important papers.

Forde thanked her. It was possible that she had discovered the papers which had been referred to by Prothero.

"I will come round at once," he said. "I was coming to your house this afternoon in any case. In the meantime, will you answer a question for me?"

"What is it?" said the girl.

Forde hesitated. He now realised that the question which he had intended to put was extremely delicate. Nevertheless, being by nature rather dogged and incapable of considering more than one thing at a time, he went on with it.

"Are you sure that Mr. Abel Prothero was your father?"

There was a long silence.

"I am not prepared," came the reply, "to discuss my personal affairs."

"Sorry," said Forde; and then: "I'll be with you in less than half an hour."

The question, of course, was answered. If there had been no mystery about the parentage of Clarice Prothero, she would hardly have refused to discuss it, even with a man whom she had reason to dislike.

He picked up one of the police cars, which are always in readiness at Cannon Row, and drove across to Putney. As he descended in front of Prothero's house he came face to face with two persons, both well known to him, but whom he had

supposed to be unacquainted. They were talking intimately, and the fact surprised him. One was George Ainsdale, and the other Roxter's partner, Benthoven.

George Ainsdale explained, with his miserable drawl:

"Just called to inquire about Prothero. You've heard of the accident, of course."

Forde looked from one man to the other.

"Yes, I am about to interview his daughter."

The two men exchanged a glance.

"I am afraid," said Benthoven, "that she isn't at home. The servant tells us that she has gone out."

The front door was still open, and the manservant, Franks, was standing in the opening.

"I must inquire into that," said Forde: and was up the steps before the man had made up his mind to shut the door. It was an inhospitable gesture, that moment of hesitation, but it had been there.

"I want to see Miss Prothero," said Rikky, holding himself ready to prevent the door being shut in his face.

The man grinned. There was no love lost between himself and the Scotland Yard man, and it pleased him immensely to communicate disappointing news.

"Sorry, Miss Prothero has gone out."

Forde pushed past the man and entered

## IT'S NO USE BLUFFING—

**THE THRILLER**  
THE PAPER WITH A THOUSAND THRILLS 2  
A THRILLING COMPLETE MYSTERY STORY  
**The FIVE KINGS**  
By Leslie Charteris

*YOU CAN'T BLUFF at Poker against four kings and the joker, and it's no use thinking you can beat the splendid story in next week's issue. Crooks and others trembled when they received the visiting cards of*

### "THE FIVE KINGS"

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## The THRILLER

*On Sale Next Saturday.*

the hall. He had every reason to believe that if Yellow-Hair had discovered anything offensive to the Racketeer—above all, if she had discovered the name of the Racketeer—then her life was worth very little. They had already had several chances to estimate the utter ruthlessness of that master criminal, and Rikky could not afford to be stalled off by a manservant.

"I have an appointment with Miss Prothero," he said. "She rang me up from this house half an hour ago. I shall have to satisfy myself that she is not here."

The man favoured him with an ironic bow.

"You're quite welcome, sir. Search the house as much as you please. You won't find Miss Prothero, as she calls herself."

Forde seized the man by the shoulder and looked fiercely into his face.

"What does that remark mean, Blumenfeld?"

"My name's Franks," said the man.

The detective shook him.

"I don't care what your name is. What did that remark mean?"

The servant grinned again.

"If you don't know, I'm not going to tell you."

"You'll come with me," Rikky told him crisply. "We'll start at the top of the house, and you will walk in front of me so that I can see what you are doing. There are the stairs. Up you go—and be quick about it!"

The servant would have hesitated; but, after a look at Forde's face, he decided that it would be better not to.

Floor after floor, from the room of the seance to the sub-ground servants' hall, which had been used as a buffet, Rikky made a careful search.

In Prothero's room the safe behind the pilaster stood wide open; and in Prothero's grate there was a heap of ashes. Both there and in Prothero's study downstairs writing-tables, and any place where confidential papers might have been kept, were methodically smashed, heaps of books and documents being thrown anywhere about the floor. Clearly a rapid, but expert, search had been conducted.

Forde made no comment upon these things. When he had made an end of his search for the girl, he led the manservant to the servants' hall; and there, having first locked the door, he began an interrogation.

"Where are the other servants?"

The man seated himself and proceeded to light a cigarette with calculated insolence.

"It just happens," he said with a sneer, "that they are off duty. The butler and the cook have been sent away on board wages, and Miss Prothero's maid had a wire early this morning telling her that her sister had met with an accident."

Forde passed over the implication.

"And so," he said, "you were alone here when Miss Prothero telephoned me?"

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes."

"And nobody has been here since, except Mr. Ainsdale and Mr. Benthoven."

"That's so."

"Who broke open the writing-tables and burnt the papers?"

"I don't know," lied the man. "I suppose Miss Prothero did."

Rikky Forde's manner had become very quiet, almost pleasant. The manservant should have perceived in that a danger signal; but he was not a person of subtle perceptions.

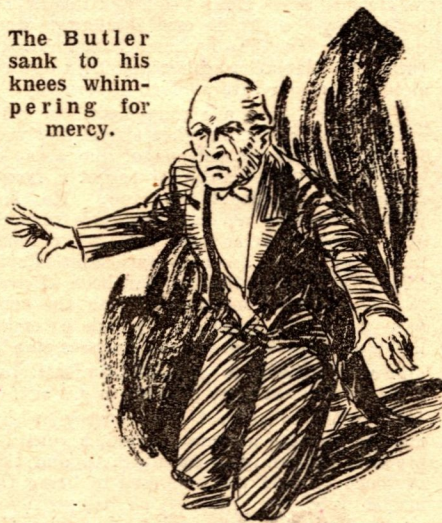
The detective walked up to him where he sat, plucked him out of his chair, and knocked the cigarette out of his mouth. Appalled by the absence of colour from the young man's face and by the steel-grey

pitiless fighting light in the young man's eyes, the man would have recoiled; but the chair prevented him. He was obliged to stand his ground.

"You know something," said Forde between his teeth. "You know something."

The man allowed himself to smile. Perhaps this pallor, this tensivity, was due, not to rage, but to anxiety.

The Butler  
sank to his  
knees whim-  
pering for  
mercy.



"Speech is silver," he quoted, "but silver

"If speech is silver," said the young man, speaking with a sort of fierce effort, "I'm going to have some small change out of you."

"What do you mean?" said the man.

"I mean," Forde told him, "that I am going to beat you up until you come clean."

"You," said the man, "beat me up? You couldn't do it. You ain't got the wots-its-name. You're only a whisky soak. Everybody knows that. Besides, you ain't got no right to do that. It ain't constitutional."

Rikky Forde smiled; and his smile was a terrible thing.

During the man's chequered career, he had seen such a twisted grimace on the faces of other men, and he knew that it meant desperation.

"If you lay a hand on me—" he said, and whipped out his automatic. The bullet went into the ceiling. The reek of cordite filled the room.

Forde tossed the pistol through the open window into the area. After that, with trembling fingers, he tore off his coat, waistcoat and collar.

"You had better find another weapon," he almost whispered, "because I'm going to beat you up."

There was a short, heavy poker in the old-fashioned grate; and, with this improvised weapon in his hand, the servant waited for Forde's attack.

It was an unfortunate choice. To use any kind of a club, one has to be within a very short distance of the intended victim. Forde simply ignored it. Walking easily until within six feet of his adversary, he hit the man between the eyes with a long left and was away again before the poker could be brought into use. The next of his long lefts found the man's nose. The next his lips; and then his nose, which was already bleeding from both nostrils, received another smashing blow. The man rushed with blind rage; but Rikky side-stepped and hooked him in the solar plexus. The servant doubled-up like a two-foot rule, and fell in a heap upon the floor. He thought, perhaps, that this was going to save him, but he was mistaken. The poker was kicked

into a corner, and he himself was jerked on to his feet to be held suspended in the air from one hand, while from the other hand he received a continuous pummelling.

"Get up on your two feet," urged Rikky, "and take what's coming to you. I haven't started yet."

"Hades!" cried the servant. "You're killing me. Let me alone!"

"Not yet," said Forde. "I'm going to manhandle you until you're ready to tell all you know."

The vicious kick was quite unexpected. Had it arrived, it might have maimed the detective for life. He stopped it with his hip, and his hip was bruised for a week afterwards.

"You would kick, would you?" he said. He cross-buttocked, and his unfortunate victim hurtled through the air, to fall like a sack of bones upon the linoleum of the floor. He had hardly fallen before Forde had him up again and smashed a couple of rights into his face.

It was loathsome work this to keep on hammering a defeated man; but the safety, and perhaps the life, of Yellow-Hair was at stake; and Forde knew no compunction. The sweat poured from every part of his body, and from one of his cheek-bones, which had been cut by his opponent's knuckles, the blood dropped on to his shirt.

"I'll kill you," he said; and probably at the time he literally meant his words.

Trampling of feet, gasping groans and curses, and the sound of blows went on for minute after minute until even Forde was in the last stage of exhaustion, and the servant was blubbing like a child out of his battered and misshapen face.

"Got to be careful," Rikky told himself, "not to put the man out, because then he couldn't talk." And still, without respite, the merciless breaking-up of the servant went on.

At length, he had the man on his knees, with bowed head and pathetically extended hands, literally whimpering for mercy.

"I'll tell—I'll tell you anything, only let me alone. For Heaven's sake, let me alone—you're killing me, Mr. Forde!"

And now, in the spell of berserkerian rage, Rikky could hardly bring himself to let up. Lifting the man clear of the floor, he crashed him into a chair, and sat down trembling and breathless in front of him.

"So," he said reflectively, "that's what they call 'third degree,' is it? I've had enough of it. It's a filthy business."

He contrived to light a cigarette.

"You're quite sure," he said, "that you don't want any more?"

The man shook his head. He was quite sure upon that point.

"Then," said Forde, "we will get down to brass tacks. 'Where is Miss Prothero?'"

"I don't know, sir."

Forde drew back his fist; and the man threw himself from the chair to the floor.

"I don't know," he screamed. "I swear to you that I don't know. She was taken away from here, just before you came."

"Taken away?"

"Yes, in an ambulance."

"In an ambulance? Was she hurt?"

"No, Mr. Forde. It was just their way of getting hold of her."

Forde believed him.

"Who do you mean," he continued, "by they?"

"I can't tell you, Mr. Forde. I dare not. They'd kill me!"

"Kill you?" said Rikky advancing. "I'd do worse than kill you!"

He seized the writhing man by the throat and banged his head against the boards.

"Who was it?" he said. "Who was it?"

And between each question he resumed his hammering.

"Benthoven," ejaculated the man at last. "Benthoven and Ainsdale."

Rikky was surprised into immobility.

"Ainsdale—George Ainsdale?"

"Yes, you didn't know. He's often laughed about that."

"It's a queer world," was Forde's comment. Even now he could hardly believe that poor old George Ainsdale, who had so often received his own sympathy, was on the wrong side of the fence. It was, indeed, a queer world.

"And," he went on, "who is the Racketeer?"

It was plain that the man had never heard the word before.

"Who," he explained, "is the boss? Who is the big noise? Who ordered the murder of Prothero? Who murdered Hindsley in the room upstairs?"

"I don't know, Mr. Forde—I really don't know. It was all done by the gang."

"Do you expect me to believe," said Rikky, with renewed anger, "that you don't know the name of the leader of your own gang?"

"That's so, Mr. Forde. Don't hit me again. That's the truth. Nobody knows. He's an under-cover man. Works in the dark. His name might be Fish—Gabriel Fish; but then, again, it might not. I tell you, honestly, I don't know!"

Forde gave the man a cigarette.

"Look here, Blumenfeld," he said very calmly, "you've burnt your boats now, my man. You're in this with me. I'm going to pull you to save you from the fate of Blarney Jim. You had better repeat your statement in writing to the police; and when the gang is rounded up, as it will be, this will be remembered in your favour. What you do about the hammering which I have just given you, I don't care two rows of pins."

"I shan't split," said the man. "You stand by me and get me out of this. So long as the gang doesn't get me, I don't care what happens now. I'm with you now. I'll tell all I know."

"And look here," he went on, "I can't tell you the name of the boss, because I don't know it, but I can tell you where you can find him. He will be at Smith's Kitchen at seven o'clock to-night."

When Rikky Forde had had a rub-down in Prothero's bed-room, and, with the aid of the now obsequious servant, had assumed his discarded garments, he put through a call to his flat and spoke to his man, Lansbury.

"Lansbury," he said, "you've got to do something for me. It's a big thing, but you've got to do it."

"Whatever it is," was the man's reply, "you know very well, sir, that I will do it."

"Good," said Rikky. "To-night I want you to take me to Smith's Kitchen."

There was a long silence.

"I am sorry," said Lansbury, "that you asked that. I don't mind for myself; but you—you want to live a little longer, don't you? If I took you there, I should be guilty of your death. That is the one thing, sir, that I cannot do."

"It's the one thing," said Forde, "that you've got to do."

"Do you hear me?" he continued, as the silence became prolonged. "You've got to do it."

With the utmost reluctance, Jim Lansbury agreed.

"Very well, sir; we'd better have a good time this afternoon, and put our things in order. The chances are that we shan't be alive by this time to-morrow. Good-bye, sir. Good-bye!"

## SMITH'S.

THE whole police force knew the story of old Smith's Kitchen—that monument to the criminal genius of one man—but very few believed in the story.

The passport to Smith's consisted, firstly, of a latchkey; and secondly, of knowledge where to find the lock which the key fitted.

Lansbury had led Forde to a row of old-fashioned houses along the Essex Road. He had entered with his own latchkey; and, descending to the basement, had passed through cellar after cellar, and then down a sloping corridor into a place of scrutiny.

There had been a strong light in this small room; and through a slit in the wall Rikky had been conscious of the eyes of Old Man Smith, who never forgot a face—never, indeed, forgot anything. He had known Lansbury at once, had this remarkable doyen of criminals; and, after Lansbury had given his assurance that Forde might be trusted, the two had been allowed to assume their masks and join the company upon the huge floor which extended under all those houses upon the Essex Road.

It was difficult to get into Smith's, but it might be even more difficult to get out.

In order to respect the secrecy which most of Smith's patrons desired, a constant pretence of gala was maintained, and this pretence of gala was supposed to bring the masks into the picture as conventional wear. Smith's lams had no belief in the fabled honour among thieves. They preferred to trust in a strict incognito.

Forde and Lansbury had wandered as unostentatiously as possible to a small table and had ordered drinks from a coloured waiter.

"You see," explained Lansbury, "there are no laws inside this place. The police know about it, all right, but they shut their eyes. It pays them."

Forde asked for an explanation; and Lansbury went on with an eloquent wink.

"Stool pigeons," he said. "The place is full of noses. The police find it convenient to know of some place to which every criminal in the country would sooner or later come. That's why they don't raid the place; and that's why they make no arrests on the premises. I reckon it's a sort of arrangement."

One who conducted an obvious search in that place would not be welcomed; and the detective did not see how, without conducting an obvious search, it was possible for him to find the Racketeer.

Luck, whether good or bad, betrayed to him the presence of the man whom he sought.

That huge head, that dwarfed body, that sing-song voice, could only belong to Snooper; and his muttering could only mean a communion with the dead Gabriel Fish.

Having recognised Snooper at a neighbouring table, Forde was able to place several of the others. There was Roxter—Roxter was recognisable anywhere, if only from his habit of wearing a four-fold collar with an evening suit. There was the bird-like Benthoven. There was Lalla Poltriska. Forde was surprised to see her there. He had never supposed that Lalla was crooked; but then, he reflected, she had enough devilry for anything. Beside her, and recognisable because of the monocle upon his shirt-front and because of his sad mouth, sat George Ainsdale. His presence, too, was a surprise for Rikky, despite the revelations of Prothero's servant.

So marked were the characteristics of this group that they might as well have been unmasked.

There were others who were not exempt from suspicion of being the Racketeer, yet

Rikky now saw that none of them had that doubtful and dangerous distinction, but one, who was strange to him, a slim young man who sat at the head of their table.

"Lansbury," he said, "you see that chap at the head of the table there, that slim man—I have no doubt that he is the Racketeer; and, before this night is over, I'm going to unmask him."

Lansbury shrugged his shoulders.

"How are you going to do it?" he said.

"I don't know," confessed Forde, "but I'm going to have a shot at it. You can keep out of what follows, and I daresay you can get clear. If I stop a brick, you had better pretend you don't know me."

He called rather loudly for some whisky; and he saw the Racketeer start and look towards him.

"Bring me a bottle of whisky," he said, "and bring it quickly. I'm thirsty."

He half-filled his glass with the neat spirit; and Lansbury, looking his way a moment later, was astonished to see that it was empty.

Forde rose up from his seat and steadied himself upon the edge of the table.

"I don't want soda," he complained. "I want potass. Why doesn't that confounded nigger bring me potass?"

Playing the part of a drunken man with considerable skill, Forde abandoned the support of his own table and lurched in the direction of the larger table where, as it seemed, the Racketeer and his fellows were holding a conference. It looked as though Rikky, in his erratic and drunken progress, would succeed in steering clear of the Racketeer's table; but his last lurch was a short one; and, instead of missing the table completely, he clutched at the back of the Racketeer's chair and fell almost into the arms of the Racketeer himself. His hand went up, as it appeared, in an effort to maintain his stability, and he grasped at the Racketeer's mask, being thrust aside with the mask still in his hand.

It was an excellent piece of character acting. Had Forde been able to maintain the part which he had been playing—that of a hopelessly intoxicated man—it is quite probable that he would have imposed upon the friends of the Racketeer and escaped with a few curses; but, in unmasking the Racketeer, he had made a discovery which startled him out of all further pretence, even, for a moment, out of his usual stoical self-possession; for the Racketeer was Yellow-Hair—Clarice Prothero—the girl of his dreams; and it seemed to Forde that the bottom had dropped out of his world.

He stood looking into her face, a man obviously perfectly sober, obviously astonished, and obviously aware of her identity.

"You!" he said. "Clarice! Yellow-Hair! How do you come into this? You are not the Racketeer!"

"The Racketeer?"

The girl repeated the words slowly and heavily.

"I don't know what you mean," she said, with a noticeable effort.

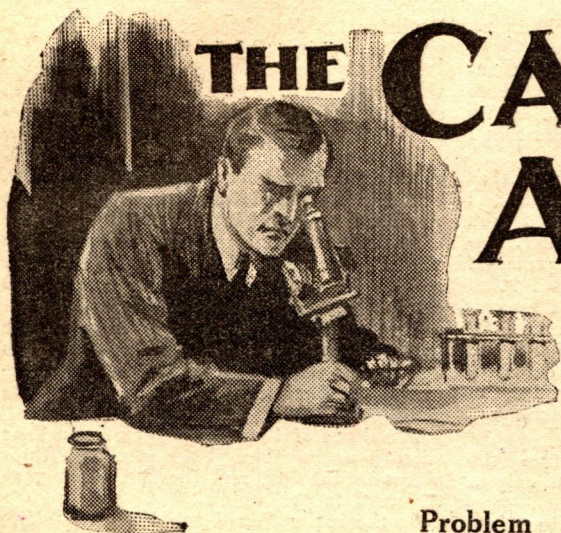
Her yellow hair had been cropped, and her eyes did not open to their normal extent.

"You're doped!" said Forde.

He had torn the mask from his own face, and stood with it hanging from his fingers. He had been pale before, but now—realising the trick which had been played upon the woman whom he loved—the young man became ghastly.

"Which," he asked, turning slowly, "which of these men has drugged you—caused you to dress in these clothes, brought you to this vile place? I was a

(Continued on page 26.)



# THE CASE OF THE ABANDONED BUNGALOW

Problem No. 12 of **BAFFLERS!** The Popular Detective Story Game.

TOWARD the end of a day in the summer of 1927, the police of a large Midland town received a tip from the underworld sources that a gang of alleged bank robbers might be found at a certain abandoned bungalow on the outskirts of the city.

There had been a large number of bank robberies and post office hold-ups over a fairly widespread area of the Midland towns, and even smaller districts. For some considerable time the police had made energetic efforts to locate the men forming the gang, and all the traps they carefully laid in the hope of apprehending the whole lot in one swoop had been successfully evaded by the criminals.

The men forming this particular gang were rather an unknown quantity to the police of the Midlands. They had evidently drifted from the South, where their frequent raids had very nearly led to arrest, and consequently they had found it necessary to transfer their attentions to a fresh hunting field.

That the raids in the Midlands were carried out by the same gang of men in each case, the police felt more or less convinced, but the information they had been able to gather was rather meagre. Every usual line they had taken, proved of no avail until at last they received apparently genuine information from an informer of the underworld.

In spite of elaborate precautions of the police, who hoped to surprise the gang, the bungalow, when surrounded, was found deserted. The occupants had apparently been

tipped off in their turn by someone who knew what was to happen.

It was a one-room bungalow, long since abandoned by its owners. Almost all the furniture had been removed. The detectives were confronted by the problem of deducing, from the evidence of the room, the size of the gang and some characteristics of its members.

The room was furnished merely with four kitchen chairs, a wooden packing box, a rickety table, and some old crockery. The only clues available were as follows:

Besides many matches of the "book"-paper type on the floor about the table, there were twenty-odd burned, large-sized wooden matches scattered on the floor behind one of the chairs.

Stubs of five Turkish cigarettes and four cigarettes made from Virginia tobacco. One cigar butt, Corona-Perfecto.

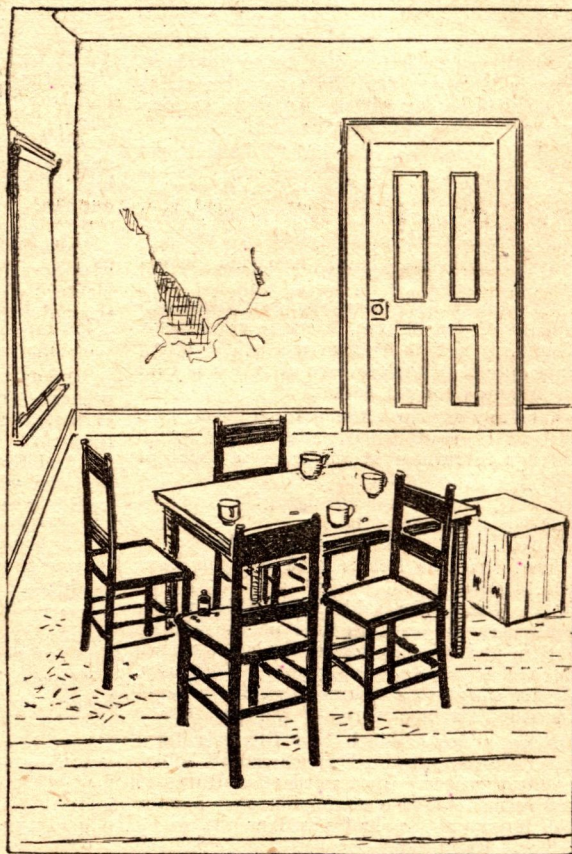
The four chairs and the wooden packing box grouped around the table, as shown in the accompanying sketch.

A bottle of iodine, nine-tenths full, with several drops of iodine on the seat of the chair on which it stood.

The cigarette and cigar-stubs were scattered, some on the floor, some of the cups that stood on the table.

Closer examination of the cups showed that they had contained a good brand of whisky. Clearly defined on the wooden packing box were a dozen or more small dents, equally divided into two groups about six inches apart—both groups some eight inches from the floor. The dents were each about a quarter of an inch long and less than a sixteenth of an inch deep in the soft wood. The cigar butt was found by the cup in front of the wooden box.

Neither footprints nor fingerprints were in evidence. Nevertheless, the detectives



Sketch from police photographs of the scene at the abandoned bungalow.

## THE RULES.

The rules are simplicity itself. On this page you are given details of Baffler Problem No. 12—there will be another next week. Briefly, you are told the story of a crime and given ALL the clues necessary for its solution. Be your own detective. Read the problem through very carefully, giving consideration to every detail, then try to answer the questions at the end.

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

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

were able to deduce important characteristics of some of the occupants of the bungalow. Ultimately it resulted in the identification and capture of the gang.

Had you been there as a detective, what would you have deduced? The questions to be answered are:

1. How many were in the gang? (Marks 2.)
2. What was a distinguishing characteristic of each member which might serve to identify the gang if seen by the police? (Marks 8.)

## THE WRECKER

(Continued from page 24.)

dead man from the moment that I took off my mask; but, by Heaven, he shall go with me!"

"I don't know what you mean," said the girl again. "You are Mr. Forde, the detective."

A detective! A low, growling murmur came from such of Smith's lambs as were within hearing. It might be that—as Lansbury had said—an occasional "nose" penetrated into the thieves' kitchen; but it was always at the risk of his life. The fact made no difference to Forde. Without question, he was in the presence of the Racketeer, and that pitiless desperado would see to it that he did not escape with his life. He could afford to be reckless.

"These," said the girl, as one repeating a lesson, "are the people to which I belong. I am here with my father."

"Who invented that lie? Your father is dead."

The girl shook her head slowly.

"Mr. Prothero was not my father."

Forde laughed mirthlessly.

"I see it now," he thought aloud. "It was easier than keeping you a prisoner, to dope you, fill you with lies, and bring you here. By the time you had discovered the trick you would be committed to a share in some crime and dragged into the dirt."

"Look here," he went on, "I haven't got much time, but I've got time for this—to tell you the truth about yourself. Your name is Clarice Fenn. Your father was a brave man—a soldier who died in France."

He thrust his hand into his breast pocket.

"You may have been shown a faked certificate of your birth. Here is a real one. You have got to believe me. The dying have special privileges, one of which is that their words compel belief."

Clarice Fenn took the printed form, but, instead of reading it, she looked with strange intentness at the man in front of her.

"But you—you are not dying?"

Rikky laughed again.

"Am I not?" Ask your friends here."

The saturnine Roxter took it upon himself to reply.

"We know," he said, "that this young gentleman is—er—over-fond of the whisky bottle; and, that being so, we must excuse his rather hectic imagination. Certainly, we are about to ask him to go for a—er—car ride; but, my dear—"

Rikky's fist crashed into Roxter's face, and the man turned a half-somersault before he hit the floor. That word of endearment had seemed to be a confession that Roxter was the man who had posed as the girl's father. In any case, it had been sufficient to fire the mine of the detective's anger.

The remainder of the crowd were strangely ominously silent and inactive. None assisted the insensible Roxter, none attempted to take up his quarrel. They appeared to wait for a lead from one who had not spoken—the master.

Forde stole a glance over his shoulder at the table where Lansbury had been sitting. Lansbury was no longer there, and Rikky's heart sank. The associate of a detective was as much an enemy of Smith's lambs as the detective himself, and everyone must have known that he—the detective—had come from Lansbury's table.

He himself was getting a longer respite than he had hoped for. Lansbury had had no such luck. Even now he was probably taking the car ride which was the

euphemism of Smith's lambs for a bumping off.

"Just one thing more," Rikky said, turning again to the girl. "Just one thing more—a matter of little moment, but, in its way, a consolation—I want to tell you that I love you."

"After all, Yellow-Hair, my heart's darling, you've got to remember me. I saved your life once when I pulled you away from that falling safe; and now, perhaps, I have saved you again. I promised myself that I would tell you that I loved you, one day, before I died. Don't remember me as a whisky-soak—I was never that. It was just part of the game which I had to play. Don't remember me as a detective who pulled down the fool's paradise in which you were living. Remember me as a very ordinary man who loved you."

Rikky Forde swung round to face the circle of hostile men who waited only a signal to destroy him.

"And now," he said easily, "I have a date with the Racketeer."

Snooper spoke, the insignificant Snooper; and he spoke with the powerful voice of the Control—that heavy baritone with a queer catch in it.

"I am the Racketeer!"

His words caused a sensation. It was clear that few, if any, of his companions had known of his dual identity. On the one hand, the half-imbecile foreman, with his reedy falsetto voice; and, on the other, the dominating Control who had used the darkness of seances to propagate his criminal designs.

"I," he repeated, "am the Racketeer."

And suddenly, by the commonplace magic of a pose, of a voice, he was revealed as a master of men. Crooked, ruthless, unscrupulous, criminal, but still—a master of men.

"I don't know," he confessed, "why I let you go on talking, wrecking my plans. But, perhaps, for the reason which you have stated, that the dying have special privileges."

"And Gabriel Fish—or Fenn, as you call him—he who was my friend, he, perhaps, would have wished it. Had it been possible for me to spare you, then—I don't see why not—Clarice might have married you. As it is"—the little man shrugged his shoulders—"as it is—well, he hasn't spoken to me lately. I don't know what his wishes might have been. You had better come for that car ride."

"Love—the love of a lover—what is that beside the love which I have for my friend, Gabriel Fish? All these crimes with which I have blackened my soul were planned for the happiness of that girl whom he left behind. I gave her a father—a rich father—and then, the fool, he went crooked, and I had to kill him."

"I don't know," the Racketeer went on, lapsing into the plaintive sing-song tones of Snooper, which must have been second nature to him, "why the necessity of killing is so often thrust upon me. Yours, for instance, is a case in point. I bear you no enmity. On the contrary, I like you; and, if you had been married to Clarice, I should have been happy to drop out of her life. Even now, if it could be arranged—"

He looked speculatively at the young man.

"Nothing could be arranged," said Forde, "which would prevent my telling what I know. You had better get on with your killing."

The Racketeer smiled.

"I expect that you are right."

Old Man Smith, the creator and proprietor of Smith's Kitchen, was, like the

Racketeer, a Napoleon of crime. He prepared for everything.

The only person who carried a weapon in that place was Old Man Smith himself; and such of his patrons as had differences settled them away from his establishment.

At the same time Smith realised the difficulties which occasionally beset his patrons, and had furnished for their use a garage reached by a small internal lift.

Forde, bound and gagged, was placed in the lift and taken up to the garage. There he was dumped upon the floor of a saloon car and covered by means of a rug.

Forde wondered, as he lay there at the bottom of the car, what Yellow-Hair was doing. He was glad that she had not witnessed the final scene of his capture by the gang.

The doors of the garage were opened as silently as possible. Four men took their places in the car, and the Racketeer gave the word to pull out.

As the car gathered speed in the short street beyond the garage, the Racketeer's men were annoyed to discover that another car going in the same direction was crowding them into the kerb.

It was so well done that they did not realise the nature of this second car until they were under arrest. The Flying Squad know all there is to know about motor tactics.

Inside the garage the Wrecker found himself faced by a small group of determined men, led by Chief-Constable Sims himself.

For the sake of his friend and master, Jim Lansbury had committed the one crime which the underworld cannot forgive. He had squealed, betrayed the Racketeer to the police.

In response to the usual formula of arrest, the Racketeer made no reply.

He began to talk in a soft undertone to some person invisible to the police, whom he addressed as Gabriel Fish.

"All right, old friend. All right. I'm coming with you now."

"There," said Sims, "you are mistaken, my man. You are coming with me."

The Racketeer smiled. Then, still smiling, he knelt down on the oily concrete of the floor. Already there was a light upon his face which is not of this world.

"Cyanide of potassium," he murmured, as he collapsed. "Cyanide of potassium makes everything so simple. All right, Gabriel—all right, old man—I'm coming!"

"You can see her now for a few minutes," said the nurse, "but you must not talk."

As it happened, Rikky could not have talked, even if he had wanted to. To see Yellow-Hair, his beloved Yellow-Hair, so pale and so weak brought tears to his eyes and a lump to his throat.

The terrible experiences of the girl and the drug which she had been induced to take had brought her very near to the land of shadows.

She stretched out a hand to him.

"They call you Rikky, don't they?" she asked. And repeated the name as if she liked the sound of it.

"Rikky—Rikky Forde."

THE END.

(Do not forget that your favourite author writes next week's book-length novel—"The Five Kings," by Leslie Charteris. Avoid disappointment by ordering your copy today.)

A BRILLIANT NEW SERIAL by JOHN G. BRANDON starts in a fortnight's time!



# THE TRAPPER!

A DRAMA  
OF THE NIGHT-HAUNTS  
OF LONDON

By  
GEORGE DILNOT

Author of "Scotland Yard," etc.

## THE CAPTURE OF THE TRAPPER.

"NO need to introduce you," said Thorold, edging a little behind the newcomer and waving a hand towards the detective. "You've met Mr. Wilde before."

The butler bowed stiffly, and, standing with one hand on his hip, glanced a little uncertainly from one to the other. His face was pasty white and utterly devoid of expression.

Wilde was on his feet.

"Not altogether an unexpected pleasure," he said. "Excuse me. Stand still a moment." Swiftly and expertly he passed his hands over the other and dropped back to his seat with a nod of satisfaction. "A mere formality," he explained. "I just wanted to be sure. So you're not dead, Watkins. I had an idea that some sympathy was being wasted on you."

Watkins smiled wryly.

"That fire was a mistake," he said slowly. "Still, I'm glad you haven't dropped any tears on my account."

"Better sit down, Watkins," suggested Thorold. "And don't make any sudden move, because I'm highly strung up and nervous to-day." He momentarily displayed a pistol in the palm of his hand. "We're going to have quite a little chat, we four. Would you mind shifting your seat a fraction nearer the door, Wilde? This little gun, which I took from Mr. Watkins less than half an hour back, has a light pull, and if a bullet passed through him—Now we're all comfortable. Tell the kind gentleman from Scotland Yard all about everything, Watkins. By the way, Wilde, I nearly forgot. This is the Trapper, whom you were getting hot and bothered about. Notice his ears."

Wilde raised a protesting hand.

"Half a moment, Mr. Thorold. We can't have this. This is entirely irregular. Watkins. I arrest you for murder. If you want to say anything I'm not going to stop you, but don't forget it may be used in evidence."

"What Mr. Wilde is trying to say," observed the millionaire smoothly, "is that he wants you to talk, but doesn't want it to be said that he induced you to do so. Don't interrupt, Wilde. This is my show."

The Trapper moistened his lips.

"You seem to have got me cold, Mr. Thorold. I'm not afraid. What I've done I've done at the dictates of my conscience even though it's been against the formulas of the law. I'm not ashamed of anything, and I'll tell you what you want so far as I myself am concerned. But I won't drag anyone else in."

"Now we understand one another," said Thorold curtly, "we'll take your pure motives for granted, Watkins, so you can cut out the flowers."

The prisoner rested his elbow on a table and his chin on his hand, gazing straight in front of him.

"What I want to make clear," he said,

speaking in a dull monotone, "is that I've acted entirely unselfishly all through. I may be only a servant, but I've thought and studied deeply about certain things. Law is a word, justice is a thing. I suppose I've read practically every book on criminology as well as hundreds on social subjects, and I've not found one person in a million who has realised that the present basis of society is all wrong. You punish the weaklings and the unfortunate, and leave those who are the fundamental cause of crime untouched."

"Long ago I came to the conclusion that an able man backed with money could teach the lawgivers and the administrators of the law a lesson. I had it all thought out—and I only need the money to start with. My chance came when Mr. Thorold engaged me. He is extraordinarily careless in some of his personal affairs, and before I had been with him long he trusted me implicitly. The unthinking world may say that I betrayed that trust. I don't look at it that way. He had more money than he could ever spend, and I took what I wanted for the good of the community."

"In other words, Watkins had a talent for forgery, which he exercised at my expense," explained the millionaire. "I believe that you were worried about some of my apparent banking operations, Wilde."

The detective was casually jotting notes on the back of an envelope. He looked up and nodded.

"That was among the points which I had against you. There was in particular twenty thousand pounds drawn out of your bank at about the time young Estrehan first got into trouble and some bonds were returned to his employers. At the time I learnt that it never occurred to me to think of forgery."

A gleam of dour amusement appeared on Watkins' face.

"Why should you?" he asked. "The only person who could open up that line of suspicion was Mr. Thorold himself, and, as I have said, he left things pretty much to me. When I realised that I had practically unlimited capital to draw upon with comparative safety, I began to arrange an organisation to carry out my plans. I knew that it would be necessary for me to enlist the help of certain professional criminals. So in my spare time I became a spectator at the Old Bailey and some of the police courts. I managed to scrape acquaintance with one or two people, and through them with others. Thus I was able to select those who would be most useful for my purposes, and I gained a knowledge of some

things that were going on in the underworld. You needn't trouble to make a note of this, Mr. Wilde. I'm not giving you any names."

The chief inspector's face betrayed incredulity.

"You're not going to tell us that you enlisted a bunch of crooks in this casual manner. It's a mathematical certainty that you'd have been given away deliberately or inadvertently before you got started."

A patronising quality as of one explaining to a child came into Watkins' voice as he answered.

"I didn't suppose that you held me quite as simple as that. I took precautions. I knew that it was important to avoid my personal identity becoming known. I have a faculty for make up, and the man who bought a couple of drinks for A and learned something about B at an East End public house had little resemblance to the man who dined at a West End restaurant with B. There was nothing elaborate really—no wigs or false moustaches, or anything like that. Just a touch of dye to the hair, a little stain to alter the complexion, a different set of false teeth, an alteration in walk, a touch of padding, changes of dress—oh, there are a hundred simple ways of doing these things, as you know."

"And bear in mind that none of these people had any reason to suppose I might be in disguise. None of them had seen me in my proper person as Watkins, the butler. They had no basis of comparison—nothing to look for."

"Then again, I did not approach them quite so crudely as you seem to imagine. There is not one even now who can tell you who the Trapper really is. I bound them to me by motives of self interest. They were highly paid, and in some cases I knew enough against them to make any attempt at double crossing highly unprofitable."

"That was, I believe, one of the methods of the late lamented Jonathan Wilde," interjected Thorold.

The butler frowned.

"He was a bloodthirsty scoundrel; I am not," he declared with dignity. "But I had to have discipline. These men had to learn that I had the power to carry out either my threats or my promises—that I could both punish and protect. So I snatched one from the jaws of prison—but you know about that."

"Another step that I took beforehand was to rent a few places which could be used in emergency. You see—there was a touch of pride in his tone—"I took a hint from the methods of successful generals, and considered the means of retreat before I began my attack. I thought of everything."

"But you had your work to do at Mr. Thorold's," said the detective. "I don't quite see—"

"I wasn't an arduous taskmaster," observed Thorold, "and I was out a great deal. Watkins would have quite an amount of time for—for his own affairs."

"No, there was no great difficulty about it,"

went on the butler. "I could arrange things. As I was saying I thought of everything. For instance, while getting things into shape it had entered my mind that my motives might be misconstrued, and that I might be considered a commonplace criminal actuated by pure greed unless I adopted some distinctive means of showing the author of those episodes in which I was concerned. I chose a wire noose as my trade mark. Also, if I may say so, there was a little question of personal pride. I wanted to pit my wits against Scotland Yard, and I wanted them to think of me as an individual. That was why I sent a noose to Chief Constable Winter, knowing that he would remember it later.

"I had heard of a notorious receiver at Dalston whom the police had never brought to book, and my first action was directed against him. There is no harm in mentioning the man Paddy since he has been convicted—although I hope you will never get hold of him to serve a sentence. He was willing enough to undertake the executive work, and I agreed to take the stones from him at a price far beyond what he could hope to get from an ordinary receiver. We planned the thing together.

"The alibi which I arranged would have been impregnable but for one thing. I went myself to Liverpool in a spare suit of Paddy's clothes. Now I could have forged his signature in the hotel book, and you would never have been able to prove that he had not done it himself if I had had time. You must have time to imitate a signature, and the pains I should have taken would have seemed queer. Therefore I hit on the plan of an injured hand. Mind you, Paddy was a fool to have smoked those distinctive cigarettes—but I'll admit the real failure to cover his traces was mine."

"Almost entirely yours," said Wilde. "Paddy was suspected from the first. If you hadn't got him to follow me from Clarges Street that day we burst up the fake export agency we might have dropped that end. But that made certain that he was mixed up with the Trapper."

"A foolish mistake," agreed Watkins. "I was a little shaken up, a bit off my balance. The affair at Farringdon Street had taken me by surprise. I was anxious to learn something more about your next moves, and I acted hastily. If I had really reflected I should have left you alone."

"Tell me how you got on to Estrehan," said the detective. "Why did you want a raw young sucker like that in the game, anyway?"

"That was partly chance, but I had very good reasons," continued the prisoner. "I had to have a few professional crooks because of their technical experience in some branches of crime. The obvious disadvantage was that the police would have an acquaintance with their methods. Young Estrehan was in a hole. I was having dinner one evening when he and a girl I recognised as associating with a gang I was keeping my eye on seated themselves at a table near me. I was practically hidden by a pillar, and I heard enough of their conversation to tell me what had happened in his case. He struck me as a type that I needed at the place in Farringdon Street—a bit of a fool who could take messages for me and whom I could mould exactly as I chose. He would not dare to betray any of the little it would be necessary for him to know while he was in fear for himself. I played also on his infatuation for Stella Cliffe. Perhaps you won't believe me when I say I was really sorry for him."

He looked from one to the other challengingly, and as they made no comment he went on:

"I took steps to put Estrehan straight with his employers, and I determined that Velvet Grimshaw was too dangerous a rogue to be allowed to continue to infest the world. With a little trouble I learnt something of his habits. I waited for him at the Gnomes Club, and at the first opportunity I shot him down with no more compunction than in killing a snake. I had not counted on you being there that night, Mr. Wilde."

"I was looking for Stella Cliffe," explained the detective.

"That might have disarranged my plans," declared Watkins, "but I found I was able to block your moves in a way that gave me confidence that I could meet future emergencies. Of course, details such as the switching off of the lights had been arranged beforehand. The torch I used was one of a kind manufactured by thousands, and I held it in my handkerchief before I threw it away in case of fingerprints." "How did you manage to make your getaway?"

A thin smile flickered on Watkins' face, leaving him as grave as ever. "Do you remember sending a waiter to have the doors barred? I was that waiter."

Thorold made no attempt to repress a chuckle, and Wilde, after an instant's hesitation, threw back his head and laughed.

"It was then you picked my pocket of my card-case and passed it on to your lady friend," he observed.

"I needed one of your cards," said the butler mildly, "and although I am not very expert, your concentration on other matters gave me my opportunity."

"A small point of personal interest," interposed Thorold. "Did you know I was at the club?"

"Not when I went there," answered Watkins. "I saw you there. It was when Mr. Wilde called on you the following day that I got some notion of what had happened. I took the liberty of listening at the door for a while. It seemed to me a suitable time to administer a warning to the three of you, and I delivered a wire noose addressed to each of you while you were still in conference—do you remember?"

"A man of your resource should have known better than to use the envelopes that were in the house," said Wilde, shaking his head. "It might have led directly to you."

"There were no others immediately available. A foolish little oversight if you like; but, as it happened, it turned out to my advantage. It confirmed you in the suspicion that Mr. Thorold was mixed up in the business. From without I heard you ask permission to write a note. I was a little disconcerted, for I realised that you intended to inspect the stationery. A moment's thought, however, showed me that you would jump to

conclusions against Mr. Thorold. I resolved that I would encourage that delusion. Mr. Thorold and I are much of the same build. Generally speaking, you would expect him to make some attempts at disguise, so our difference in feature did not much matter. When I met you in Farringdon Street I was masked, and I deliberately used a slight American accent to mislead you. I adopted the same course at other times so that your suspicions might be focussed on him."

"You succeeded," said Thorold grimly. His eye met Wilde's triumphantly.

"There was no animus," went on the butler. "It was the line of least resistance. Mr. Wilde was bound to suspect someone else at Clarges Street unless some such precaution was taken."

"I am obliged," said the millionaire, with a little bow. "Go on."

"There's little more to say. You know what I did to Markwell and Murragestein. I had some other people of that kind to deal with, but events got out of hand. It became apparent to me that my real danger was as much from another quarter as from Scotland Yard. I learned of the activities of Miss Langton and Mr. Thorold after a while, and at first I was inclined to pooh-pooh them as futile amateurs. It came to me as a shock when I realised that they were getting unpleasantly near the truth, but even then I never supposed that they had penetrated my identity. I was able to keep some sort of eye on Mr. Thorold, and on one occasion I inspected Miss Langton's office."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Wilde," said Patricia, catching the sidelong glance that the detective threw at her. "I gave you credit for that."

"I don't want even Chief Detective-inspector Wilde to be blamed for any action of mine," said the prisoner. "Since you have got me cornered there is no need for me to hide or to deny any of my personal actions. The only reason I have for gratifying your curiosity is that other people should not suffer for what I have done. It was I who attempted to kill Stella Cliffe. She was too astute a person to have enlisted as a witness against me."

"Did you intend that she and Estrehan should die at the house in Canonbury where we found them trussed up?" demanded Wilde.

(Do not miss the concluding chapters of this dramatic story in next week's issue of The Thriller.)

## The Solution of this week's 'BAFFLER' PROBLEM

on page 25.

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

1. In all probability there were four men in the gang at the abandoned bungalow. This is indicated by the number of cups, and by other clues which follow.

2. The man who sat in the chair in the right foreground of the illustration was probably a tall man with a sore or wounded foot. From the illustration it will be seen that the chair on which the bottle of iodine stands is in a direct line with this chair, and from the direction in which the latter chair is turned it is possible to deduce that the man who sat in it was using the other chair as a footrest. The chairs were not very near together, so the police deduced that it was a tall man who had the sore foot. Probably his neighbour at the left had been dressing the wound for him, and had placed the iodine on the nearest edge of the chair used for a footrest.

3. This man must have been a pipe smoker, judging from the large number of burned wooden matches around his chair. Many pipe smokers prefer the larger and longer burning flame of wooden matches to the short-lived paper ones.

4. The man at the back of the table (in the illustration) was evidently left-handed, as is indicated by the position of his cup with relation to his chair.

5. The man who sat on the wooden box and drummed with his heels, making the dents in the box, was an unusually short man, or at least had very short legs, as shown by the distance of the dents from the top of the box. He probably was short in the trunk also, as he evidently chose the high wooden box to sit on. The cigar butt found by the cup at this place indicated almost certainly that the short one was not a woman.